

PART 1

Introducing the SAT : Critical Reading Skills

Nature of the Test

What is the SAT? Educational Testing Service (ETS) says it's a standardized test designed to help predict how well high school students are likely to do in their academic work as college freshmen. From your viewpoint, it probably looks more like one extra set of hurdles you have to jump before you get to the next level of the college admissions game.

This particular set of hurdles, however, doesn't demand any specialized knowledge on your part, just general test-taking savvy. You're not required to recall great chunks of history or literature or science. You're not even required to recall most math formulas—they're printed right in the test booklet.

Assessment tests are basically multiple-choice tests. Your score depends upon how many correct answers you get within a definite period of time. Speed is important, but so is accuracy. You have to pace yourself so that you don't sacrifice speed to gain accuracy (or sacrifice accuracy to gain speed).

Overview and Content

This is the actual format of the SAT. The total testing time allowed is 3¾ hours. There are ten sections on the test. You are given 25 minutes apiece to complete seven of them. They are:

- 1 essay-writing section
- 2 critical reading sections
- 2 mathematics sections
- 1 writing skills section
- 1 "experimental" section (critical reading, writing skills, or mathematics)

The eighth and ninth sections take 20 minutes apiece. They are:

- 1 critical reading section
- 1 mathematics section

Finally, there is an additional 10-minute section. It is:

- 1 writing skills section

These sections will all appear on the SAT. However, the order in which they appear is likely to vary from test to test.

Not counting the experimental section, the three critical reading sections should contain a total of 19 sentence completion questions and 48 passage-based reading questions. More than half of the critical reading questions on the SAT directly test how well you understand what you read.

Pay particular attention to how these critical reading sections are organized. All three sections contain groups of sentence completion questions followed by groups of passage-based reading questions. The sentence completion questions are arranged in order of difficulty: they start out with easy “warm-up” questions and get more and more difficult as they go along. (The passage-based reading questions do not necessarily get more difficult as they go along. In general, questions about material found early in the passage come before questions about material occurring later.

The Critical Reading Sections

Sentence Completion Questions

Sentence completion questions ask you to fill in the blanks. Your job is to find the word or phrase that best completes the sentence’s meaning.

Directions: Choose the word or set of words that, when inserted in the sentence, best fits the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

Brown, this biography suggests, was an ___ employer, giving generous bonuses one day, ordering pay cuts the next.

- (A) indifferent
- (B) objective
- (C) unpredictable
- (D) ineffectual
- (E) unobtrusive

If you insert the different answer choices in the sentence, (C) by definition makes the most sense. Someone who gives bonuses one day and orders pay cuts the next clearly is unpredictable—no one can tell what he’s going to do next.

To learn how to handle sentence completion questions, turn to Part III.

Passage-Based Reading Questions

Passage-based reading questions ask about a passage's main idea or specific details, the author's attitude to the subject, the author's logic and techniques, the implications of the discussion, or the meaning of specific words.

Directions: The passage below is followed by questions based on its content. Answer the questions on the basis of what is stated or implied in that passage.

Certain qualities common to the sonnet should be noted. Its definite restrictions make it a challenge to the artistry of the poet and Line call for all the technical skill at the poet's

(5) command. The more or less set rhyme patterns occurring regularly within the short space of fourteen lines afford a pleasant effect on the ear of the reader, and can create truly musical effects. The rigidity of the form precludes a

(10) too great economy or too great prodigality of words. Emphasis is placed on exactness and perfection of expression. The brevity of the form favors concentrated expression of ideas or passion.

1. The author's primary purpose is to

- (A) contrast different types of sonnets
- (B) criticize the limitations of the sonnet
- (C) describe the characteristics of the sonnet
- (D) explain why the sonnet has lost popularity as a literary form
- (E) encourage readers to compose formal sonnets

2. In line 7, "afford" most nearly means

- (A) initiate
- (B) exaggerate
- (C) are able to pay for
- (D) change into
- (E) provide

3. The author's attitude toward the sonnet form can best be described as

- (A) amused toleration

- (B) grudging admiration
- (C) strong disapprobation
- (D) effusive enthusiasm
- (E) scholarly appreciation

The first question asks you to find the author's main idea. In the opening sentence, the author says certain qualities of the sonnet should be noted or observed. He then goes on to tell you which of these qualities deserve your attention, characterizing them in some detail. Thus, he describes certain of the sonnet's qualities or characteristics. The correct answer is (C). You can eliminate the other answers with ease. The author is upbeat about the sonnet: he doesn't say that the sonnet has limitations or that it has become less popular. Similarly, he doesn't discuss different types of sonnets. And while he talks about the challenge of composing formal sonnets, he never invites his readers to try writing them.

