

## Reflections on Taking the New SAT

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I took the new SAT at Bearden High School on Saturday, March 12, 2005. As someone who's helped students prepare for this test for over twenty years, I felt that I needed to experience the changes to the test first-hand. I also felt that I could empathize more with the pressures my students endure if I struggled through the four-hour test myself.



The new SAT is certainly a test of perseverance. I arrived at Bearden at 8:00 a.m., already one of the last people in line. I found my assigned classroom after almost being denied admission by a hall monitor who thought I was too old to be taking this test. After standardized test instructions, the first section began at 8:30 a.m. I took ten timed sections over the next four hours with only two five-minute breaks. I amazed myself at how much I accomplished during those five minutes—used the restroom, munched crackers, drank water, and walked quickly up and down the hall to keep myself awake. After finishing the test at 12:45, I immediately went to Buddy's for lunch.

The new SAT has retained some familiar components, skills that have been tested for many years. Sentence completion exercises still require a well-developed vocabulary to answer the more difficult questions. Only knowledge of such words as *chicanery*, *disingenuous*, *undaunted*, *perspicacity*, and *sycophants* will guarantee the highest scores. On the other hand, the analogy sections have been eliminated, reducing the sheer number of difficult vocabulary words that a student encounters. The longer reading passages continue to challenge a student's patience; the questions that follow these passages test the ability to draw inferences or make conclusions from difficult material. Finally, SAT mathematics questions have remained "perplexing." Although many questions draw on skills students learn in algebra I and geometry, the questions do not match exercises in mathematics textbooks. Instead students must problem solve and apply knowledge to new situations. Thus, most of these math questions seem more like puzzles than math problems.

What's "new" about the new SAT? Although the mathematics questions retain their puzzle-solving nature, the number of skills that are tested has increased—students must now also demonstrate knowledge of algebra II concepts and some college preparatory mathematics, such as mathematical functions. With analogies eliminated, more reading passages have been added. Thus, students are under more pressure to be able to read and answer questions quickly on unfamiliar, often dense and uninteresting material.

Furthermore, writing skills sections have been added, multiple-choice questions that test standard written English rules pertaining to punctuation, grammar, and usage. Try the following two questions. Here are some simplified directions: If the sentence contains an error, select the one underlined part, A to D, that must be changed to make the sentence correct. If the sentence contains no error, choose E.

It is impossible for my sisters and I even to consider buying a car from such a disreputable person. No error.

A B C D E

Although Erik and Karl had hoped to be a finalist in the swim meet, neither of  
A B  
them was able to beat out the competition. No error.  
C D E

For the first question, knowledge that “I” cannot be the object of a preposition is needed to select the correct answer A. For the second question, the plural reference to “Erik and Karl” must be matched with a plural correlative, “finalists,” instead of “a finalist” in the correct answer B. Students must now continue their mastery of such standard written English rules while in high school English classes in order to achieve high scores on the new SAT.

The most dramatic change to the new SAT, however, is the requirement to write an essay based on a given prompt. Students have twenty-five minutes to plan, write, and proof their response. I was furious at the essay that Saturday morning. It wasn’t that the prompt was uninteresting. The prompt asked me to reflect on whether the majority opinion should guide actions in most circumstances or if individuals or minorities could ignore the dictates of the majority in some situations. This contrast between majority and minority opinion is actually very pertinent to our conception of democracy. I found myself stressing both points of view, that in a democracy the majority should influence such decisions as electing a President while, at the same time, room must be made for dissent, for the individual to speak freely about ideas that may upset the majority. I was furious because I had so little time to plan and write a sophisticated essay on such a complicated topic. Furthermore, my handwriting is atrocious; so I was painstakingly printing my response as I noticed the minutes tick away. I like to write, and I like to think about important controversies. But I don’t do either very well in 25-minute periods. This essay requirement may produce the most frustration among high school students; I feel that even good writers will be perplexed unless they’ve practiced how to plan and write a time-limited essay.

The essay also provided a stark contrast to the dozens of multiple-choice questions that followed it. SAT multiple-choice questions are designed to be solved quickly, in less than a minute on average, and have one correct answer. Students are rewarded for speedy problem solving and for finding correct solutions. In this type of question, uncertainty must be reduced to certainty in less than a minute. For the essay, however, there is no certainty, only opinion and argument and persuasion, backed with reasoned examples. This exercise seemed a strange interloper in an otherwise binary universe of correctness and incorrectness.

I will continue to prepare students for the SAT, now more than ever. As part of my experience, I feel that I understand the changes to the test and the pressures that students undergo. Despite my resentment toward the essay, I will ensure that my students practice this activity thoroughly. As long as colleges emphasize SAT scores for admissions, I will help my students do their best on this exam.

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