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Complete Guide to the New SAT

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Introduction

Welcome to the Magoosh eBook! We hope to take what many see as a grueling pre-college ritual -- prepping for the SAT -- and turning it into an experience that is both fun and instructive. This eBook is meant to serve as a comprehensive overview of the SAT, combining crucial information on test structure and question types while providing essential strategies and tips for doing your best test day.

The information in this eBook is a synthesis of some of the best content on the [Magoosh High School Blog](#). So no matter where you are in your studies, if you're preparing for the SAT, this eBook is for you!

If you're reading this eBook as a PDF on a computer or tablet, you can click on specific sections in the [Table of Contents](#) if you want to skip around.

If you're already familiar with the exam and are looking for more study material, head over to the [Resources](#) section!



The Magoosh Team

We're a team of passionate educators in Berkeley, California. We like word games, video games, and helping students do really well on standardized exams so that they can achieve their educational dreams! :)

You can learn more about us and what we do on our [Team page](#). If you have any questions, feel free to contact us at help@magoosh.com!



What is Magoosh?

Magoosh is an [online SAT prep course](#) that offers:

- 140+ unique lessons on all SAT subjects
- 400+ Reading, Math, and Writing practice questions, with video explanations after every question
- Material created by expert tutors, who have in-depth knowledge of the SAT
- Access anytime, anywhere from any internet-connected device
- Email support from experienced SAT tutors
- Customizable practice sessions and quizzes
- Full-length timed practice test
- Personalized statistics based on your performance

The screenshot shows the Magoosh dashboard interface. At the top is a navigation bar with links: Admin, Dashboard, Lessons, Practice, Review, Resources, Help, and Account. The main content area is titled 'Dashboard' and is divided into several sections:

- Suggested Lessons:** A list of lessons categorized by subject (Math, Reading, Writing). Math lessons include 'Properties of Real Numbers', 'Intro to Percents', 'Intro to SOHCAHTOA', 'Positive and Negative Numbers - I', and 'Working with Percents'. Reading lessons include 'Active Reading', 'The Passage - Part I', 'The Passage - Part II', and 'The Graph'. Writing lessons include 'Intro to Sentence Structure', 'Pronoun Cases', 'The Comma', 'Attacking The Passage', and 'Concision and Wordiness'. A note at the bottom states: 'Suggestions are based on your lesson progress'.
- Quick Practice:** Three green buttons for 'Practice Math' (164 questions left), 'Practice Reading' (149 questions left), and 'Practice Writing' (127 questions left). A link 'Customize your practice' is also present.
- Results Summary:** A section showing performance metrics for Math, Reading, and Writing. Each subject has a pie chart and a table of statistics.

Subject	Correct	Incorrect	Questions Answered	Your Pace	Others' Pace
Math	50%	50%	6	1:12	1:43
Reading	75%	25%	4	0:39	1:30
Writing	75%	25%	4	0:21	0:46
- Your Notes:** A section with a 'View all notes' link and three status messages: 'You have taken 0 notes on Math', 'You have taken 0 notes on Reading', and 'You have taken 0 notes on Writing'.

A green 'Help' button is located on the right side of the dashboard.

Featured In



Why Our Students Love Us

the
muse

"This company is
helping more
students than ever
succeed"

*"I think Magoosh definitely helped me!!! I used it only for a couple of weeks in advance of the test and I really wish I had used it months in advance. All your video lessons are incredibly helpful and I love the amount of practice questions you provide. **Loved it so much and it helped my score by more than 100 points... and that was just studying the week before!**"*

*"Helped me review the fundamentals of math and writing that I have forgotten. Also provided me with useful tips to use on the test. **The dashboard really helped me understand my studying performances and habits.**"*

*"Magoosh placed me in a setting where I can be right in the comfort of my home watching clear and coherent instructional videos to learn about topics I wasn't sure about or saw that I was weak in from the diagnostic. **The staff also always sent out the most fruitful reminders and information in emails and I was able to increase my SAT score by 200 points in a matter of a month.**"*

Meet the Authors

Here are the awesome instructors (and students) who wrote the content for this eBook:



Chris Lele

For the last ten years, Chris has been helping students excel on the SAT, GRE and GMAT. In this time, he's coached 5 students to a perfect SAT score. Some of his GRE students have raised their scores by nearly 400 points. He has taken many GMAT students from the doldrums of the 600s to the coveted land of the 700+. Rumor has it he does a secret happy dance when his students get a perfect score.



Kristin Fracchia

Kristin is the ACT Expert who creates awesomely fun lessons and practice materials for students. With a PhD from UC Irvine and degrees in Education and English, she's been working in education since 2004 and has helped students prepare for standardized tests, as well as college/graduate school admissions, since 2007. She enjoys marathon running, backpacking, hot yoga, and esoteric knowledge.



Mike McGarry

Mike creates expert lessons and practice questions to guide GMAT (and other) students to success. He has a BS in Physics and an MA in Religion, both from Harvard, and over 20 years of teaching experience specializing in math, science, and standardized exams. Mike likes smashing foosballs into orbit, and despite having no obvious cranial deficiency, he insists on rooting for the NY Mets.



Rita Kreig

Rita helps high schoolers find Magoosh, improve their SAT/ACT scores, and get into their dream schools. She earned both her BA and Master of Pacific International Affairs from UC San Diego, where she also studied Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Rita loves education and community development, just as much as she loves vinyasa yoga and baking cookies.



Lucas Fink

Lucas is the teacher behind Magoosh TOEFL. He's been teaching TOEFL preparation and more general English since 2009, and the SAT since 2008. Between his time at Bard College and teaching abroad, he has studied Japanese, Czech, and Korean. None of them come in handy, nowadays.



Maddi Lee

Maddi started writing for Magoosh as a high school junior. She is an avid freelance writer and has been featured in multiple literary publications and anthologies. When she isn't writing, she loves traveling, doodling, and most of all, sleeping. Through her own experience and passion, she hopes to help guide fellow students through the roller coaster that is SAT and college admissions. Maddi currently attends Yale.

From the Author of this eBook

Hi, my name is Chris and I love test prep. Okay, I know that's like an uber dorky thing to say. At the same time, being around these tests for many years has given me a sense of the way that the test writers ask questions—and create trap answers!—and I look forward to imparting this knowledge to you. My hope is that after you go through this eBook, though you might not necessarily heart test prep, but you will get a deeper understanding of the new SAT—and use that to your advantage.

I'm also here to tell you that becoming good at test prep is like any other skill: you have to practice. Taking standardized tests is not an inborn skill. Many often have more exposure than we do, yet we persist at thinking, "oh, they're just good at tests". So while many of the concepts in this book might be new to you (though I'm guessing quite a few will be familiar), just remember: the more you learn and the more you practice SAT test questions, the more likely you are to improve.

Of course, it's not that easy. You'll realize that you are better at certain parts than others. Reading, for example, might be easier for you since you enjoy reading in your spare time, whereas complicated graphs dealing with three different variables will make your head spin. Remember, though, that most have these similar issues. What will help you get through the trouble spots are persistence, and a positive attitude. You will think of questions you answer incorrectly as opportunities for learning.

To help you better understand the part of the test you need to work on, I—along with my team of content experts—have broken the test up into writing, reading, and math. As you work your way through this book, I recommend highly that you do actual SAT practice questions. Nothing can help you improve more than doing actual questions. Of course, those practice questions are based on fundamentals and concepts, and that's where this eBook comes in. One way of using it is by doing College Board practice questions, figuring out your areas of weakness, and then reading up on those areas in this book. Or you can just read through the entire eBook before tackling questions, and then come back to specific parts of the eBook.

Finally, if you hit a plateau or a wall, or whatever metaphor you want to employ for not improving, stop. And take a break. Our brains often learn even while we are not learning in front of a book. Taking a couple of days off from parabolas will likely make it easier for you to understand them the second time around. So, from all of us

here at Magoosh, good luck on your SAT journey. And who knows, you might actually end up enjoying test prep more than you thought.

The SAT is changing

When many high school freshman found out a couple of years back that the SAT was undergoing its most dramatic changes ever, they reacted in a totally predictable fashion: they freaked out.

After all, they would be guinea pigs not just for any test but for a test that more than any other could determine their futures. Since then, the writers of the test—The College Board—have released reams of new material and practice tests. Yet, there is so much lingering dread to the new test that many are opting to take the ACT, the once perceived underperforming sibling to the mighty SAT, but a test that has since gained more respectability amongst college admissions boards.

To make matters worse, at least as far as the new SAT was concerned, no scoring data had been released. So, you could take any one of the four practice tests available yet have no idea how you fared compared to other students--nor know what score on the old test your new SAT score corresponded to.

But here you are anyway, and I am going to tell you that you shouldn't worry too much, that you might actually use this situation to your advantage. How?

1) You've come to the right place

By checking out the Magoosh eBook and all that it offers, you already have an insider's take on the test.

2) Get the test out of the way

As long as you prep and are serious about the test, you should take the opportunity to take the test in the first few months. That way you can focus on other aspects of your college applications.

3) Be the first to take a retake

By prepping first, you can also be one of the first to retake the test. Now before you balk, you should realize that a retake is not seen as a bad thing. In fact, admissions boards expect you to take the test several times. What they are looking for is score improvement between tests. Who knows, admission offices might even give you extra points for being one of the plucky souls to take the first few tests.

Taking the test the first time will also give you a good sense of exactly of how you do in the actual testing environment. This will give you valuable feedback on how to improve the second time around, and what to study before the retake.

This eBook will help you along your test prep journey! And if you have any questions, we're real people (not robots) ready to help! You can contact us at help@magoosh.com.

Meet the Redesigned SAT



Oh the SAT is a-changin’

The SAT exam has taken on many different forms since it debuted in the 1920s, but the recent redesign is by far the largest change in the last 30 years. As of March 2016, the College Board released a new SAT exam that aims to better represent what students learn in high school, and be a fairer indicator of future college performance. The actual effects that the new SAT format will have on college admissions remain to be seen. In the meantime, let’s focus on what you can expect from this newly redesigned, refurbished, and restructured exam!

The Format of the Old SAT vs the New SAT

Let’s start with a side-by-side comparison:

Category	Old SAT (Pre-March 2016)	New SAT (March 2016 - Present)
Exam Length	3 hours and 45 minutes	3 hours (+ 50 minutes for the optional essay)
Sections	1. Critical Reading 2. Writing 3. Math 4. Essay	1. Evidence-Based Reading and Writing a. Reading Test b. Writing & Language Test 2. Math a. No-calculator section b. Calculator section 3. Essay (optional)
Essay	Required (25 minutes)	Optional (50 minutes)
Score	600 - 2400	400 - 1600
Subscoring	None	Subscores given for every section
Guessing Penalty	-1/4 point for every wrong answer	None

Please note that there is no longer a penalty for getting an answer wrong. If you never took the old SAT, then you might wonder if this is a big deal. Let me tell you ... it is.

Okay, one more chart before we move on. Let's look at what you can expect in each section of the new SAT exam:

Section	What to Expect
Reading	• 65 minutes • 52 multiple-choice questions • Read passages from literature, historical documents, social sciences, and natural sciences. Answer questions about information and ideas in the text, the author's use of language, and how passages relate.
Writing & Language	• 35 minutes • 4 passages, 44 multiple-choice questions • Read passages and answer questions relating to grammar, vocabulary in context, and editing. The four passages relate to: careers, social studies, humanities, and science.
Math	• 80 minutes ○ No-calculator section: 25 minutes ○ Calculator section: 55 minutes • 58 multiple-choice questions ○ No-calculator section: 20 questions ○ Calculator section: 38 questions • 1 set of "extended-thinking" grid-in questions • Answer questions relating to: ○ Heart of Algebra: Algebra I, including linear equations and inequalities ○ Problem Solving & Data Analysis: Interpreting data, analyzing relationships ○ Passport to Advanced Math: Algebra II (including quadratic and high-order equations) ○ Additional Topics in Math: geometry, trigonometry, complex numbers

Essay (Optional)	• 50 minutes • 1 essay • Read the passage, analyze the author’s argument, and demonstrate your ability to write an effective essay. The prompt barely changes from test to test, but the passage is different each time.
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Alright, that about covers the basics. Let’s move on to some general tips and test-taking strategies.