The second question asks you to figure out a word's meaning from its context. The rhyme patterns have a pleasant effect on the ear of the listener; indeed they provide or afford this effect. The correct answer is (E).

The third question asks you to determine how the author feels about his subject. All the author's comments about the sonnet form are positive, but he doesn't go so far as to gush (he's not effusive). The only answer that reflects this attitude is (E), scholarly appreciation.

See Part IV for tactics that will help you handle the entire range of passage-based reading questions.

Before the Test

Six Months Before

EXPAND YOUR VERBAL HORIZONS

If you haven't started studying for the test by this time, you'd better get started now. There's no point killing yourself with last-minute cramming sessions and overnight flash-card marathons. Now's the time to pick up some good habits that will expand your verbal horizons and increase your verbal skills.

Make a habit of reading a high-quality newspaper every day. Try The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, or The Washington Post, not something written in short sound bites like USA Today. Good newspapers, written for discriminating readers, exemplify what is best in journalism today. Note how

their editorials address the day's issues dispassionately, delineating schemes to rectify society's ills.

Note also the number of boldface words in the preceding two sentences. We have highlighted them because they are key SAT words: you can find them all on our SAT High-Frequency Word List (Part V). Were any of them unfamiliar to you? Then turn to the high-frequency list. You can jumpstart your SAT preparations if you follow the directions given there for building your vocabulary. You have the time—get to it!

Two Months Before

REGISTER

First, get the paperwork out of the way. Unless you like paying late registration fees, be sure to pick up a test registration form at your high school guidance office and send it in to the College Board at least 6 or 7 weeks before the date on which you want to take the test. Plan ahead: if you want to take the test in October, you have to mail your form in early September, when you are bound to be busy getting off to a good start with your new classes at school.

To get a registration form, or to order a copy of The SAT Preparation Booklet, a guide to the test including a sample SAT, go online, call, e-mail, or write the College Board:

(866) 756-7346

(8:00 A.M.–9:00 P.M. Eastern Time, weekdays)

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/contact>

College Board SAT Program

P.O. Box 025505

Miami, FL 33102

REHEARSE

The best way to practice for a race is to run the course in advance. Likewise, the best way to practice for a test is to take a simulated test, going over all the different question types in advance.

First, memorize the directions in this book for each type of question. These are only slightly different from the exact words you'll find on the SAT. The test time you would normally spend reading directions can be better spent answering questions.

Did You Know?

You can have an official SAT Question of the Day delivered to you by e-mail. It's free!

Then take your practice test. In this workbook, you have four model tests—one self-assessment test in the next chapter, plus three more at the end of the book. To get the most out of these tests, try taking them under test conditions—no breaks in midsection, no talking, no help from friends.

You'll find this kind of run-through will help build your test-taking stamina and strengthen you for those four vital hours after you walk through the test-center door.

LEARN TO PACE YOURSELF

In taking the SAT, your job is to answer as many questions as you can, rapidly, economically, correctly, without getting hung up on any one question and wasting time you could have used to answer two or three additional ones.

As you go through this book, if you find you do get bogged down on an individual question, think things through. First, ask yourself whether it's a question you might be able to answer if you had a bit more time or whether it's one you have no idea how to tackle. If you think it's one you can answer if you give it a second try, mark it with a check or an arrow, and plan to come back to it after you've worked through the easy questions in the section. If, however, you think it's a lost cause, mark it with an X and come back to it only after you've answered all the other questions in the section and double-checked your answers. With practice, you should be able to distinguish a "second chancer" from a lost cause. In any case, if you're taking too long, your best bet is to move on.

LEARN WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO GUESS

Students always worry about whether they should or shouldn't guess on standardized tests. Because wrong answers do count fractionally against you on the SAT, you may think that you should never guess if you aren't sure of the right answer to a question. But even if you guessed wrong four times for every time you guessed right, you would still come out even. A wrong answer costs you only $\frac{1}{4}$ of a point. On the multiple-choice questions, the best advice for top students is to guess if you can eliminate one or two of the answer choices. You have a better chance of hitting the right answer when you make this sort of "educated" guess.

As you go through this book, try this experiment to find out what kind of guesser you are. Take part of any test that you have not taken before. You don't have to take an entire test section, but you should tackle at least 25 questions. First, answer only

the questions you are sure about. Then, with a different color pen, answer the remaining questions for which you can make educated guesses. Finally, with yet another color pen, guess blindly on all the other questions.

Score each of the three tests separately. Compare your scores from the three different approaches to the test. For many people, the second score (the one with the educated guesses) will be the best one. But you may be different. Maybe you are such a poor guesser that you should never guess at all. That's okay. Or maybe you are such a good guesser that you should try every question. That's okay, too. The important thing is to know yourself.

