

C H A P T E R

# 1



# Getting to Know the Writing Section of the New SAT

For over 80 years, high school juniors and seniors have faced the SAT on their paths to college. During that time, the test has undergone some changes. However, the new SAT, offered for the first time in March 2005, represents the most significant change in the history of the test. What does that mean for the more than two million students who take the test each year? They'll miss more of the Saturday on which they take it: The old SAT was three hours long, and the new one is almost four. Instead of two sections, the test now includes three, and the top score is 2,400 instead of 1,600. But of even greater importance are the changes within those sections. Let's look more closely at what today's students will encounter with the new SAT.

## ► Old versus New

Minor changes have been made to the Math and Verbal sections. Math topics have been expanded to include exponential growth, absolute value, and functional notation. Familiar topics, such as linear functions, manipulations with exponents, and properties of tangent lines, are given greater emphasis. Skills such as estimation and number sense will be tested in new formats. The Verbal section is now known as Critical Reading, and has added short reading passages while eliminating analogies.

The biggest change to the new SAT is the addition of a Writing section; however, all of the material in this section isn't entirely new. The Writing section has three parts; the first two are multiple choice, and the last is essay writing. You'll have 35 minutes to complete the multiple-choice section, which is broken down into 25- and 10-minute parts. It contains the same structure and content as the "old" SAT II Writing Test (which was optional,

and has now been eliminated), and includes 49 questions designed to measure your knowledge of basic grammar and usage rules as well as general writing and revising strategies. The questions consist of three types: identifying sentence errors, improving sentences, and improving paragraphs. Preceding the multiple-choice section is the essay, for which you are given a prompt to which you have 25 minutes to respond. Here's an overview of each section:

- **Essay.** The essay will always be the first section on the SAT. You'll get a prompt, which will either be one quote, two quotes, or a sentence that you must complete. Then, there is an assignment that explains what you need to do. You might have to agree or disagree with a quote, develop your point of view about an issue related to a quote, or explain the choice you made in the sentence completion.
- **Identifying Sentence Errors.** In each question is one sentence with four words or phrases underlined. You need to determine which underlined portion, if any, contains an error.
- **Improving Sentences.** Each question contains five versions of a sentence—you choose the one that is most clear and correct.
- **Improving Paragraphs.** Only about 10% of the questions in the writing section are this type, which is good news. They are the most time-consuming, with five or six questions relating to a passage of about 200 words. The questions can involve organization of paragraphs, sentence order, word choice, and grammar issues.

### **Coachability**

The SAT, including the new Writing section, is often referred to as a coachable test. That means you can improve performance through study and practice, whether with this book, software, or a course. In fact, many companies in the test-preparation business tout a hundred- or more point gain for their students. Dili-

gent preparation or coaching is a combination of three critical components:

1. studying the material that will be presented
2. studying the test itself
3. practicing by taking mock tests

For most students, working through the second and third components makes the most difference on test scores. You've already learned the math, grammar, and critical reading skills that are tested on the SAT. While you might need a refresher on some of those skills, what's even more important is understanding the test itself. In this book, we'll review misplaced modifiers, but we'll also reveal how they're used on the test, and how you can spot them more easily. When you are very familiar with the test's format through study and practice, your performance will improve.

### **► Strategies for Test Taking**

One of the factors cited in the coachability argument is the fact that there are methods of approaching the SAT that work much better than others. For example, when you know that it only makes sense to guess when you can eliminate one or more multiple-choice answers, you are much more likely to get a better score. Likewise, be aware that there are easy questions, which come first, and harder questions, which appear at the end of the test. It makes sense to answer the easiest first because the computer scoring your test does not discriminate—each right answer, whether to a difficult or simple question, counts for just one point. Your objective is to get as many right as possible within the allotted time. Hard questions may take a couple of minutes to think through, while during the same time, you could have answered three easier questions.

## Determining the Level of Difficulty

How do the writers of the SAT determine the level of difficulty of each question? Before the question is included in the actual test, it's put into an experimental or "equating" section. If you haven't heard about this section before, here's the scoop: Every test contains one of these sections, and it doesn't count toward your score. However, since there's no way to know which section it is, apply yourself equally to all of the material on the test; don't waste time trying to identify the experimental one.

Once an experimental test section has been given, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) looks at the results. If most test takers get a question right, it's determined to be easy, and if most get it wrong, it's hard. The questions in each section, then, are organized from easiest to hardest. If there are fifteen sentence errors questions, five will be easy, five will be average, and five will be hard.

More specific strategies for each section will be given in Chapters 2 and 3, but here are a few more general pointers:

*Study the directions before taking the test.*

Following the directions *exactly* is critical. Why spend valuable time during the test poring over them? The College Board, which administers the SAT, reveals the directions word-for-word on their website ([www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)). Study and understand them ahead of time, and you'll have more time to spend answering questions and scoring points.

*Skip questions you don't know how to answer.*

You can leave questions blank and still get a good score. It doesn't make sense to spend a lot of time on a really difficult question if you can skip to others that could be easier for you. If you have extra time, you can go back to the tough ones and try again.