General SAT Tips & Strategies



How Long Should You Study for the SAT?

Some would say a weekend; some would say a lifetime. Clearly, the truth is somewhere in between, and the answer really depends on you. Are you the busy type, but have lofty goals? Then studying an entire summer is probably necessary (and more, if you don't do as well as planned). Not looking to rock the Ivy League, but hoping for a decent in-state school? Maybe a month is all you'll need.

But don't spend just a weekend. Whereas a month can make a big difference in your score, depending on the materials and whether you have a teacher, a weekend isn't going to make much of a difference on your score (and all-nighters are never fun).

On the flip side, don't fritter your life away, attending SAT schools every weekend, year after year (colleges do want well-rounded students). Of course, most students do not fall into this category, but if you are a super-achiever keep this advice in mind.

Ultimately, how long you study for the SAT has a lot to do with your current score and the average score of the school you hope to go to. Figure that out first, and then you'll have a better sense of just how much time you'll need.

The 70-150 Point Plan = One Month

Life is busy, and you just don't have time to dedicate it all to one thing. But as long as you can give SAT prep a month of your time, you can—with hard work and a good teacher—expect to improve about 30 to 70 points in both Math and Reading/Writing, or up to around 150 points overall.

The 150-250 Point Increase = One Summer

With the right materials and a good teacher, a summer is ample time for you to raise your score by as much as 250 points (assuming you are not starting off with a score of over 1350). You will need to take practice tests every week and go through them with a really good teacher/tutor. That person will also help determine your weak points.

If you are unable to get a teacher/tutor, you can still see such a point increase. It'll just be a little tougher; you'll have to be more disciplined and attuned to the errors you tend to make.

The 250-350 Point Club

First off, I'm here to tell you that such a score increase is possible. Secondly, the higher your baseline score (the score you start out at), the less likely it is to see such an increase. So yeah, if you are already scoring 1400, then it is impossible to increase by 300 points.

But for students scoring in the 900-1200 range, a 300-point increase is possible, given lots of hard work and, of course, time. You will need to become an avid reader, a math machine, and a grammar nazi (or at least think like one). But these are all learnable skills, with the right guidance and materials. You will probably need more than a summer; in fact, you might find yourself working back-to-back summers. But that's okay, if you are in between your sophomore and junior years. With the determination, you can do it.

The 1350+ Plan

Let's say you are already starting at the 1350- or 1400-level. Increasing 100 or more points is going to be tough. But you are probably already a strong student. You might only need about 6 weeks, but that will have to be an intense 6 weeks (you will be dreaming in fourth-degree polynomials and Reading passage quotes). Going through multiple practice tests a week with an SAT tutor may be necessary. With an entire summer, and the right instruction, you should be able to break the 1500-point threshold.

How to Make Your SAT Prep Stick

When studying anything, SAT topics included, there's the constant, underlying danger that you may forget what you've learned. Remember that Spanish quiz in seventh grade? The one you studied for the night before, but came into class feeling totally unprepared for? Or maybe it wasn't seventh grade; maybe it was last week. Most of us know the feeling pretty well.

So while you're prepping for your SAT, how can you make sure that the things you grasp don't just...slip away?

Enlist a friend as a study buddy

Unlike your other tests, you don't have to choose from the people actually in your classes to study for the SAT with. Since most kids are going to take it anyway, you can pick and choose just about anybody in your year to practice with. Doing it with a friend might really make the whole thing a lot more enjoyable, which is important for avoiding SAT prep apathy.

But the most important thing about working with somebody else is that it makes you actually engage with the questions. If you're working together, then there will constantly be one person explaining their process to the other—and that's good for both sides. The person explaining has to clarify their thoughts rather than just answering the question and moving on, and that helps them to remember the experience. Likewise, the person listening has to try to follow the thinking of their friend, which gives them something more personal to interact with than the coldness of an SAT prep book alone. Going back and forth acting as "teacher" and "student" is a great way to approach this so neither person is left just being silent.

Really pick apart practice SAT questions

After every practice question, your goal should be to know exactly how that question was created. You should strive to be able to write the test yourself, even if you're not planning to apply for work at the College Board and write SATs any time soon.

Do not just get the answer and move on. It's not about the answer; it's about the process. You want to be sure that you understand in your bones why you arrived at the answer and how it could have gone wrong. You're

probably going to see a question that tests a similar logical process on your actual SAT, whether it's in reading, math, or writing, so make sure that you take a good hard look at it. After that, try to write a similar question yourself using slightly different details.

Locate your weak areas and focus on them

If you've gotten a few function questions wrong, for example, spend a whole lot of time just repeating that one type of question. In order to do this, you're going to need the right kind of materials, though. Unfortunately, the Official SAT Study Guide doesn't cut it, here, since it just doesn't have sections devoted to specific types of questions (like math functions) that you can focus on. [Magoosh's online SAT prep offerings](#) are better suited for it.

But even if you don't have a whole lot of questions that work on the same skills, you can still use this focus—just repeat those same questions. I know, I know, it sounds dull. But the logical process that you go through to get the answer is the focus. By repeating the or question(s) from week to week, you can help drive home the strategy you need, and that strategy may prove pretty helpful on your SAT.

How to Take a Practice SAT (The Right Way)

The College Board, the creators of the SAT, releases a book of ten practice tests. Many students wisely use this book, as it contains actual questions from the SAT. As somebody who teaches the SAT, the book is the bible and offers the best practice out there.

Simply going through each test will not translate to a better score. But practicing full-length SAT tests is invaluable to SAT your study routine. Get the most you can out of this test by keeping the following four points in mind.

Build a foundation first

If you have little experience taking the SAT, do not just dive into the College Board book. Learn effective tips and strategies from Princeton Review and Barron's.

Time yourself

Once you're ready to take a practice test from the College Board book, don't give yourself all the time in the world. You want to make this as close to the real test as possible. So set your timer, and don't give yourself any more time than the time allowed for each section.

Don't get interrupted

Now that you've got the timer going, don't stop the timer. Also, do not take a break in between sections. Simulate the actual SAT by sitting for the entire three hours (turning off your iPhone will definitely help!).

Figure out your wrong answers

After you've taken a test, don't just mark questions right and wrong. Try to understand why you missed certain questions. This process will help you better understand how the test writers think and will help you avoid similar mistakes in the future.

If you can't figure out, I've recorded explanations on Magoosh SAT's YouTube channel for the SAT. Have a look!

SAT Scoring



Scoring On The Redesigned SAT

Scoring on the new SAT has gotten both simpler and a whole lot more complicated. But let's start with the simple first.

The test is no longer out of a total of 2400 points, and is now out of 1600 points. Reading and writing have been lumped into one section that is out of 800. The math section will constitute the other 800 points. And remember how the essay used to be part of your writing score? Well, now the essay will be optional and will not be included in your writing score.

In line with the simplicity motif, **guessing will no longer be penalized.** That's right, the pesky $\frac{1}{4}$ penalty (pesky because it was tedious to calculate and it redounded negatively on your score) has gone the way of dinosaurs and bell-bottoms.

So how have things gotten more complicated? Well, there will be different domains of knowledge that will stretch across multiple sections. For instance, your ability to interpret data, aka "the graph," will be tested across both sections; some of the reading passages and some of the writing sections will have questions dealing with graphs. Another domain will test your ability to understand how words function in context. The idea is that colleges won't just know your score, but that they will also have a breakdown of your skills across a variety of areas.

To the best of my knowledge, all questions will be weighed the same. However, the number of questions you need to get correct in order to get a specific score (a topic referred to as "scaling") is something College Board won't release until multiple groups of students have completed the new exam. Hopefully, that information will give us a better sense of how scoring will work on the new test.

Avoid Score Drama

Obviously, studying for the SAT is no piece of cake. But the obnoxious drama that surrounds the whole process can make it nearly unbearable. Here are our top tips for how to avoid catfights, gossip and more:

Don't check scores around your friends

We can advise against this from personal experience: tears because some students got lower scores than their friends; guilt over higher scores. It's always a bad scene.

Moral of the story: make sure you have a private place to be when you check scores. And don't feel pressured to share your score with friends if you don't want to.

Don't judge people's responses to their scores

If you find yourself in a situation where you have to be around your peers when everyone is checking scores, try to focus on yourself. Don't worry about their responses, happy or sad. Everyone is different, so everyone will have different reactions.

If someone is enthusiastically happy with what you think is a low score, let them be. If someone is sobbing over a score that's higher than yours, let them sob. That's also their prerogative. You never know how much work a student put in, or what kind of emotional stress they are under.

Don't spread scores around

To many, SAT scores are private information. Just because someone tells you their score doesn't mean they want it to become common knowledge to the whole student body.

News of various students' scores can be a big source of gossip in high school. But you shouldn't care! It's other people's business and it has nothing to do with you.

Understand context

It doesn't make sense to compare yourself to others because everyone prepares for the test differently. If someone got a higher score than you, it most likely means that they studied more than you. Maybe they were able to afford tutoring that you couldn't. You never know.

SAT Writing Test



Intro to SAT Writing

What you need to know

- There are four, 350-450-word passages, containing eleven questions each
- Tests basic grammar
- Also, tests more big-picture grammatical issues, i.e. transitions between sentences and transitions between paragraphs
- Tests style, tone, and syntax
- One passage will have a graph with one question

Basic Tips for SAT Writing

Over the years, I've had several students who would always surprise me when it came to grammar. While masters at gaming the grammar section of the old SAT, they failed to spot even simple grammatical errors in their own essays. But it wasn't just on the level of struggling to find a subject-verb agreement issue in their own writings. They seemed to miss the larger connections—those between sentences in a paragraph and those between the paragraphs themselves.

I'm guessing that the College Board recognized the same shortcomings in their approach (okay, let's be honest, the ACT recognized the shortcomings in such an approach). So instead of having isolated snippets of grammar, grammar that becomes very predictable if you know what to look for and thus doesn't really determine grammar knowledge, the new SAT is having students make corrections to a full-length essay.

This change is highly welcome (at least to educators who want the test to actually measure what it purports to). However, it makes the test less easy to game. You'll actually have to be a decent writer—one who can tell an okay transition sentence from a felicitous one—to do well. That doesn't mean there aren't some basic techniques to help you become better at this section.

1. To read or not to read

400 words are a lot to read. Multiply that by 4 and this section suddenly has 1,600 words—that’s not including the 44 questions. So should you read the entire essay?

I don’t think there is an easy answer. My recommendation is to experiment. First off, time yourself where you do one passage followed by the eleven questions. See how many you get correct and also gauge how comfortable you felt with the material as you went through it. Next, try the same without reading the passage at all.

My hunch is that the more successful approach might be determined by the specific passage. That is, some passages have more paragraph-centric questions. You might only need to read that paragraph to get the question right, and not have to worry about reading the entire passage from the get-go. Conversely, some passages might ask you to analyze the relation between paragraphs or transitions between paragraphs. Without initially reading the entire passage, you might find yourself scrambling around, trying to figure out what to read. Or you might totally overlook the supporting context and think you got the question right but flub it completely.

New Strategy

- Read a paragraph at a time
- Re-read parts of that paragraph if necessary

I believe the best possible approach is to read a paragraph at a time and then do the questions relating to that paragraph. That way you’ll be able to quickly go back and correct the grammar issues you just encountered.