LEARN TO CONCENTRATE

Another important technique for you to work on is building your powers of concentration. As you go through the practice exercises and model tests, notice when you start to lose your focus. Does your mind drift off in the middle of long reading passages? Do you catch yourself staring off into space, or watching the seconds ticking away on the clock? The sooner you spot these momentary lapses of concentration, the sooner you'll be back working toward your goal.

By the way, there's nothing wrong with losing focus for a moment. Everybody does it. When you notice you're drifting, smile. You're normal. Breathe in slowly and let the air ease out. Then take a fresh look at that paragraph or question you were working on. You've had your minibreak. Now you're ready to pick up a few points.

LEARN THERE'S NO NEED TO PANIC

Despite all rumors to the contrary, your whole college career is not riding on the results of this one test. The SAT is only one of the factors that colleges take into account when they are deciding about admissions. Admissions officers like the test because the scores give them a quick way to compare applicants from different high schools without worrying whether a B+ from the district high school is the equivalent of a B+ from the elite preparatory school. But colleges never rely on SAT scores alone. Admissions officers are perfectly well aware that there are brilliant students who fall apart on major tests, that students who are not feeling well can do much worse than normal on a test, and that all sorts of things can affect SAT scores on any given day. What's more, every college accepts students with a wide range of SAT scores.

You do not need to answer every question on the SAT correctly to be accepted by the college of your choice. In fact, if you answer only 50–60 percent of the questions correctly, you'll get a better than average score, and that, plus a decent GPA, will get you into most colleges.

As you can see, there's no need to panic about taking the SAT. However, not everybody taking the SAT realizes this simple truth.

It's hard to stay calm when those around you are tense, and you're bound to run into some pretty tense people when you take the SAT. (Not everyone works through this book, unfortunately.) If you do experience a slight case of "exam nerves" just before the big day, don't worry about it.

- Being keyed up for an examination isn't always bad; you may outdo yourself because you are so worked up.
- Total panic is unlikely to set in; by the time you face the exam, you'll know too much.

Keep these facts in mind, and those tensions should just fade away.

The Night Before

REST

The best thing you can do for yourself before any test is to get a good night's sleep. If you find you're so keyed up that you don't think you'll be able to sleep, try listening to relaxing music, or exercising and then taking a warm bath. If you're lying in bed wakefully, try concentrating on your breathing: breathe in for 4 to 6 counts, hold your breath for another 4 to 6 counts, exhale for 4 to 6 counts. Concentrating on breathing or on visualizing an image of a person or place often helps people to block out distractions and enables them to relax.

ORGANIZE YOUR GEAR

The night before the test, set out everything you're going to need the next day. You will need your admission ticket, a photo ID (a driver's license or a nondriver picture ID, a passport, or a school ID), four or five sharp No. 2 pencils (with erasers), plus a map or directions showing how to get to the test center. Set out an accurate watch (one that doesn't beep) plus a calculator with charged batteries to use on the math sections.

Lay out comfortable clothes for the next day, including a sweater in case the room is cold. Consider bringing along a snack, a treat you can munch on during the break.

PLAN YOUR ROUTE

Allow plenty of time for getting to the test site. If you haven't been there before, locate the test center on a map and figure out the best route. To be sure you know the way, take a trip to the site before the day of the test. The test starts at 8:00 AM—

you've no time to get lost. If you're using public transportation, check your bus or subway schedule, and be sure you've got a token or ticket or the correct change. If you're driving, check that there's gas in the car. Your job is taking the test. You don't need the extra tension that comes from worrying about whether you will get to the test on time, or the extra distraction that comes from kicking yourself for losing test time by being late.

During the Test

Use Time Wisely

In the course of working through the model tests and practice exercises in this book, you should develop your own personal testing rhythm. You know approximately how many questions you need to get right to meet your academic goals.

Don't get bogged down on any one question. By the time you get to the SAT, you should have a fair idea of how much time to spend on each question (about 30–40 seconds for a sentence completion question, 75 seconds for a passage-based reading question if you average in your passage reading time). If a question is taking too long, leave it and move on to the next ones. Keep moving on to maximize your score.

NOTE DOWN QUESTIONS YOU SKIP

Before you move on, put a mark in your test booklet next to the question you're skipping. You're probably going to want to find that question easily later on.

What sort of mark? First, ask yourself whether it's a question you might be able to answer if you had a bit more time or whether it's one you have no idea how to tackle. If you think it's one you can answer if you give it a second try, mark it with a check or an arrow and plan to come straight back to it after you've worked through the easy questions in the section. If you think it's a lost cause, mark it with an X and come back to it only after you've answered all the other questions in the section and double-checked your answers. Either way, mark the test booklet and move on.

