

A Look at the New SAT/PSAT

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Once again, the College Board is redesigning the SAT and PSAT. The new PSAT will start in fall 2015 and the first new SAT in spring 2016. The College Board's Test Specifications for the Redesigned SAT outlines the philosophy and particulars of these new tests. By examining what the College Board is proposing, I overview the philosophy behind this new design, outline the structure of the new tests, and suggest ways that students and parents can prepare for these assessments. Furthermore, I will comment on the challenges posed by the College Board's major competitor, the ACT college admissions test.

Philosophy

The College Board feels that today's students are ill prepared for college and for the workforce, given high rates of remedial work required in postsecondary education. The College Board states that it must do all it can "to help all students not only be ready for college and workforce training programs but also succeed in them." To accomplish this herculean task, the College Board acknowledges that the SAT, its "flagship college and career readiness assessment," needs to change. This new SAT must meet three challenges: "First, the test must provide to higher education a more comprehensive and informative picture of student readiness for college-level work while sustaining, and ideally improving, the ability of the test to predict college success. Second, the test must become more clearly and transparently focused on the knowledge, skills, and understandings that the best available research evidence indicates are essential for college and career readiness and success. Third, the test must better reflect, through its questions and tasks, the kinds of meaningful, engaging, rigorous work that students must undertake in the best high school courses being taught today, thereby creating a robust and durable bond between assessment and instruction." In summary, "To these ends, the redesigned SAT has been designed for greater focus, relevance, and transparency while retaining the test's tradition of being a valuable predictor of college and career readiness and success."

What I find rather amusing are the implications that the flagship assessment, the SAT, for decades the most widely used college admissions tool, must now be more focused, relevant, and transparent, suggesting that this assessment did not previously have these characteristics! The SAT underwent a significant revision in 2005, when the test added writing skills, an essay, and a change to its total scoring scale (from 1600 to 2400). At that time, the College Board claimed that the "new SAT" was more closely aligned with high and college expectations. In less than ten years, the College Board seems to have decided that this was a mistake and that it needs to start over from scratch.

The College Board has high hopes for this new SAT. The Board claims that this new assessment will align with standards taught in high schools, that the questions on the assessment will be familiar to students (since the questions will model how great teachers assess), and that test results will even be more "equitable" (that is, eliminating disparities between scores of various ethnic groups). These hopes, however, are unproven.

Particulars

The documents supplied by the College Board do provide more detail about the test specifications of the new SAT. "We will make the redesigned SAT the most transparent exam in the assessment field... What the test measures will be no mystery. How we go about measuring students' reading, writing, language, and mathematics skills will be widely known." Once again, these statements suggest the irony behind the decade's old struggle to get ready for the SAT: it has been a mystery. It has been such a mystery that students have sought special test preparation programs to prepare for the exam. Alternatively, they have taken the ACT, the other college admissions test.

The **Reading Test** will now have students read and analyze challenging prose passages drawn from a range of content areas. These content areas will include not only literary passages but also texts drawn from science, social studies, history, and current information. Furthermore, at least one passage will be an authentic text, such as a U. S. founding document like the Declaration of Independence. Text complexity will be aligned with difficulty of texts found in first year college textbooks or workforce training documents. Some passages will also include graphics. Sentence completions have now been discarded. All vocabulary will be tested in the context of a passage. This change represents the final move by the College Board to eliminate straightforward vocabulary testing from the SAT. Antonyms were removed in the 1990s and analogies with the 2005 revision of the test. Therefore, now all those SAT vocabulary-building workbooks are obsolete!

The **Writing and Language Test** will test students' ability to revise and edit texts particularly using conventions of standard written English. Instead of standalone questions, this test will measure writing and language skills in the context of longer passages. The SAT Essay will now be optional. Furthermore, students will no longer be asked their opinion on a prompt but be asked to produce a written analysis of authentic texts.

The **Math Test** will undergo the most dramatic changes. The Math Test will have four major areas of focus: Heart of Algebra (strong emphasis on Algebra I and II); Problem Solving and Data Analysis (greater emphasis on statistics than ever before); Passport to Advanced Math (with topics such higher degree polynomials and nonlinear functions found at the end of Algebra II courses or in Pre-Calculus); and Advanced Topics (which now includes a smaller dose of Geometry but, for the first time, some ideas from Trigonometry). The Math Test will have two sections, one in which a student can use a calculator and one in which the student may not.