You’ll also be able to more easily identify any conjunction issues that come between sentences without having to read the entire paragraph (though you’ll have to reread the specific sentences relating to that question).

Finally, you’ll be able to better notice the transitions between paragraphs, in case a question asks about that.

2. Know your rules (aka “Standard English Conventions”)

Ultimately, this is a test of grammar. So you’ll still have to know the basic rules. What seems fairer about this test is that if you have a pretty strong grasp of a grammatical rule you’ll most likely get the question. Sure, there might be a tricky question or two, in which you’ll have to read the previous sentence to figure out the correct

answer, but it won't be anything like the old SAT. On the old test, you could drill subject-verb agreement or pronoun-antecedent until your eyeballs pop out, but you likely would still miss the dreaded question #29 in the writing section.

3. Know the question types

The new writing section isn't all about grammar. You'll have to understand how ideas are developed over the course of a paragraph (and sometimes the entire essay). The test will ask you whether it should add information, delete a sentence, or move a sentence to a different part of a paragraph.

The first time you see such a question you might be flustered. By practicing these questions and learning what the test is expecting of you, you will have an easier time with this same question type in the future. And remember this is a standardized test, so the wrong answers—and the reasons they are wrong—are often consistent over tests. Once you pick up on these patterns, you'll become better at the question type.

4. Importance of context

It is tempting to approach the new writing section by looking directly at the underlined part and the few words around it, and then coming to a conclusion. This might sometimes not get you in trouble, if the question has to do with possessives or a straightforward subject-verb agreement question. But when dealing with sentence structure or transitions between sentences, it is always a good idea to read the entire sentence before the underlined part and the entire sentence in which the underlined part is contained.

Sometimes, you will have to choose an answer choice that asks you to consider information from the previous paragraph. (We'll see such an example in the practice passage at the end.) Often, when this happens, the test writers will reinforce the importance of context. Compare these two:

"Which choice most effectively combines the underlined sentences?"

"In context, which choice best combines the underlined sentences?"

The first prompt will focus on grammatical issues within the two sentences that you have to combine (basically, you don't need to know the sentences that came before). The second prompt, however, clearly states "in

context”. So you better make sure you understand the sentences—and sometimes even the paragraph—that come before the combined sentences the question is asking about.

Standard English Conventions

Knowing these basic strategies and being familiar with the question format will help—up until a point. You will still need to know your “standard English conventions”. This formidable-sounding phrase basically means grammar. The good news is you don’t have to open up one of those massive grammar tomes your English teachers have been foisting on you since the 6th grade.

Below are the common grammar issues you’ll see on the test. Review and understand them. And then—and here’s the important part—practice by applying what you’ve learned as you go through an actual passage.

I should also note that the headings of the sections below—“Sentence Structure”, “Conventions of Usage”, “Conventions of Punctuation”—allows me to organize all the different concepts. You don’t, however, have to know that “parallelism” falls under “Sentence Structure” and that “agreement” falls under “Conventions of Usage”. You simply have to understand the concept of “parallelism” and when it is being violated, and the same for “agreement”.

Sentence Structure

What I'm going to do here is show you a basic example (so you get the concept) and then a much more advanced SAT-level example. My logic is as follows: many students understand the concept at its most basic level (which usually means basic "See-Jane-run" level sentences), but these same students fail to spot the error when the sentence is more advanced.

Additionally, I'm going to structure the layout of the grammar exactly the way that the College Board does.

1. Sentence Boundaries
2. Subordination and Coordination
3. Parallel Structure
4. Modifier Placement
5. Inappropriate Shifts in Verb Tense, Mood, and Voice
6. Inappropriate Shifts in Pronoun Person and Number

But unlike the College Board, I'm actually going to delve into—I'm talking deep dive—what each means in an SAT context.

1. Sentence Boundaries

Fragments

Sentences are made up of both a subject and a verb that tells us what the subject is doing. The exception would be commands, which aren't tested on the SAT (for example, "Study!").

Fragments are incorrect because they lack a verb that describes what a subject is doing. But it's not that straightforward, as the examples below show.

Many students with a test on Monday.

Correct: *Many students with a test on Monday **are preparing** over the weekend.*

With proper training, many athletes.

Correct: *With proper training, many athletes **should be able to avoid** injury.*

(The bolded parts are the verbs of each sentence.)

SAT-level

Daily vitamins and minerals that are important in healthy cellular functioning.

In this case, “that” begins a relative clause, which functions as a large adjective describing the subject. The verb that is part of this clause (in this case “are”) should not be considered the verb that pairs with the subject to create a complete sentence.

Correct: *Daily vitamins and minerals that are important in healthy cellular functioning **are** in many of the foods we eat.*

Comma Splices

There are several ways to connect complete sentences. The most obvious is by using a period. You can also use a semicolon or a comma **AND** a conjunction. The “and” is big; that’s why I put it in caps. If you have a sentence made up of two independent clauses and a comma without a conjunction connecting those sentences, you have a comma splice. (I have bolded the part that shows the comma splice).

Incorrect: *Studying every day is not how I want to spend my **summer**, I want to make lasting memories with friends.*

Correct: *(using a conjunction): Studying every day is not how I want to spend my **summer**, **because** I want to make lasting memories with friends.*

Correct: (using semicolon): Studying every day is not how I want to spend my **summer**; I want to make lasting memories with friends.

SAT-level

Incorrect: Jupiter is the largest planet in the solar system, it also has the largest moon.

Correct: Jupiter is the largest planet in the solar system, and it also has the largest moon.

Correct: Jupiter is the largest planet in the solar system; it also has the largest moon.

2. Subordination and coordination

There are two ways of approaching this, one of which is much more important for the SAT. The first way is to explore the difference between “subordination” and “coordination”. After all, that is the title that the College Board has given to this grammatical idea. However, getting tangled up in the nuances of the difference between subordination and coordination deflects from the purpose of the test: to determine whether you can tell the difference between a transition between clauses that suggests **contrast** (“however”, “nonetheless”, “on the other hand”), **similarity** (“additionally”, “furthermore”, “moreover”) and **cause and effect** (“because”, “therefore”, “thus”).

Contrast

She practices tennis everyday, **though** she is still unable to hit a solid backhand.

Even though many students apply to out-of-state schools, they end up choosing a local college.

“Contrast words”: however, (even) though, although, nonetheless, notwithstanding, despite

Similarity

*Climate change is causing many heat-related deaths. **Moreover**, it is leading to conditions that, in the long run, will harm us all.*

*Students feel overwhelmed with the number of hoops they have to jump through to get to college. **Likewise**, they feel flustered, once they get to college, by the many demands of their new environment.*

“**Similarity words**”: likewise, moreover, additionally, furthermore, also

Cause and Effect

***Because** of tuition hikes at the private school, many parents are opting to send their children elsewhere.*

*The level of competition in college sports has become fiercer than ever. **Therefore**, athletes and coaches are seeking ever more sophisticated training regimens.*

“**Cause and effect words**”: therefore, thus, because, so, since

Mini-quiz:

1. The SAT has historically been the test the majority of high school students take to enter college; additionally, with more students opting to take the ACT, the SAT has been forced to alter its content.

A) NO CHANGE

B) however

C) therefore

D) furthermore

2. The mean temperature of oceans has been rising significantly for the last ten years; however, many organisms have been forced to move from their traditional habitats or to simply perish.

A) NO CHANGE

- B) moreover
- C) therefore
- D) nonetheless

Answers and explanation:

1) B

A contrast exists between what has historically been the case ("The SAT has been the most popular exam for college-bound students) and what is now the case ("The ACT is becoming increasingly popular). This points to the contrast word, B) *however*.

C) and D) are tempting. However, that the SAT has had to alter its content does not result from the fact that the SAT has long been a popular test; the SAT altering the test is a *result* of the ACT becoming more popular.

2) C

There is cause and effect here: ocean temperatures increasing (cause) and organisms moving from their traditional habitat (effect). So C) *therefore* is the answer.

A quick note on subordination

There is still an important idea in subordination that is likely to come up on the test. If a clause is subordinate, it is a dependent clause, or not a stand-alone sentence. It depends on something; that something is an independent clause.

Because he was tired

Though he was smart

The above are both dependent clauses. They need an independent clause to complete them:

Because he was tired, he wasn't able to study all the material before the test.

Though he was smart, he never cared to study.

The SAT might test this in the following way:

Although El Niño is typically associated with a sharp spike in annual rainfall on the West Coast, though there are other meteorological factors that can offset this effect.

A) NO CHANGE

B) West Coast. Though there

C) West Coast, there are

D) West Coast. There

So what's exactly wrong with this sentence? Well, a dependent clause *depends* on an independent clause, which is fancy-speak for a complete sentence. However, the part that comes after the dependent clause, which begins with "although", also starts with "though". When a phrase starts with "although", "though", "despite", "because", etc., it is a dependent clause. Therefore, we have back-to-back dependents clauses—a big "no-no". Getting rid of the "though" gives us a complete sentence ("There are other meteorological...offset). Answer C).

3. Parallel structure

There are two things you'll want to remember when it comes to parallelism: parts of speech and lists.

Parts of speech include adjective, noun, verb, etc. If I **list** several things, those things should be in the same form, i.e. they should share the same parts of speech. For instance, in the sentence below, the list is made up of three things: read magazines, watch television, and play video games.

Incorrect: *George likes to read magazines, watch television, and he plays video games.*

Incorrect: *George likes to read magazines, watch television, and plays video games.*

Correct: *George likes to read magazines, watch television, and play video games.*

In the first two examples, we have two verbs that are parallel (“read” and “watch”). What I mean by parallel is they have the same form: they are not “reads” and “watch” or “read” and “watches” or “watching”.

Not that we couldn’t use some other form of the verb. But the three parts that make up the list must be in the same form.

Correct: Reading magazines, watching television, and playing video games are three things he likes to do during his free time.

Parallelism and correlative conjunctions

There is a special type of conjunction called the correlative conjunction. You don’t really have to know the name, but you have to know the function. More specifically, you have to remember when you see these conjunctions to think “parallelism”.

Correlative conjunctions:

Not only A but also B

Both A and B

Either A or B

Neither A nor B

What in turn does A and B mean? “A” stands for a word or phrase and “B” stands for a word or phrase. These words or phrases should be parallel. In other words, A and B should be parallel.

Not only is he funny, but he is also clever.

In this case A and B are adjectives.

SAT-level example:

Incorrect: Not only has he **squandered** an important opportunity, but he is also **upsetting** many people close to him.

Correct: Not only has he **squandered** an important opportunity, but he has also **upset** many people close to him.

Squandered is in the simple past tense; therefore, we need the simple past tense of upset, which is upset. Notice in the incorrect example, squanderED does not match upsettING.

On more advanced parallelism questions, it won't just be two words that have to be parallel but entire phrases. Other times a question is difficult because the verbs are buried in a morass of words, as the example below shows.

SAT-level (hard):

Playing video games, unlike watching television, is not a passive activity, because doing so requires that the video game player react to what's happening onscreen, strategizes to overcome obstacles, and that she persevere to advance through the most difficult stages of the game.

1)

A) NO CHANGE

B) that she strategizes

C) that she strategize

D) strategize

2)

A) NO CHANGE

B) she persevere

C) *she perseveres*

D) *persevere*

Answers and Explanation:

The video game player has to do three things: react, strategize, and persevere. The verb form is something called the subjunctive, which often pops up in words that indicated a command, request, or a requirement. You don't actually have to know this. But you do have to notice that it does not say, "the video game player **reacts**"; a verb usually takes an 's' the end when it refers to a third person subject ("he walks", "she dances", etc.).

Here though it is "react", not "reacts" (again, that's because we have the verb "require that", which removes the -s from the end of a verb referring to the third person. Therefore, the other two verbs must both be in this form, giving us "strategize" and "persevere". Therefore, the answer to both 1) and 2) is D).