*Read carefully.*

Moving too fast can hurt your score. Multiple-choice questions, especially the last few, can be subtle. If you miss a word, or otherwise read the question incorrectly, you'll probably get it wrong. Essays that don't directly address the topic get a zero (the lowest score) no matter how well written they are.

*Use your test booklet.*

During the test, your booklet may be used to flag questions you've skipped (you may have time to get back to them), underline or circle key words in a question, and/or eliminate choices you know are wrong. Go ahead and mark up your booklet—once you're done with it, it's headed to a paper shredder.

*Be aware of the time.*

When time is called, you must put down your pencil and close your book. Keep track so you aren't caught off guard; taking practice tests with a timer will help you familiarize yourself with the number of questions and their difficulty in relation to the clock. Remember that if you finish a section early, you can go back and try those you skipped, or check your answers (only in that section).

## Snacking on Test Day

The new SAT is 30 minutes longer than its previous incarnation, so the breakfast you ate before taking the test won't give you enough energy to get through it. It's a great idea to bring foods that give you long-lasting energy rather than sugary snacks that temporarily elevate your blood sugar. Think nuts, dried fruits, and cheese (not strong-smelling), as well as bottled water, to improve stamina and concentration.

*Come prepared.*

Bring with you:

- your admission ticket
- sharp, number two pencils (at least two)
- a good eraser
- identification with photo (such as a driver's license, a school- or government-issued ID card, or a valid passport)
- a watch (if it has an alarm, turn it off)
- snacks, including water: These must be in sealed containers within a book bag and can only be consumed out of the testing room during breaks.

Leave at home:

- blank paper, notes, books, and dictionaries
- highlighters, pens, and colored pencils
- portable listening or recording devices
- cell phones and pagers

### ► Scoring

The Writing section is scored in two ways: Multiple-choice questions are scored by a machine, and the essay is scored by two graders. The machine simply reads the marks you made with your number two pencil. It gives you one point for every correct answer, deducts a quarter of a point for every incorrect answer, and gives you zero points for questions left blank.

#### **Should You Guess?**

Every multiple-choice question has five possible answers, meaning that if you have no idea which is correct, a guess will give you a 20% chance of getting it right. But if you guess wrong, you'll lose one-quarter of a point. In other words, for every five questions you answer with random guessing, you'll probably get one right. But you'll lose a point for the four you got wrong. That means random guessing is a waste of time. If you can't eliminate even one answer, skip the question.

But what if you can eliminate one or more answer choices? If you are positive one answer is wrong, you now have a 25% chance of getting it right, up from 20% if you couldn't eliminate any answers. That means for every four questions you answer this way, one will be right. Subtract the three-quarters of a point you lose for the three wrong answers, and you are ahead a quarter of a point. If you can positively eliminate two answers, and are guessing between the remaining three, you'll be ahead even more. Therefore, if you can narrow down the answers by even just one, it makes sense to guess.

## Address the Topic

It can't be stressed enough how important it is to clearly address the topic. You can write an incredible essay filled with unique insights, mature diction, and outstanding organization and development. But if it doesn't address the topic, it will receive a zero.

### The Essay

Scorers of the essay are high school and college teachers who use a scale of 1–6; their two scores are combined to reach an essay score of 2–12. (Note, however, that an essay written off-topic, no matter how good, will receive a zero.) If the two scores vary by more than a point, a third reader scores it.

Essay scorers are trained to use a holistic approach, meaning they consider the essay as a whole, rather than word-by-word. Big issues, such as organization and structure, count more than little ones, such as an errant spelling mistake or extraneous comma. That means essays receiving a twelve may have a couple of mechanics errors.

Specifically, scorers look for three things:

1. development of a point of view in response to the topic
2. strong supporting examples and details
3. skillful use of language

Don't get put off by the third requirement. Scorers know you have just 25 minutes to write your essay, so they don't expect perfect grammar and punctuation (although it certainly won't hurt!). They will look for word choices that reflect a strong vocabulary (avoid clichés and slang), variety in sentence structure, and logical development of ideas. We'll go into greater detail about essay specifics in Chapter 3.

### ► SAT Study Timetable

Whether you're reading this book six weeks or six months before you take the SAT, the steps in your timetable remain the same.

#### Now

Take a practice test, such as the one in Chapter 4. Score your test and analyze the results. For each incorrect response, ask yourself:

- Was there something you needed to know that you didn't know? Make a list of the topics you need to review and devote extra time to studying them.
- Did you misunderstand the question? What about the question confused or tricked you?
- Did you make a careless mistake? Careless mistakes include transference errors (marking the wrong oval on the answer sheet) and simple misreading, such as mistaking one word for another.

When you've finished your analysis, use it to make a list of your strengths and weakness. You'll see which specific skills need reviewing, and which test-taking skills need improving. Then, get out your calendar. How much time can you realistically devote each day and each week to your SAT preparations? Estimate how long you can spend on each of the four question types.