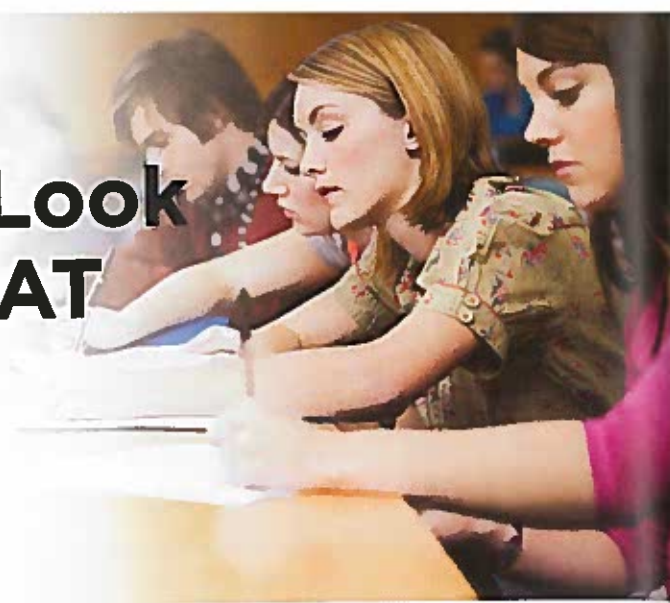


An Insider's Look at the New SAT

By Evan Wessler



The only real way to talk about something authoritatively is to go through it yourself. This goes doubly for education: it's nice to discuss things in theory, but there is no replacement for having experiences that require deep knowledge and present unique stressors. That, among other reasons, is why I sat for the redesigned SAT this May. (I was supposed to take the test when it was first administered in March, but the College Board pushed all non-student registrations to the May administration, citing security measures amidst several cheating scandals that have recently plagued the testing organization.) Having scrutinized the new exam for the past two years, I was not surprised by its content, but I did gain further valuable insight into the goals the College Board seeks to achieve with its updated exam.

In a LINK for Counselors article last fall, I described how reading-oriented the SAT was to become, and can now say with certainty that it does not disappoint. The first section—Reading—is nothing less than an onslaught of text, with passage after passage demanding consistent and intense focus. Though the section provides a much greater average time per question than the analogous Reading Test on the ACT (1 minute and 15 seconds per question on the SAT, versus a stingy 52.5 seconds per question on the ACT), its questions are inarguably written at a higher and more abstract level than the questions on the ACT. While the latter asks many questions whose answers can be pulled nearly verbatim from the text, the average SAT Reading question requires much more thought and a greater ability to deal with answer choices that are phrased in more advanced and indirect ways. This is especially so

for the “evidence” questions, which ask students to select the segment of text that provides the strongest support for their answer to the previous question. Though standardized tests have always been challenging to those students who disdain reading, the SAT sets the tone immediately: maintaining the wherewithal to think critically and quickly about words and ideas for 65 minutes is a tough slog. I found myself agonizing between two answers for a few questions, but the good news is that I was able to fall back on the same techniques I teach students in order to resolve the indecision. And this is the key: for the Reading especially, any student who wants to excel must scrupulously prepare for how to deal with the intensity and high level of analysis. Whereas the previous SAT featured passages in the relatively bite-sized form of 25- or 20-minute chunks, the Reading part of the new exam has graduated to a significantly more demanding level.

If any part of the test made me feel bad for the students in my testing room, it was the No Calculator Math section, the third of four sections (or five, if one elects to write the essay). During the 5-minute break after those 25 minutes, I could feel a sense of hopelessness and resignation set in amongst many of the students. Many of the comments I overheard are not fit for print, but suffice it to say that the test certainly demands fluency with operations and numbers in the absence of a calculator as a crutch. The same could be said for the final math section; despite the fact that it allows students calculators, there are now very few one-sentence “find x” questions on the exam. Nearly every question provides rich context, demanding that students have a much deeper understanding of the reasoning behind the

math they're doing, and not just a rote recipe.

I couldn't resist sitting for the Writing portion of the exam, and I'm glad I did. I'll give kudos to the College Board for turning what was once a completely artificial and canned exercise into a task that actually does what it was meant to do: make students think. In completely abandoning the opinion-/perspective-based calamity that was the last SAT essay task, the College Board now challenges students to evaluate a primary source argument's effectiveness in clear terms that are far less susceptible to subjectivity. At risk of sounding like a total nerd, I actually enjoyed it, and agree that it will showcase a student's comprehension, analytical skills, and ability to convey ideas.

All that said, here's some good news for students: though the College Board has sought to make the SAT less “teachable”—claiming that it will instead emphasize what students who follow a rigorous high school curriculum should know—the exam remains extremely predictable. I'll be the first to admit that the College Board had me worried two years ago when it announced that one of its goals in revising the SAT was to construct an exam less conducive to strategy-based preparation; after all, the viability of Method Test Prep is predicated in large part on our ability to teach students the best ways to tackle the SAT using predictable techniques. Though the new exam is certainly less vulnerable to “tricks” and “shortcuts”, I'm happy to let students know that employing smart strategy and technique is still the name of the game. On just about every question, I was able to use approaches that I and my colleagues have developed over the years to get to the answer. I was even able to consciously develop some new strategies on the fly during the exam, as the time restrictions made it advantageous to do (they do say necessity is the mother of invention). And so it stands: by focusing on common question types, cross-test similarities in the wording of questions and answer choices, intelligent pacing, and of course diligent practice, we can still teach motivated students to improve their scores dramatically.

No discussion about the SAT is complete without an analysis of the scoring. The score report comes back featuring an array of numbers, the most talked about of which are the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (EWR), and Math scores, both out of 800. I would, however, encourage students to pay close attention to the content sub scores (out of 15) the

report provides, which can provide a specific window into the particular skills students must bolster to raise their scores. The sub scores are accompanied by colored lines on which the scores are plotted, giving students a very clear glance at their skill sets. These can be invaluable tools for students who seek to improve their scores during a future administration.

There has been much consternation—including a public spat between College Board's and ACT's administrators—over how new SAT and ACT scores “concord” with (equate to) one another. While the short answer is that the College Board has provided conversion tables, the long story is that the ACT insists the current comparison is invalid. Whether and how college admissions officers might compare students' scores using the College Board's numbers is a decision that will likely vary between admissions offices. It is for this reason that I advocate paying more attention to averages and percentiles particular to each exam, which are calculated by each of the testing organizations independently, and don't require conversion of scores on different scales. According to the latest numbers, the average score on the new SAT lies somewhere between 1040 and 1080 (section scores 520 to 540), and every score report supplies percentiles (which can be thought of as the percentage of students a particular student out-scores) for each section. I suspect, but cannot confirm, that amidst all of the confusion and argument, colleges will place a greater emphasis on percentiles than before, in order to feel more comfortable with their admissions decisions.

I'm happy to have taken the SAT, and will likely do so again to keep abreast of the slight changes to the test and to keep myself sharp. For those who are curious, I scored 1590: 800 on Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, 790 on Math—frustratingly, I made a mistake on one question—and straight 8s out of 8 on the three Essay subscores. I'll find out soon enough what my mistake was when I get the test back through the Question Answer Service, which all of your students can order for the October, January, and May exams. In all, the experience worked to emphasize what we have all known for a long time: practice makes perfect, or at the very least, close to it.

Evan Wessler is the VP Education of Method Test Prep. He can answer any questions you have about the SAT or ACT by e-mailing him at evan@methodtestprep.com or visiting the Method Test Prep website at www.methodtestprep.com.