4. Modifier Placement

The SAT has always loved to test this concept. There is a clear logical reasoning behind the correct answer, yet many disregard this in their everyday speech. And when "what sounds right" and "what is actually right" conflict, you can bet the SAT is waiting there with a carefully engineered question to trap the unwary.

So take a look at the following sentences: is anything wrong?

Studying for finals and playing high school sports, it is hard for many to find time.

Living for seven months in Madrid, Martha's fluency in Spanish increased rapidly.

Not so sure? Well, what about the following examples?

Running down the street, a bicycle hit him.

Flipping through channels, the television suddenly turned off.

Something weird is clearly going on. Was the bicycle running down the street? Was a television sitting on a couch and eating Doritos, while flipping through channels?

To avoid such absurd scenarios, we have to make sure that when we have a phrase beginning with an *-ing* verb (called a participle) that the phrase, which ends right before the comma, accurately describe the subject that comes right after the comma.

Running down the street, he had to jump out of the way of an oncoming bicycle.

Flipping through channels, Dexter threw his hands up in frustration when the television suddenly turned off.

Now let's go back to those first two examples. Can you think of ways to improve those sentences? Give it a shot. Makes sure the *"-ing phrase"* correctly modifies the subject. The correct version of the sentences is immediately below (don't peek!)

Correct:

Studying for finals and playing high school sports, many students find it hard to focus on anything else.

Incorrect:

Living for seven months in Madrid, Martha became fluent in Spanish.

Modification is basically a fancy way of saying "describing". And you can think of the *"-ing phrase"* as a large adjective that should logically (don't forget the Doritos-eating television) describe the subject.

Sometimes, though, modification comes after the subject.

John sat on the couch eating Doritos and watching a blank screen.

John sat on the couch, eating Doritos and watching a blank screen.

One of these sentences implies that the couch eats Doritos (which isn't too absurd if you look under some couches). The other is correct because it describes (correctly) John eating the Doritos and watching a blank screen.

The correct sentence uses a comma to separate the phrase, "John sat on the couch" from the phrase that says "eating Doritos...". When the "-ing phrase" comes after the comma, the action in that phrase should always describe the subject of the sentence. In this case, John is that subject of the subject.

On the other hand if you don't have a comma separating the "-ing phrase" from the rest of the sentence, then that phrase must logically describe the noun that comes immediately before it. In the first sentence (the one without the comma), there is no comma separating "couch" and "eating". Therefore, that sentence implies (incorrectly) that the couch is eating Doritos and watching a blank screen.

Mini-Quiz

Students multitask everyday, indeed many times a day, students believe they are very adept at juggling two or three different activities while studying for a midterm. Though they may well be able to learn while multitasking, it is not nearly as efficient as focusing only on studying. Yet many students continue to pass up an optimal studying environment preferring to multitask at every opportunity.

1)

A) NO CHANGE

B) To multitask

C) Students multitasking

D) Multitasking

2)

A) NO CHANGE

B) environment; preferring

- C) environment, preferring
- D) environment, they prefer

Answers and explanation:

1. As is, this sentence has two subjects (“students” and “students”). Since students is already the subject of the clause beginning “students believe...”, it is easy to add a dependent clause, specifically an “-ing phrase” and voila! We have a valid sentence. Answer: D). C) is wrong because it also repeats the subject, “students”.

2. As is, the sentence implies that the environment prefers to multitask. By putting a comma between “environment” and “preferring”, the sentence is correctly structured to indicate that “preferring” refers to the subject, “many students”. Answer: C).

5. Inappropriate Shifts in Verb Tense, Mood, and Voice

Verb tense

Consistency. That’s the first thing you have to remember about verb tense. If you are telling a story about the time in the 7th grade where you got lost hiking in a thunderstorm, don’t suddenly shift to the present tense.

While that may sound pretty straightforward, when the topic is not that familiar and the SAT is the one writing about it, we tend to lose track of the proper tenses. Sometimes, tenses also shift from past to present, and vice versa. It all depends on context.

19th century musicians had grueling practice sessions to help them master the rigors of their respective instrument. Today, instrumentalists must also practice many hours a day. Some argued that, with the “make-it-or-break-it” competition musicians must face today, practice sessions are more grueling than at any other point in history.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) *had argued*
- C) *would have argued*
- D) *argue*

The context here compares musicians of the 19th century to musicians today. Notice how the passage describes the 19th century musicians using the past tense and how it switches to present tense to describe today's musicians. Notice how the part being tested, "argued", is in the past tense. Notice, too, how the "some" doing the arguing are discussing practice sessions *today*. Therefore, we want present tense. Answer D).

The test can get a little more complicated by asking you to differentiate between present perfect and present tense.

Since the 6th grade, I have kept a daily diary.

SAT level example:

Ever since the advent of moving pictures, directors have been refining film techniques.

The test wants you to be aware of the fact that whenever you have an action that started in the past but continues today, you should use the present perfect. To make that clearer the test will almost always throw in the word "since".

Mood

"Mood" is a strange word choice to describe a grammatical subtlety. And for that reason, I think it turns many students off (and puts them in a bad mood, as it were).

What we mean by mood in grammar-speak is whether the verb is a command ("imperative mood"), a question ("interrogative mood"), or conditionality ("subjunctive mood").

"Imperative mood"

The way this is going to show up on a test is in the form of a verb. “Command words”, or words such as “request that”, “order that”, “require that” are followed by “be + verb participle”.

*The teacher demanded that the hyperactive **be seated** the entire class.*

*He requested that she **be present** at the meeting.*

“Subjunctive mood”

In general, “mood” is so rare on the test that I think it showed up in one question of the four practice tests in the College Board book. So if you have to skip one section of the grammar review, this might be the one.

The subjunctive mood implies conditionality, in other words a hypothetical, i.e., something that isn’t and can’t be reality. To show this, we change the verb “was” to “were”. If the verb is already “were”, then we just leave it (“Were we space aliens, we could travel the cosmos”).

Were she responsible for the break-in, she would not have an airtight alibi.

If I were president of the United States, I would make “taco Tuesdays” a national holiday.

Both of these examples are in the “subjunctive mood” because they describe something that couldn’t possibly be. It’s like saying “imagine if”. (Basically, I’m implying there is no way I’d ever be president of the United States—sorry, no “taco Tuesdays”). When something is possible, then you don’t need to change the verb “to were”.

Notice how I didn’t mention the “interrogative mood”. That’s because nothing changes with the verb; therefore, there’s no easy way for the SAT to test that the interrogative mood is being used.

Inappropriate shifts in voice

Throughout this eBook, I have used two levels of speaking when coming up with example sentences: One that is casual and chummy (the “taco Tuesdays” voice) and another that is more formal (“the SAT voice”). The SAT wants to make sure you know when to use the appropriate level of voice. That is, you don’t want to say something in a casual lax way when writing an essay, or, in this case, editing an essay that the SAT is provided.

In the sentence pairs below, one maintains a consistent tone whereas the other lapses into casual speak.

1a) The SAT places harsh demands on a student’s attention, forcing them to be focused for almost four hours straight.

1b) The SAT is really hard because you have to keep your mind on the task for four straight hours.

2a) Working in groups can lead to high employee productivity while making people feel good about working with others in the office.

2b) Working in groups can lead to high employee productivity while fostering goodwill between colleagues.

Answer: 1b and 2a are too casual for the likes of the SAT.

Language can also be too stilted, or formal. The SAT—and any manual of style (and good sense!)—will tell you to avoid overly formal language. Can you spot the offender below?

3a) The SAT is highly onerous on minds exhibiting a propensity for divagation.

3b) Students who are serious about SAT prep are more likely to seek outside help, and are thus more likely to see a score improvement.

If you are not even quite sure what 3a) is saying, you are not alone. It uses overinflated, pompous language.

The reason, I think, the SAT is testing this is because amongst students (and you might even be one of them) there's a notion that sprinkling fancy-sounding SAT words into your essay is a mark of good writing. That thinking, however, is a gross misconception. See, there is a major difference between the discernment used in choosing a particularly apt word and the desperation to sound intelligent by using words like "divagation" (don't worry that word will not be on the test!). The latter will confuse your reader, muddy what you are trying to communicate, and ultimately turn the reader off from what you have to say.

Mini-Quiz

There is, of course, a dark side to video games. Like any activity that is based on a system of rewards, video games can cause people to overindulge and neglect other aspects of their lives, all so they can reach the next level in their favorite games.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) stop doing other stuff
- C) cease in the engagement with other significant life activities
- D) fail to attend to urgent facets of life

Explanation

B) is too casual. Both C) and D) are too formal and wordy. A) is consistent with the tone and level of formality found in the rest of the sentence.

6. Inappropriate Shifts in Pronoun Person and Number

Every time you see a pronoun on the SAT that pronoun should be clearly linked to a noun. That noun is what we call the antecedent. Typically, it'll come before the pronoun but not always. The main point is you don't have a mysterious "he" floating around in a paragraph. The "he" should clearly refer to Jim, Bob, or whatever male you are writing about.

Jim was voted class president mainly because he is very popular amongst the student body.

SAT-level

Though Einstein is lauded for his genius, he wasn't particularly adept at mathematics and, to support his more complex theories, he often relied on his more computationally minded peers to crunch the numbers.

Number

In the last sentence, you can see that “he” and both of the “his” pronouns refer to Einstein. This use of pronouns should be pretty straightforward to most. Things get a little more complicated when we drop the word “number” in there. “Number” as far as verbs and pronouns go, refers to either singular or plural.

For instance, the number of ‘I’ is singular; the number of ‘we’ is plural. However, most of us are unlikely to mix those two up. The SAT will most likely test you by taking a plural subject and using the “it” pronoun to refer to a plural subject, or vice versa. See if you can spot the error below.

Bobby forgot to do several assignments but turned it in later.

In this sentence, what does “it” refer to? Common sense tells us the “assignments.” Indeed, we speak this way and would understand exactly what the person is saying. However, in writing, you have to make sure that the pronoun matches the subject in terms of number. In this case, “assignments” is plural, therefore we need the plural pronoun “them” (some students are often surprised to see “them” refer to non-human subjects and abstract nouns, though this usage is 100% correct).

Correct: *Bobby forgot to do several assignments but turned them in later.*

By the way, if you are still not convinced and think that “it” refers to homework, which is singular, remember that the noun homework actually has to show up somewhere in the sentence.

Inappropriate shifts in person

The SAT likes to trick you by switching from the third person (one) to the second person (you) or vice versa. Always remember that the correct pronoun is the one that appears in the non-underlined part.

To give you a little refresher, here is a table showing the different number and “person” of pronouns.

	1st person	2nd person	3rd person
Singular (subject)	I	you	he/she/it
Singular (object)	me	you	him/her/it
Plural (subject)	we	you	they
Plural (object)	us	you	them

Mini-quiz

We have all received them: emails claiming that we have won or inherited a large sum of money. While most of us see these emails for what they are—utter scams—a small percentage are lured in, believing that they are indeed the recipients. Yet Internet scams are not always so obvious and so 1) one needs to be on guard against far subtler forms of online deception.

1)

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) you need
- C) we need
- D) they need

Often a scammer will pose as a legitimate company, sending an email that has the insignia and branding of that company. Called “phishing”, this method of extorting confidential financial information from online users is on the

rise. Indeed, if one looks at recent emails, they are likely to come across an email that seeks to “phish”. Of course, you probably do not even bother to open such an email in the first place, because it seems like junk mail, or mass email.