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This redesign of the SAT must be put in context of the challenges posed by the ACT. The number of ACT test-takers has risen dramatically in the past decade, to the extent that, by 2013, the ACT had overtaken the SAT as the more popular college admissions option. Many states have adopted the ACT and are paying the fees for juniors to take the test. It is curious that the new SAT will revert to its "old" scoring scale: 200 to 800 for Math and 200 to 800 for the combined Reading/Writing and Language Test. This "old" scale was in existence for decades before the last "new" SAT in 2005. In this past decade, the College Board has seen the fortunes of its flagship assessment decline dramatically.

The College Board is also competing with the ACT by introducing a series of new tests that parallel the EXPLORE (designed for 8th graders to measure high school readiness) and PLAN (taken by 10th graders as a measure of high school progress). The following table summarizes all the new tests proposed by the College Board. The PSAT 8/9 is supposed to compete with the EXPLORE; the PSAT 10 will compete with the PLAN. The maximum score on each section of the new SAT will be 800; the maximum score on the PSAT 8/9 will be 720 and the maximum score on the PSAT 10 and the PSAT/NMSQT will be 760. The PSAT 8/9, PSAT 10, and PSAT/NMSQT will be slightly easier tests than the SAT (a design that also copies the ACT EXPLORE and PLAN).

Test Name	Reading +Writing/Language Scale (low to high)	Mathematics Scale (low to high)	Purpose
PSAT 8/9	120 to 720	120 to 720	High school readiness; administered in fall or spring of 8th or 9th grade
PSAT 10	160 to 760	160 to 760	High school progress; administered spring of 10th grade
PSAT/NMSQT	160 to 760	160 to 760	Administered fall 10th or 11th grade; 11th grade is the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test
SAT	200 to 800	200 to 800	College admissions test; administered multiple times during 11th and 12th grade

It is also interesting that many of the features of this new SAT are strikingly similar to what is already on the ACT. For instance, consider the following characteristics that have been a part of the ACT since 2005:

1. Optional essay
2. No penalty for guessing
3. Four answer choices instead of five (except for ACT Mathematics)
4. Reading passages from science and history as well as literature
5. Writing and Language Test skills tested in texts (also using a NO CHANGE option)
6. More focus on Algebra II, Functions, and Trigonometry in Math Test
7. Longer time limits per section
8. No direct test of standalone vocabulary

Preparation

The College Board has probably been influenced by the Common Core Standards movement. Many of the changes to the new SAT will directly align with these Common Core Standards. However, an argument could be made that many of these changes have already been anticipated by the ACT, and the College Board is trying to play catch up with its major competitor. Furthermore, the College Board is hoping that the new SAT will be directly integrated into classroom instruction: "...the SAT will become more fully integrated into an instruction-and-assessment approach that is designed to link students to the educational opportunities they have earned. No longer will the SAT stand apart from the work of teachers in their classrooms." The new SAT will also aid current educational reforms by taking the focus off test prep for its own sake: "The redesigned SAT will aid these necessary reforms by supporting a fundamental shift in k-12 education from a focus on "test prep" in the limited sense to a focus on rich, challenging course work for all students." Finally, the College Board claims, "the questions will be more familiar to students because they'll be modeled on the work of the best classroom teachers."

After reviewing the dozens of sample questions for the new SAT available at the College Board website, I believe that test preparation for this new SAT/PSAT will be just as important as it has been in the past (and also equally important for the ACT). I also believe that the College Board agrees with me: It has contracted with Khan Academy to produce hundreds of videos and sample questions for these new tests. The importance of college admissions tests has not diminished. Most colleges and universities use these tests as part of their admissions' criteria. I will continue to help students prepare for these tests and to achieve their best score for admissions and scholarships.

Michael K. Smith, Ph.D., has taught test preparation courses through his company, Testprep Experts, for thirty years. He has routinely kept abreast of changes to college admissions tests, the SAT and ACT.
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Preparation for the New PSAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test starts Summer 2015.

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