

The Rules for the SAT Essay

Believe it or not, even essay tests have rules. You have to learn them if you want to do well. But be careful! The SAT Scoring Guide that appears on page 105 of the College Board Publication *The Official SAT Study Guide For the New SAT* isn't very useful if you're trying to figure out exactly what to do on the test.

It might sound strange to say this, but most of the College Board's advice on how to write the SAT essay is very, very bad. Instead of following the rules that the College Board states explicitly, we'll do something much smarter—we'll figure out the rules that are implicitly revealed in the high- and low-scoring sample responses provided by the College Board in *The Official SAT Study Guide For the New SAT*. Here they are.



Remember that these are the rules revealed by actual high- and low-scoring sample essays released by the College Board. As such, they may be very different from the stated rules that you'll find on page 105, and elsewhere, in *The Official SAT Study Guide For the New SAT*.

SAT Essay Rule 1: Open-Ended Prompts

The prompts that appear on the SAT Writing Test are all open-ended and fairly vague about what they want you to write. This gives you a wide degree of latitude in deciding what to write, which can be a good thing if you don't let it overwhelm you.

SAT Essay Rule 2: Talk About Whatever You Want

When you plan your answer, you don't have to worry about being politically correct or trying not to offend your reader. Don't believe me? Take a look at page 197 of the College Board publication *The Official SAT Study Guide For The New SAT*. You'll see a top-scoring essay that talks favorably about how the Confederate Army was "defending its way of life" during the Civil War.

Now, nobody is suggesting that you go out of your way to discuss something controversial or offensive. All we're trying to point out is that there's no need to be worried that you might say the wrong thing. As the essay on page 197 demonstrates, the graders are interested in how well you develop an argument that relates to the prompt—they don't really care what the argument actually is.

SAT Essay Rule 3: Make Up Any Proof You Want

When you're looking for examples to support your argument, the SAT allows you to draw from anything at all. Some of the high-scoring essay writers choose to draw examples from history and literature, but some of them draw examples from their own lives. In fact, the high-scoring essay on page 200 of *The Official SAT Study Guide for the New SAT* uses two personal examples that are almost certainly made up.

SAT Essay Rule 4: Some Imperfect Grammar Is Okay

The high-scoring essays that appear in *The Official SAT Study Guide For The New SAT* are full of mistakes that would qualify as errors for the [Identifying Sentence Errors](#) portion of the Writing Section. For example, the high-scoring essay on page 120 of the College Board's book improperly shifts from the present tense to the past tense, uses the word *alright*, and starts a sentence with the conjunction *however*. So you can get away with a few grammatical mistakes and still score a perfect 6.

SAT Essay Rule 5: The Longer, The Better

All the high-scoring sample essays included in *The Official SAT Study Guide For The New SAT* are fairly long and well-developed, while the low-scoring sample essays are much shorter. But be careful—an essay's score seems to correlate with its length, but that doesn't mean that writing garbage just to fill up space is a good idea. What it means is that if you've written a short essay, your chances of scoring high seem to be just about zero.

SAT Essay Rule 6: Vocabulary Isn't That Important

On page 105 of *The Official SAT Study Guide For The New SAT*, the College Board says it looks for a “varied, accurate, and apt vocabulary” in high-scoring essays. But the essays that receive the highest possible scores demonstrate very little in the way of vocabulary skills. The biggest word in the sample high-scoring essay on page 120 is *dumbfounded*, and, as already mentioned, that essay also uses the word *alright*. The other high-scoring essays have similarly unimpressive vocabularies.

SAT Essay Rule 7: No Set Format

The high-scoring essays in *The Official SAT Study Guide For The New SAT* use a variety of formats. Some seem to use variations on the standard five-paragraph essay; all of them use an opening paragraph and a closing paragraph, both of varying lengths.

SAT Essay Rule 8: Details, Details

The high-scoring essays in *The Official SAT Study Guide For The New SAT* all use detailed examples to support their claims.