2)

A) NO CHANGE

B) he and she is

C) you are

D) one is

3)

A) NO CHANGE

B) we probably do

C) they probably do

D) one probably does

Answers and explanations:

1) From the very beginning of the paragraph, the pronoun “we” is used. There is even an “us”, signaling that we are using the third person plural. “You” is the second person. We can’t just change the pronoun of the audience we are addressing. Whichever pronoun is not underlined determines the pronoun the essay should use to address the reader. **Answer C).**

2) Here the author uses the third person singular pronoun “one”. To keep this consistency the first underlined part should be “one is”. **Answer D).**

3) Here the pronoun changes to you. Again, keep it consistent with the pronoun “one”, which appears in the non-underlined part of the paragraph. **Answer D).**

Conventions of Usage

1. Pronoun Clarity

See if you can figure out what's wrong with the following sentences.

Nancy and Mary took her mother to the movies.

Gary gave Dave his laptop.

In the first sentence, who does “her” refer to? Is it Nancy or Mary’s mother who is going to the movie with them?

In the second example, are we talking about Gary’s or are we talking about Dave’s laptop? The “his” doesn’t tell us, so it is an ambiguous pronoun, meaning it can logically refer to more than one thing. On the SAT this is a big no-no.

Though this error isn’t as common as pronoun issues with number and person (see previous section, in “Standard English Conventions”), it does come up sometimes.

SAT-level example:

*Tests on humans and laboratory rats can yield dramatically divergent results. When **they** do, people are bound to notice. But in those many instances in which **they** have tested experimental drugs on both rats and humans, and the results are the same, few take notice.*

The first “they” should clearly refer to a plural noun in the preceding sentence. However, there are many plural nouns in the first sentence: test, humans, rats, results. Therefore, the “they” is potentially confusing. So, instead of “they” we should repeat the subject: the tests. Note that if the sentence had contained only one plural noun, “they” would have been okay, especially if the sentence were shorter and/or the plural noun were closer to the pronoun that refers to it. i.e., *Clinical tests can yield useful information. Whey they do...*

The second “they” is confusing in a different way from the first. Whereas the first was debatably unclear, meaning most would conclude that logically speaking “they” can only refer to “tests”, the second “they”, which is closest to the plural subject “people”, creates an unintended meaning. It implies (absurdly) that people in general are testing experimental drugs on humans and rats. It is experimenters in general. A good idea is to replace the second “they” with “experimenters” or “scientists”.

2. Possessive determiners

Without any context, do you know the difference between the following:

It’s vs. Its

Their vs. They’re vs. There

Your vs. You’re

If not, here is the breakdown:

It’s = It is (It’s going to rain.)

Its = possessive pronoun (The dog had its tail in its mouth).

Their = possessive pronoun (Their friends are the snootiest of the bunch).

They’re = they are (They’re the snootiest bunch I’ve ever met).

There = place (I am going over there to study).

Your = possessive (Your friend is totally stuck-up).

*You’re = you are (You’re the snootiest person I know).

*So remember to always write “you’re welcome”. “Your welcome” implies that you possess the welcome, “you’ve outlived your welcome”.

Mini-quiz

Workers given freedom to set their own agendas tend to be highly productive. According to several recent studies, however, **1** their the most productive when they not only determine their own agenda but also when **2** they're is a daily system of accountability. **3** It's something backed up by study and practice, the idea that workers are most productive when there is some oversight but when workers get to own our projects.

1)

A) NO CHANGE

B) there

C) they're

D) theirs

2)

A) NO CHANGE

B) there

C) there's

D) theirs

3)

A) NO CHANGE

B) Its

C) They're

D) There's

Answers:

1) C

2) B

3) A

3. Agreement

The SAT has always loved agreement—it's easy to test and it's easy to make the question difficult. But first let's talk about what agreement is: it is when the subject and verb are consistent in terms of number.

We've talked about number in the context of pronouns. It's no different here, in the sense that "number" refers to whether a noun is singular or plural. The difference is the verb. Some verbs will take an –s at the end depending on whether the subject is singular or plural.

He watches many movies.

They watch many movies.

I watch many movies.

The SAT is more concerned with abstract nouns such as "the analysis", "the observation", "the description". All of these nouns are singular and correspond to the third person pronoun "it".

The analysis shows that Tim is the better soccer player.

It shows that Tim is the better soccer player.

Notice the –s in show. This throws a lot of students off at first. If something is plural, they think, shouldn't it have an –s at the end of it? Well, that something is the subject. The –s we are talking about comes at the end of the verb. And verbs are not something that you can pluralize.

Granted, it is still a little confusing. But remember that the '-s' only comes at the end of the verb if the subject/noun is singular (he, she, it, or some abstract noun that is singular).

If you've gotten what I've said so far and are thinking, *what's so hard about that?* The SAT has a little trick up its sleeve.

The analysis of the two soccer players show that Tim is the better player.

What's the subject?

Many students think that the subject is “two soccer players”, which is plural and that “show” is the right answer. However, “two soccer players” is not the subject. The subject, at least on the SAT, will always come before the first preposition (words such as “of”, “in”, “on”). Notice in the sentence above the “of” that comes after analysis. The subject will always come before that preposition.

Take another stab to see if you can find the subject.

Research into the habitats of meerkats show that the animal is highly social.

What's wrong with the sentence?

Well, first figure out what the subject is. Remember to look at the first preposition. If you spot the “of”, don't think that's the first preposition because it was so in the previous example. Go back further in the sentence to “into”, which is a preposition. Therefore, the subject—it will come before the first preposition—is “research”, which is singular. Therefore, “show” should be “shows”.

See if you can figure out what the subjects in the following sentences are:

A mastery of cardiopulmonary techniques and other lifesaving tactics potentially turns an average person into an instant hero.

The number of students who are pursuing postsecondary education is increasing annually.

In the first sentence, the subject is “mastery”; in the second sentence, the subject is “number”. Both are singular so the main verb of the sentence takes an –s at the end (“turns” in the first sentence; “is” in the second. Remember, that an –s at the end of the verb indicates a singular subject. In the case of “to be”, that's not necessarily the case).

By now you might have noticed how the SAT makes agreement questions difficult: **it increases the “distance” between the subject and the verb that refers to that subject.**

To illustrate this, I've eliminated all the words that come in between the subject and the verb:

A mastery of cardiopulmonary techniques and other lifesaving tactics potentially turns an average person into an instant hero.

The number of students who are pursuing postsecondary education is increasing annually.

To become strong at these question types that is what you have to do: Quickly ignore the extra words and home in on the subject, which comes before the first preposition.

4. Frequently confused words

Unlike many of the other sections I've gone through thus far, I can't show you the logic or a quick rule or two that you need only apply correctly to do well. Knowing the definitions of words, and those of words that look similar, takes a lot of practice.

Luckily, there are two pieces of good news: this question type isn't very common and there are lists of commonly confused words all over the Internet. Here are a few of the good ones, though I encourage you to type in commonly confused English words in order to get the fully monty.

except vs. accept

precede vs. proceed vs. proceeds

affect vs. effect

conscience vs. conscious

allusion vs. illusion

principle vs. principal

Basically, I would focus on other SAT grammar concepts before moving on to this. But if you are ever unsure how to spell a word because it sounds like a similar word, make sure to look up both words so you know the difference. Who knows, that very word pair may show up test day.

5. Logical comparison

An easy way to think of this is you must compare apples to oranges. You can't compare an orange to the taste of an apple, or the taste of an orange to an apple. You can, however, compare the taste of an orange to that of an apple. The "that" refers to taste. Instead of repeating "taste", a noun already mentioned in the sentence, we use the pronoun "that of" (for singular nouns) or "those of" (for plural nouns).

The SAT is very particular about this rule, so even though it's clear what two things are being compared, you must always be as literal as possible:

Incorrect

According to some, the use of sriracha as a condiment will soon surpass mustard.

Correct

*According to some, the use of sriracha as a condiment will soon surpass **THAT OF** mustard.* (We are comparing the use of sriracha to the use of mustard).

Incorrect

Mozart's piano works are much easier to learn than Chopin, a reason why many beginners will know how to play a piece by Mozart, but not one by Chopin.

Correct

*Mozart's piano works are much easier to learn than **THOSE OF** Chopin, a reason why many beginners will know how to play a piece by Mozart, but not one by Chopin.* ("those of" refers to "works").

6. Conventional expression

The College Board describes “conventional expression” as the following:

“Conventional Expression questions don’t fit neatly into one of the usage types listed earlier, but like them they focus on recognizing and correcting instances in which word choice doesn’t conform to the practices of standard written English.”

This sounds like “Effective Language Use” to me, and unless College Board gives an example that differentiates between these two, I wouldn’t worry about the distinction. This question will basically ask you to choose the right word in terms of its precision and level of formality.

Conventions of Punctuation

1. End-of-sentence punctuation

For the first in our list of conventions of punctuations, this one is pretty obscure and not that likely to show up on the test. So if you skip this and don't remember anything of it, it's not that big of deal (make sure that you are paying attention to the rest of this list).

So here it is: when somebody asks an indirect question, you don't want to end that sentence in a question mark. What is an indirect question you ask? Take the following situation.

Mark: Is Patty going to the movies with us?

John: I don't know. I'll guess I'll ask her when I see her next.

(Later that day)

John: Hey, Patty, Mark asked if you are going to the movies with us.

Patty: No, you guys are losers.

Notice that when John asks Patty whether she is going to the movies that sentence does not end in a question mark. And that's it. Again, very unlikely you'll see this on the test.

2. Within-sentence punctuation

Another way to think of this is, do you know when it is appropriate to use semicolons, colons, and em-dashes. Yes, the dreaded semicolon—I had to get to it eventually. The good news is that the test is not asking you to use a semicolon in your writing; it's asking you to recognize when a semicolon is appropriate (as it was in the middle of this sentence).

Below is a quick breakdown of each. And I promise, semicolons are not as bad as you probably think they are.

Semicolon

The bubonic plague, public speaking, not having your smartphone on a transatlantic trip—few things are as dreaded in life as the semicolon. But there is no reason to fear this oft-maligned punctuation mark, especially the way it is used on the SAT. It really is pretty straightforward:

It is used to separate two independent clauses.

That's it. That is all you have to know. Sure, the essence of the semicolon is that the two independent clauses are closely connected, and so it wouldn't make as much as sense to use a period. Of course that becomes a judgment call and is at least part of the reason that many feel uncomfortable using a semicolon. But the SAT is only going to ask you about whether or not a sentence correctly uses a semicolon; it is not going to ask you to write a sentence using a semicolon (Like how I dropped that semicolon in there?)

So let's put you to the test. Which sentences correctly use a semicolon?

1) *For my upcoming hike, I pack several things; a compass, a first aid kit, a water heating contraption, and a pocketknife.*

2) *I visited several colleges during my senior year; none of which I liked.*

3) *I was hoping to work in the Peace Corps after graduating; I was hoping to make a difference.*

4) *Most smartphone users operate under the assumption that smartphones will somehow make them smarter; yet because excessive cell phone use diminishes many basic cognitive abilities, such as working memory, this is not necessarily the case.*

Answers and explanations:

1) Incorrect

This sentence requires a colon (see colon section), not a semicolon.

2) Incorrect

“none of which I liked” is not an independent clause/legitimate sentence.

3) Correct

The clauses to either side of the semicolon are both independent clauses.

4) Correct

This is a meaty sentence, about as complex as anything the SAT will throw at you. Though the clause immediately following the semicolon starts with the words “yet because”, it is part of a complete sentence since it is linked by a comma with the independent clause “this is not necessarily the case”.

Colon

The colon has two main uses, one of which we learn in grade school. If you are going to describe a list of things you use a colon.

I want many things in life: a new flat screen television, an exercise bike, a massage chair, a video game system, and year supply of Oreo cookies.

The SAT knows that most students are familiar with a basic list of things following a colon, so they’ll try to jazz things up by adding a list of complex clauses.