Whenever you skip a question, check frequently to make sure you are answering later questions in the right spots. No machine is going to notice that you made a mistake early in the test, by answering question 9 in the space for question 8, so that all your following answers are in the wrong places. Line up your answer sheet with your test booklet. That way you'll have an easier time checking that you're getting your answers in the right spots.

Never just skip for skipping's sake. Always try to answer each question before you decide to move on. Keep up that "can do" spirit—the more confident you are that

you can answer the SAT questions, the more likely you are to give each question your best shot.

ANSWER EASY QUESTIONS FIRST

First answer all the easy questions; then tackle the hard ones if you have time. You know that the questions in each segment of the test get harder as you go along (except for the passage-based reading questions). But there's no rule that says you have to answer the questions in order. You're allowed to skip; so, if the last three sentence completion questions are driving you crazy, move on to the reading passages right away. Take advantage of the easy questions to boost your score.

TACKLE SHORTER QUESTIONS BEFORE LONGER ONES

If you're running out of time on a critical reading section and you're smack in the middle of a reading passage, look for the shortest questions on that passage and try answering them. Aim for questions with answer choices that are only two or three words long. You don't need much time to answer a vocabulary-in-context question or a straightforward question about the author's attitude or tone, and one or two extra correct answers can boost your score an additional 10 to 20 points.

ELIMINATE WRONG ANSWERS AS YOU GO

Eliminate as many wrong answers as you can. Sometimes you'll be able to eliminate all the choices until you have just one answer left. Even if you wind up with two choices that look good, deciding between two choices is easier than deciding among five. What's more, the reasoning that helped you decide which answer choices to eliminate may also give you new insights into the question and help you figure out which of the remaining answer choices is correct.

Draw a line through any answer you decide to eliminate. Then, if you decide to move on to another question and come back to this one later, you won't forget which answer choices you thought were wrong. (However, when you cross out an answer choice, do so lightly. Don't obliterate it totally. You may want to look it over again later if you decide your first impulse to eliminate it was wrong.)

Even if you can't settle on a correct answer and decide to guess, every answer you eliminate as definitely wrong improves your chances of guessing right.

Center on the Test.

Focus on the question in front of you. At this moment, it's all that matters. Answer it and fill in your answer choice, being careful you're filling in the right space. Then

move on to the next question, and the next. Find your steady, even testing rhythm and keep it going.

BLOCK OUT DISTRACTIONS

When Tiger Woods plays golf, he has his mind on one thing: the game, not the movements of the enthusiastic crowd, not the occasional plane flying overhead, not the applause of the spectators, not even the photographers in the gallery. He blocks them out.

The SAT is your game. To play it well, block out the distractions. Don't start looking around at the other students taking the test. You don't get any points for watching other people answer questions. You get points only for answering questions yourself. Keep your eye on the test booklet and your mind on the game.

WHEN THINGS GET TIGHT, STAY LOOSE

Sooner or later, as you go through the test, you're going to hit a tough spot. You may run into a paragraph that seems totally unintelligible, or a couple of hard questions that throw you, so that you stop thinking about the question you're working on and sit there panicking instead.

If you come to a group of questions that stump you, relax. There are bound to be a few brain-benders on a test of this nature. Remember: You don't have to answer every question correctly to do just fine on the test.

There will be a break about halfway through the test. Use this period to clear your thoughts. Take a few deep breaths. Stretch. Close your eyes and imagine yourself floating. In addition to being under mental pressure, you're under physical pressure from sitting so long in a hard seat with a No. 2 pencil clutched in your hand.

Anything you can do to loosen up and get the kinks out will ease your body and help the oxygen get to your brain.

KEEP A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

The best thing you can do for yourself during the test is to keep a positive frame of mind. Too many people walk into tests and interviews defeated before they start. Instead of feeling good about what they have going for them, they worry about what can go wrong instead. They let negative thoughts distract them and drag them down.

You are a motivated, hard-working student. That's why you've chosen to work through this book. You're exactly the sort of person for whom colleges are looking. For you, the SAT isn't an unknown terror. It's something you can handle, something

for which you are prepared. It's okay for you not to answer every question. It's okay to get some questions wrong. You'll do better figuring out the answers to the questions you tackle if you know you're doing okay. Have confidence in yourself.

NOTE WHAT'S GOING RIGHT

Whenever you cross out an answer you know is incorrect, whenever you skip a question so that you can come back to it later, notice that you're doing the right thing. Whenever you catch yourself drifting off and quickly get back to work, whenever you stretch to get out the kinks, recognize how much you're in control. In applying these tactics you've mastered, you're showing you know how to do the job and do it right.

PAT YOURSELF ON THE BACK

As you go through the test, each time you get a correct answer, pat yourself on the back. "Yes! Ten more points!" Enjoy your successes, and keep an eye out for more successes, more correct answer choices ahead. Feel good about the progress you're making and the rewarding college years to come.