As soon as Sandra stepped outside the airport she knew she was in a foreign land: the smell of mangos wafted in the light breeze, the shouts of food cart vendors punctuated the humid air, and a language she recognized only from Rosetta Stone courses rang in her ears.

The colon can also be used to separate two clauses, the second of which elaborates on the first. I am now going to illustrate this: here is a sentence that uses a colon. You can think of the first part announcing that it is going to tell us something and the second clause is this thing.

She wanted only one thing in life: to become senior class president.

This use of the colon is good to know from a writer's standpoint; I don't think the SAT will explicitly test it, though. But it is good to know just in case.

Em-dashes

When I first mentioned em-dashes a minute ago and you were thinking I'm not worried about the semicolon, what the %\$& is an em-dash, well, you've come to the right place.

If you see an em-dash mid-sentence, it has one of two functions.

1. A list of things mid-sentence

Usually, we see a list of things after a colon. But if a list comes mid-sentence, we want to set it off using em-dashes.

There are some punctuation marks—colons, semicolons, em-dashes—that scare the crap out of people.

Notice in the list, I did not use an "and" to connect the 2nd and 3rd noun, the way you usually would ("he hates using colons, semicolons, and em-dashes"). I don't think the SAT is going to explicitly test you on this convention, but it is good to keep in mind since you want to eliminate a correct answer using em-dashes just because there is no "and" between the last and the second-to-last item.

2. It emphasizes a parenthetical statement

Sentence #1 - She helped him as much as she could (she passed up going to see Taylor Swift in concert), and yet he made more demands on her time.

Sentence #2 - She helped Sylvester as much as she could—she passed up going to see Taylor Swift in concert—and yet he made more demands on her time.

The difference between these two sentences and the reason that sentence #2 is probably what the writer is going for (though both are grammatically correct) is that sentence #2 emphasizes how much she gave up to help Sylvester—she missed the Taylor Swift concert. Were that not that big of a deal, just a passing thought the writer wanted to slip in there, then Sentence #1 would be fine.

Luckily, the test is not going to ask you to choose between em-dashes and parentheses. You just have to make sure that if an em-dash is used to emphasize a thought that it is set off by two em-dashes: one at the beginning of the phrase and one at the end.

Correct:

*Harold consumed lots of food—**four hot dogs, nine slices of pizza, a cheeseburger**—before passing out.*

Incorrect:

*Harold consumed lots of food—**four hot dogs, nine slices of pizza, a cheeseburger**, before passing out.*

*Harold consumed lots of food—**four hot dogs, nine slices of pizza, a cheeseburger**; before passing out.*

*Harold consumed lots of food; **four hot dogs, nine slices of pizza, a cheeseburger**—before passing out.*

*Harold consumed lots of food, **four hot dogs, nine slices of pizza, a cheeseburger**—before passing out.*

The basic rule: if you start with an em-dash mid-sentence, make sure to use another em-dash mid-sentence.

3. Possessive nouns and pronouns

We all know how apostrophes work. What the test is going to try to trick you with is singular vs. plural cases, and vice versa.

Correct: *The team's victory was unexpected, even to the players' most diehard fans.*

Incorrect: *The teams' victory was unexpected, even to the player's most diehard fans.*

In the second sentence, notice how “team” is made a plural possessive. However, there is only one team. Its victory is what is being mentioned. Also, note how “players” becomes “player’s”, which is singular. Obviously, a team is composed of many players, not just one

4. Items in a series

When a sentence lists three things—A, B, and C—these things are called items.

She likes to eat cookies, ice cream, and cotton candy.

A = cookies

B = ice cream

C = cotton candy

The convention is that there is a comma between A and B, and B and C. Interestingly, the comma between B and C, called the Oxford comma, is not necessary. No less than the fancy pants newspaper *The New York Times* has dispensed it, so that a sentence containing three items will look like this:

She likes to eat cookies, ice cream and cotton candy.

The SAT doesn't care about the difference; at least it won't test you on it. What it does care about is longer list or lists that contain commas in their clauses. With all those commas floating around, the meaning might get muddled. One way to deal with all these commas is to separate the clauses by a semicolon.

I grew up with copies of Dickens, Thackeray, and Tolstoy sitting on shelves; unfinished literary essays and snippets of inscrutable poems gracing the kitchen table; and ceaseless literary chatter echoing in the hallways.

A = Dickens, Thackeray, and Tolstoy

B = unfinished literary essays and snippets of inscrutable poems

C = ceaseless literary chatter echoed in the hallways

Speaking of inscrutable, by not using a semicolon to break up A, B, and C, we get this mess:

I grew up with copies of Dickens, Thackeray, and Tolstoy sitting on shelves, unfinished literary essays and snippets of inscrutable poems gracing the kitchen table, and ceaseless literary chatter echoing in the hallways.

Sometimes, commas can come to the rescue when you have muddled meaning.

5. Nonrestrictive and parenthetical elements

The nitty-gritty

This is a scary title. So I want to make it a bit easier to understand.

Compare the following two sentences:

My biological Mom, who lives in Seattle, is visiting this weekend.

My biological Mom who lives in Seattle is visiting this weekend.

One of these sentences is impossible. That's right! Even though the sentences are identical word for word they are completely different. And that's all due to one little comma. Compare:

My biological Mom, who

My biological Mom who

In the first fragment, we are defining Mom. She is the one and only. And she happens to live in Seattle.

The second fragment, by dropping the comma, is saying that out of all my biological moms, I am specifically talking about the one who lives in Seattle. But that is absurd. Everybody has always had one and only one biological mom. There is no need to specify which biological mom. However, that is what happens when we remove the comma between “Mom” and “who”: we are specifying which of your moms.

If we want to specify which subject, we don’t use a comma to separate that subject from “that” or “who”. The phrase that follows the “who” is called an essential or a restrictive clause, (Yes, I know, it’s totally annoying when grammarians have two terms—both of which are technical sounding—to describe the same thing and then use the terms interchangeably. For simplicity sake, I’ll stick to the terms restrictive and nonrestrictive, the way the test does).

Compare the following two sentences:

My dog that sleeps outside has a nasty case of fleas.

My dog, which sleeps outside, has a nasty case of fleas.

Unlike the “mom sentences”, both of these sentences are possible. But one of them is implying you have more than one dog. Remember when you do not have a comma between the subject and the word “who” or “that”, you are specifying which subject. Therefore, the first sentence is specifying the dog that sleeps outside and is implying that you have at least one other dog that doesn’t sleep outside.

When a comma separates the subject from a “which” or a “who”, we are dealing with a subject that is the “one and only”. So the second sentence is talking about your one and only dog, which sleeps outside and has a bad case of the fleas. The use of “which” signals the beginning of a nonrestrictive clause. The reason it is called a nonrestrictive clause is you could eliminate it without much change in meaning.

My biological mom, who lives in Seattle, is coming to visit this weekend.

My friend who has the loan I’ll need to pay rent is visiting this weekend.

In the first sentence, we still know the key information: your mom is coming to visit. There is absolutely no vagueness because you know exactly which mom: your one and only biological mom.

By getting rid of the clause in the second sentence, essential information is lost. We have to know which friend out of all of your friends is visiting. Because this friend is the one who is going to give you a major helping hand.

In an SAT context

So how exactly will the SAT test this?

Well, the good news is that it not going to be nearly as complicated as everything above. But to be confident, it helps to know the nitty-gritty above. However, the SAT will mainly care about proper punctuation.

But it won't just be a question of "to comma or not to comma"; you will also have to rely on a basic knowledge of semicolons and em-dashes.

1) Most students who choose to go to graduate school must often take out student loans in order to attend.

A) NO CHANGE

B) students who choose to go to graduate school,

C) students who choose to go to graduate school—

D) students, who choose to go to grammar school

2) Many know only a few famous vistas of the Grand Canyon that actually wends 270 miles through the desert floor and has an average depth of one foot.

A) NO CHANGE

B) the Grand Canyon;

C) the Grand Canyon, that

D) the Grand Canyon, which

Answers and explanation

1) A

We are talking about a subset of most students: those who go to grad school. If we were to put commas after “most students” and directly after “school”, we’d be defining “most students” as those who go to grad school.

Luckily, the test doesn’t ask us to choose between the restrictive and nonrestrictive phrase based on this meaning. The difference between the correct answer and other answer choices is based on poor grammar: (B) should have no comma directly after “school”; (C) has an unnecessary em-dash; (D) has only one comma and not two, the way we would expect with a nonrestrictive phrase. The correct answer, (A), uses a restrictive phrase (remember: no commas).

2. D

We need “which” to show that the Grand Canyon is defined as “actually winds...”. The original, answer (A), implies there are more than one Grand Canyon by using the word “that”, which sets up a restrictive phrase. That sets up the unintended meaning: out of all the Grand Canyons, it is the one THAT.

6. Unnecessary punctuation

Sometimes, when a subject is separated from its verb by many words, we are tempted to use a comma.

Incorrect

The spread of airborne infections in public places or in closely confined areas, is nothing new; our efforts to combat them, however, are more vigorous than ever.

The subject of the sentence is “spread”; the verb matching that subject is “is” (way down there, next to the “nothing”). Because of this distance we are tempted to put a comma there. However, if the subject is followed by a restrictive phrase (basically, there is no other comma separating the subject from a phrase that refers to it), then you should not put a comma before “is”.

Correct

The spread of airborne infections in public places or in closely confined areas is nothing new; our efforts to combat them, however, are more vigorous than ever.

If a phrase has a nonrestrictive clause/nonessential clause between the subject and verb, always remember to use two commas: one right after the subject and one right before the verb:

Incorrect

At 900 pages, Don Quixote, which some considered the first novel ever written is no easy read.

Incorrect

At 900 pages, Don Quixote which some considered the first novel ever written is no easy read.

Incorrect

At 900 pages, Don Quixote which some considered the first novel ever written, is no easy read.

Correct

At 900 pages, Don Quixote, which some considered the first novel ever written, is no easy read. (Notice the two commas).

Expression of Ideas: The Art of Writing

Intro

Yes, this is a pretty pretentious title. But it is the one that the SAT gave us. For shorthand, expression of ideas will become (EOI), and I will drop “The Art of Writing” entirely—lest I start sounding all highfalutin.

EOI consists of three sections: Development, Organization, and Effective Language Use.

The College Board further breaks these sections down; however, they do it in such a way that the titles can be technical and difficult to remember. For instance, “proposition” is simply a fancy way of saying that you will have to consider adding, keeping, or deleting sentences. So, I’ll just give an overview of development, organization, and effective language. That way you’ll know what to expect without getting bogged down in all the technical terms.

Finally, I’m not going to go as in-depth as I did with Standards Conventions (the grammar part). It makes more sense for you to read about the different types of EOI and then do actual practice questions from the College Board or other sources. I do, at the end of this section, have a practice writing passage in which I explain some of the EOI subcategories when they are relevant to a question.

Development

These question types will ask you to add, delete, or keep a sentence depending on how it relates to the main idea of the passage or the paragraph. Often this means you’ll have to evaluate thesis sentences or topic sentences. And that makes sense: your teachers have most likely (correctly) stressed that the most important part of your essays is the thesis sentence followed by the topic sentence. This is SAT’s way of testing how well you can handle the big ideas of an essay.

By the way, the College Board throws the graph question into this group. That fact is totally irrelevant. Just remember: out of 44 questions, there will be one graph question. My advice? Do a few practice graph questions from the College Board book. You’ll see that this is actually one of the easier question types on the Writing test.

Organization

Development is about the main ideas of the essay; organization is about the details the essay uses to support these main ideas. Again, this is something you do when writing a standard essay. That is, you don't just drop a claim in the place of your topic sentence without ensuring that the sentences that follow support this claim.

This question will take an interesting form, as you'll see in the practice passage below. Basically, one of the paragraphs will have a bracketed number next to each sentence, signifying the position of that sentence in the paragraph (it's a lot clearer if you just look at the passage). Your job is to figure out the best placement for the sentence. This is very common and you will begin to think of "organization" as the one that asks you where to put the sentence. And that's perfectly fine. You do not have to know the specific name of any question type for the test; you just have to know how to approach the question.

Effective Language Use

I actually like how the College Board breaks up this section, so I'll use its terminology here.

Precision

In certain contexts some words might be synonyms but in other contexts if you use the words interchangeably you are going to get some surprising (and unintended!) meanings.

1a) As midnight approached, most of the campers **retired** to their tents.

1b) As midnight approaches, most of the campers **returned** to their tents.

2a) Most of the people in the city who have **retired**, settle down in the old person's community down the road.

2b) Most of the people in the city who have **returned**, settle down in the old person's community down the road.

In 1a and 1b, the words are interchangeable. But when the context is different, as in 2a and 2b, the meaning of “retired” changes, then you have a problem.

Here’s another example in the form of an SAT question:

Dickens’ London was not the gleaming metropolis of today but a city in which the average living conditions were so gross that cholera epidemics were not uncommon.

Which choice best maintains the tone established in the passage?

A) NO CHANGE

B) negative

C) squalid

D) immoral

Explanation:

On some precision questions, you’ll also be asked to eliminate answer choices that are too vague (“negative”) or too informal (“gross”). D) Immoral is a specific word, but remember the retiring example above; it doesn’t quite fit the context since you can have immoral people or practice but you can’t have immoral living conditions. So C) squalid is the best choice.

Concision

Don’t say the same thing twice; in other words, don’t repeat yourself when you’ve already said the same thing elsewhere.

Yes, that’s a grammar joke. I gave you an example of redundancy. I said something and then I repeated it, not word for word, but pretty close.

The test will always want you to avoid these redundancies in the spirit of concision. Also called economy, in a writing context, concision aims to use as few words as possible to express the exact same point.

While such criteria might strike you as being a bit vague, the test is always very clear when it is testing redundancy—you just have to pick up on the fact that it is testing concision/redundancy and not precision/word choice. Let's try a few examples:

1) *On a yearly basis, the company has been making over 100 million dollars annually.*

2) *Johnny was not popular amongst his classmates because he was always spiteful and he showed malice at every turn.*

3) *Presently, I don't have the ability to help you at this moment because I'm too busy and need a break.*

How would this actually look on the test, given that an underlined part, and not the whole sentence, is being tested:

Presently, I don't have the ability to help you at this moment because I'm too busy and need a break.

A) NO CHANGE

B) currently

C) really speaking

D) "delete the underlined portion"

Here are the three words that are redundant for each of the three questions above:

1) yearly = annually

2) "spiteful" means "showing malice"

3) presently = at this moment

A final note on concision

Oftentimes, an entire question won't be dedicated to concision. Rather, a question will be about some other grammatical rule, but one of the answer choices will happen to lack concision. That answer choice is almost always wrong.

Style and tone

Tone

Sometimes when we write, we lapse into phrases that are too casual for an essay, but are ones we might very well use with our friends. On the flipside (or should I say “inversely”), we sometimes try to impress our teachers, or whoever it is reading our essay, by using overly formal and vocabulary-heavy phrases.

Finding that proper level of formality is the focus of tone questions. Since the SAT writing passages are always written in professional style, the kind you'd encounter in an article found in a magazine (think *National Geographic*) or newspaper article (think the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*), the tone is never extremely casual or frighteningly stiff and formal.

Extremely casual

1. That's neat what happened during the Olympics.
2. My job is super special.
3. Finding out stuff about the presidents isn't as boring as I thought.

Overly formal

1. Superlatives abound in rendering the phenomenon concomitant with the Olympics.
2. My vocation affords more than a modicum of autonomy.
3. Imbibing knowledge pertaining to the former heads of the Oval Office proved more scintillating than I could have possibly envisioned.

What the SAT would write

1. This year's Olympics proved to be a memorable one, with numerous world records being set.
2. My job allows me the flexibility to work from home and set my own schedule.
3. Learning about the lives of U.S. presidents was not nearly as dull as I had anticipated.

Notice that both the overly casual and the overly formal tend to be vague, whereas the proper level of writing is clear and specific without ever being verbose ("Imbibing knowledge" loses out to the unpretentious "learning" in the concision contest any day).

Style

Sometimes the SAT wants to know if you can pick up on a certain style a writer is using. Since it is difficult to test style without directly asking what the author is doing, the test writers have focused mainly on sentence structure. Specifically, there will be an uncommon way of arranging a sentence or sentences that the test wants you to pick up on.

Though you aren't likely to see this kind of question, you might be wondering how you'll know when you are dealing with this kind of question. Well, the test will most likely tell you in the question stem:

Which of the following answer choices is most consistent with the style used by the writer of the passage?

Standing in front of an audience of thousands was the greatest moment of the young singer's life. Faces glowed with adulation. Eyes fixated on her with wonder. People could not wait to hear her.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) People were anticipating her singing.
- C) Ears perked up in anticipation.
- D) She was going to sing in the crowd's ears.

Notice how C) parallels the structure used by the previous two sentences: body part + verb + preposition.

Syntax/Combining Sentences

Let me first give you the general definition of syntax; then, I'll tell you exactly how the test writers will use it (that's the more important part).

Syntax: the arrangement of phrases, clauses and sentences.

What this means as far as the test goes is how to best “combine sentences”. That's the key phrase here and you can forget the word syntax. Think of this section as “Combining Sentences”. The test will never ask you whether you should combine sentences (they won't make you to judge of whether something is too choppy) but will only ask you how to best combine two or more sentences.

Short underline

Miles Davis was an innovative jazz trumpeter. He developed a style known as “cool jazz”.

This sentence is slightly choppy, so the test wants you to make it less so.

Which choice most effectively combines the sentences at the underlined portion?

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) jazz trumpeter who developed
- C) jazz trumpeter; and in his music, he developed
- D) jazz trumpeter, but developed

Explanation:

A) is choppy, meaning that it doesn't provide a transition word or phrase showing the connection between what comes before the period and what comes after it. Notice how the first part talks about how Miles Davis was innovative. The second part gives us an example: he developed a new style of jazz. D) is wrong because it indicates a contrast between the two sentences. C) is wrong for punctuation reasons. The ‘and’ directly after the

semicolon is unnecessary. B) is correct because it avoids the chopiness in A) by connecting the two sentences. 'Who' avoids the unwanted contrasted suggested in D).

Entire sentence underline

Let's take the same sentence and show you what else the test can do.

Miles Davis was an innovative jazz trumpeter. He developed a style known as "cool jazz".

Which choice most effectively combines the sentences?

- A) Developing a style known as "cool jazz" is why Miles Davis was an innovative jazz trumpeter.
- B) Miles Davis was an innovative jazz trumpeter, and he also developed a style known as "cool jazz".
- C) A style known as "cool jazz" was developed by Miles Davis, an innovative jazz trumpeter.
- D) An innovative jazz trumpeter, Miles Davis developed a style known as "cool jazz".

Explanation:

One thing you'll want to look for in combining sentences question types is a logical "balance" between two sentences. Here the logical connection is that Miles Davis's creation of a new style resulted from the fact that he was innovative: INNOVATIVE results in CREATION OF NEW STYLE.

A) I've mentioned before how concision is something that can pertain to many question types. Here, "is why" leads to a sentence that lacks concision. Also, the original sentence is not to express what made Davis an innovative trumpeter ("he developed a new style") but that he was innovative trumpeter who invented this new style of jazz.

B), by using "and also" does not show this logical connection. This sentence makes it sound as though Davis was two relatively unrelated things: he was innovative and, by the way, he also created a new style.

C) is in passive voice. Think of passive voice as the “by tense”, e.g., *The ball was hit BY him*. This is almost always considered incorrect on the SAT. That is, there will almost always be a perfectly good answer not in passive voice.

D) does a good job of showing the importance of the two parts of the sentence. “An innovative trumpeter” is not as important as “he created a new style”. Therefore, we make it a subordinate clause (“subordinate” means of lesser importance”). That puts the focus on the content of the main clause.

Putting it all Together: Practice Passage

As you will see, only a few of the many grammatical principles above will be tested in any one passage. Over the course of an entire section, you'll likely see most of the categories tested at least once. However, some question types are so rare that they might pop up only once every few tests. I have tried to give a general sense of the likelihood that a grammar or stylistic concept will be tested. Still, you'll tend to get a better sense of this as you go through practice sections in the College Board book.

Here's a practice passage to get started with:

Practice Passage

Many have heard of the sequoia trees, giant Californian redwoods. But few know that the trees are named after an actual living person, one who was a giant amongst his native people: The Cherokees.

Born in the late 18th century in Oklahoma, or what was then the Cherokee Nation, Sequoyah *SENTENCE STRUCTURE 1 displaying* early in life a knack for figuring out things on his own. For instance, to *EFFECTIVE USE OF LANGUAGE 2 increase the efficiency of dairy production* on the land his family owned he constructed a dairy house and devised a system of milk troughs. This ingenuity served Sequoyah well in his later vocation as a *CONVENTIONS 3 silversmith, where* he was able to create such interesting designs that his handiwork was highly sought after.

What Sequoyah is remembered for today, *SENTENCE TRANSITIONS 4 however*, had a far greater impact on the Cherokee Nation: he was the first to ever develop a functional alphabet for a Native American language. As a silversmith, Sequoyah came in contact with many white settlers and noticed the writing on their pieces of *5 paper, he described* them as "talking leaves". *SENTENCE STRUCTURE 6 Sequoyah, spotting* the utility such an innovation offered, hoped to convince tribal elders that the Cherokee nation needed a similar way of communicating. The elders, however, expressed skepticism, thinking it impossible for somebody to communicate a person's message if that person *VERB TENSE 7 was not* present. Some even believed that writing was a form of sorcery that should be avoided.

SENTENCE PLACEMENT 8 [1] Reassured by this reception, Sequoyah began finding a way to turn the complicated sounds of his language into a system of syllables. [2] Hoping to prove that the Cherokee language, like European languages, could be used to communicate important messages. [3] After isolating himself for a year, Sequoyah finally emerged with a viable system of writing. [4] Since much of his family believed that Sequoyah, during his year in seclusion, was practicing witchcraft, his six-year-old daughter became his unlikely pupil and quickly learned to read the language. [5] To convince the elders that the system actually worked, he needed a willing apprentice. [6] Securing an audience with the elders, Sequoyah asked them to say a word that he would **EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE USE 9** proceed to write down. [7] Then, he would summon his daughter, who had been far beyond earshot, and she faithfully **PUNCTUATION 10** read, to the astonishment of the elders—each word that had been written down. [8] Within months, Sequoyah had successfully taught the writing system to many Cherokees. **MAIN IDEA 11**

1.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) displayed
- C) displays
- D) is displaying

Difficulty: Very Easy

2.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) make farm production better
- C) augment the efficiency in the generation of dairy
- D) ups the amount of milk that is produced

Difficulty: Medium

3.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) silversmith, which
- C) silversmith, in which
- D) silversmith that

Difficulty: Medium

4.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) For example,
- C) , additionally,
- D) , moreover,

Difficulty: Easy

5.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) paper, describing
- C) paper; describing
- D) paper describing

Difficulty: Medium

6.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) Sequoyah spotted
- C) Sequoyah, he spotted
- D) Sequoyah spotting

Difficulty: Hard

7.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) had not been
- C) were not
- D) would not have been

Difficulty: Very Hard

8. Which of the following is the most appropriate place for sentence 5?

- A) Where it is now.
- B) Immediately before sentence 4
- C) Immediately after sentence 2
- D) Immediately after sentence 6

Difficulty: Hard

9.

In context, which choice best combines the underlined sentences?"

Reassured by this reception, Sequoyah began finding a way to turn the complicated sounds of his language into a system of syllables. Hoping to prove that the Cherokee language, like European languages, could be used to communicate important messages.

- A) NO CHANGE

B) Sequoyah was discouraged by the reaction of the elders and spent several months avoiding the task of trying to transcribe the complicated Cherokee sounds into a consistent writing system.

C) Undeterred, Sequoyah began working on a way of transcribing the complicated sounds of his language into a system of symbols, hoping to prove that the Cherokee language, like European languages, could be used to communicate important messages.

D) Believing that the Cherokee language could be used to communicate important messages, like European languages, Sequoyah began finding a way to turn the complicated sounds of his language into a system of syllables.

Difficulty: Hard

10.

A) NO CHANGE

B) precede

C) succeed

D) progress

Difficulty: Medium

11.

This writer wants to conclude the passage with a sentence that highlights the enduring legacy left by Sequoyah to his tribe. Which choice would best accomplish this goal?

A) Many of the elders present were so impressed that they became experts of Sequoyah's writing system, and taught many other members of the Cherokee nation.

B) In 1825, nearly ten years after its creation, the Cherokee nation officially adopted Sequoyah's writing system, an act allowing parts of tribe separated by long distances to communicate effectively with one another and merge the divided East and West tribes.

C) The most important aspect of Sequoyah's work was that it took a complicated phonetic structure and turned it into an alphabet that is readily accessible to anybody who wants to learn it.

D) Sequoyah will be forever remembered for the writing system he helped create, an innovation that is startling even in this day of high-powered computers.

Difficulty: Hard

Answers and Explanations:

1. The first phrase, starting with "Born in the late..." describes the subject Sequoyah. However, the subject needs a verb in the present or past tense, not the participial form (you wouldn't say, "I eating my food"). Since the paragraph describes past events and sticks to the past tense throughout, we want answer (B).

2. In questions asking for the most appropriate way to phrase something (see the section on syntax), you want to choose an answer that is neither too casual nor too formal. You'll also want to make sure that the answer isn't too verbose (see section on concision) or vague. In this case, (B) is too vague. (C) is too formal and lacks concision. (D) uses such colloquial words as "ups". Also, dairy is the right level of formality. "Milk" is not quite appropriate and something more formal and Latin-based, such as lactal (not mentioned in the answer choices) would be too formal. So (C) is the answer.

3. The focus here is "vocation". It is not an actual place so (A), which uses "where", is incorrect. "Which" is tempting. But if you plug it into the sentence, it implies that Sequoyah created the vocation of the silversmith. (D) suffers from this same problem. When describing a noun that an action refers to, we want to use "in which". Example: This was the game IN WHICH he SCORED the winning goal. (C) is the answer.

4. The previous paragraph gives a quick biography of Sequoyah's accomplishment. The next paragraph transitions to the accomplishment that he is really known for. Therefore, there is a contrast between the accomplishments mentioned in the paragraph preceding this question and his main accomplishment: the creation of the Cherokee language. Only (A) gives us a contrast word.

5. As is, this question contains a classic SAT error: the comma splice. This happens when two independent clauses are joined by a comma (see comma section above). By putting a comma and the a participle immediately

after that comment, we make sure that the phrase “describing them as ‘talking leaves’” refers to the subject, Sequoyah. (C) is incorrect because it uses a semicolon to separate a dependent clause starting with a participle and an independent clause. (D) implies that the paper described itself as “talking leaves”—an absurd statement. So, (B) is the answer.

6. This is a more advanced test of sentence structure. We can separate a subject from a verb using a participial phrase, as long as that phrase is set off by two commas. Therefore, the original is correct. (B) is wrong because we can’t have the participle in the -ed form if a comma separates it from an independent clause, the way we can with a participle ending in -ing. (C) unnecessarily repeats the subject. (D) omits the comma between the subject and spotting. (A) is the answer.

7. This is a difficult question because it uses the subjunctive case (see section on “mood”). When there is a hypothetical situation, the first and third person takes on a plural form of a verb. Therefore, “was” should be “were” in “that person were” not present, since we are talking about a situation that is hypothetical (“thinking it impossible”). Answer: (C).

8. Sentence 5 says more or less that Sequoyah needed a willing pupil. Sentence 4 describes how most of his family thought he’d gone a little loopy, so he was forced to turn to his daughter as an apprentice. It makes sense to put the sentence saying that he needed a pupil before the sentence that describe the process of recruiting a pupil. Answer: (B).

9. The original has a fragment in the second part, since it lacks a subject and simply begins with the participle “hoping”. (B) is not grammatically incorrect. However, whenever the SAT uses passive voice (“discouraged by the reaction”), you want to find an answer that uses the active voice AND is grammatically correct. (C) is exactly that answer. (D), by using “like” implies that Sequoyah is like European languages. Answer: (C).

10. To proceed to do something is to go ahead and do it, which is exactly what we want here. (B) means to come before, and is the correct answer. It is unidiomatic to say “succeed TO”; the correct idiom is “succeed IN”. It is also odd to say “progress TO do something”.

11. The key to answering this question correctly is “enduring legacy”. We don’t want a mere positive outcome; we want the reason Sequoyah’s innovations was highly momentous for his people. (A) is one such answer. That’s great that many elders learned the language. But it doesn’t really tell us the major positive effect on the

Cherokees that Sequoyah's writing system had. (B) gives us a clear reason why this innovation was so important: it helped connect the Cherokee over long distances and mend the rift between East and West Cherokees. (C) just explains that it was innovative. (D) gives the inapt comparison with modern day computers. (B) is the answer.

SAT Reading Test



Introduction to the SAT Reading Test

The new SAT Reading test is quite different than that old he-who-shall-not-be-named Reading test. Gone are the sentence completion questions that quizzed you on tough vocabulary. Now, it's all about the passages. Meaning, it's all about reading comprehension (ok, so there's a little vocab snuck in there too; we'll talk about that in a bit.)

What to Know:

- The SAT Reading test is 65 minutes long.
- It has four passages plus one pair of passages (so five parts total). Each passage is 500-750 words long.
- It has 52 questions (10-11 questions per passage).
- It's all multiple choice.
- One passage will be from U.S. and World Literature, two passages (or 1 passage and 1 pair) will be from History/Social Studies, two passages (or 1 passage and 1 pair) will be from Science.
- There will be 1 to 2 graphics embedded in 1 History/Social Studies passage and in 1 Science passage.
- Passage complexity ranges from grades 9 and 10 to early college.
- Your score will be combined with your Writing score for one "Evidence-Based Reading and Writing" score out of 800.

What to Study:

- Reading comprehension
- Understanding basic tables and graphs of data
- Texts from a variety of genres including contemporary and "classic" literature, science, and social studies, including one text from "U.S. Founding Documents or the Great Global Conversation" (This means things like the Declaration of Independence or a speech by Nelson Mandela).

What Not to Study:

- Esoteric vocab words (such as "esoteric"). Definitely flip those flashcards if you have a weaker vocabulary so that you can better understand the passages. However, the questions that specifically address the meaning of words on the new SAT primarily concern more common words with multiple meanings.

The SAT Reading Test: Strategies

Let's start with the basics. The Reading section of the SAT requires intense focus. You'll be facing long reading passages and will even have to compare two passages on similar topics. So before we launch into the nitty-gritty of the passage and question types on the SAT, let's talk about the big picture: the general reading comprehension strategies that are going to help you get the most out of your reading time on the test.

1. Read the entire Reading passage first

There used to be this urban myth that you could ace the Reading passages by reading the questions first and then going back to the parts of the passage the questions tell you to. I am guessing this legend might have faded a bit now that there are fewer line number questions on the SAT, meaning the questions aren't going to tell you exactly where to look for the answer. You have to hunt for it, or remember where you saw it. The cruelty!

Now we aren't saying you can't still get a few questions right using this tactic, but if you skip the passage altogether, you are likely to miss many questions that relate to the general ideas in the passages. You are also likely to spend more time trying to choose between two answers, because you simply don't have the context that you can only get by reading the passage.

So let us say it loud and clear: **Always read the entire passage first.**

2. Get the big picture

Doing well on SAT Reading passages requires understanding what the passage is about, in general. If you find yourself stringing words together, hoping to reach the end of a torturous passage, you are actually hurting yourself. **It is not about getting to the end of the passage; it is about understanding the passage.** So pause frequently as you read and digest what you just learned.

3. Watch out for the swamp!

Some people take the idea of trying to understand the passage to the other extreme. "I have to understand every detail," they tell themselves. Many of these passages are constructed in such a way that there is a lot of dense, nasty material buried in the middle. Students often get pulled into this swamp of words and complex ideas, believing that to answer the questions, they have to understand the most complex part of the passage.

This is often not the case, as the questions typically deal with easier parts of the passage—or at least not exclusively on understanding two back-to-back difficult sentences. **The key is to understand the topic**

sentences of the paragraphs and feel comfortable glossing over the tough stuff—instead of getting stuck in a swamp of words.

4. Take snapshots

No, we're not talking about taking pictures with your iPhone. "Snapshots" refers to those little mental summaries you make in your head as you read. Each paragraph is a unit of information—important information that you should make a quick summary of while you read. For instance, when you have finished with the first paragraph, you should think something along the lines of, "Ok, that was about a couple of reasons radio telescopes are important in hunting for aliens. Hmm...this paragraph just talks about one of those reasons, which is that...."

These summaries should not take you long—only about five seconds or so. For those of you who aren't fast readers, or aren't used to summarizing stuff in your heads, you can also write mini-paragraph summaries in the margins (though we recommend building up to where you are comfortable making mental snapshots of each paragraph).

And remember: you are just going for the big ideas. Don't get buried in the swamp, because it will disrupt your ability to understand the main ideas of the passage.

5. Get really excited

We know this sounds weird. After all, you are dealing with SAT passages that often seemed intentionally designed to torture you, what the %\$@ is there to get excited about?! But that's the point: our natural tendency upon starting a reading passage is to fall asleep—or at least get bored. By convincing yourself that what you are about to read is so fun and entertaining—and thus boosting that pulse ever so slightly—you'll be far more alert as you read.

By combining all the elements above, you are going to be far more prepared for those sneaky questions, and all those carefully placed traps in the answer choices. The key when applying these techniques is patient practice. You are not going to automatically start taking real clean "snapshots" as you excitedly make your way through a passage about the dispute regarding Linnaeus's taxonomic contribution to natural science. But with practice, hey, you just might.

Active Reading

Read the following passage and then we'll talk:

Once American men returned from the WWII battlefields, they quickly displaced the women who had temporarily filled jobs otherwise reserved for men. With most women reverting to their domestic roles, the dramatic increase in the number of infants born is perhaps not too surprising. Yet, such factors alone cannot explain the increase in the number of births from 1946-1951. Murray suggests that both women and men's perspectives changed, mostly because of America's success in the war. This optimism, in part, fueled the rapid growth in population. However, many argue that women, in returning to the home, were able to focus on raising a family, regardless of their levels of optimism.

Oh, it's you again. Welcome back! Without looking at the passage above (you might want to put your hand over the passage, or scroll down a bit to hide it), tell me what you just read.

You're likely to pause for a minute and try to grab onto one of the words or phrases floating around in your head ("women," "jobs," "number of infants") and then formulate a statement like: "It was about women in America and how they had more kids." Your attention likely waned after the first couple of sentences and might have even derailed by the time you got to the name "Murray" (you might not even remember reading that name).

Passive reading

Besides coming up with some vague generalities, you probably had difficulty formulating anything coherent and thorough. Much of the reason for this is your brain was in passive mode: it was stringing words together, and once word was piled upon word, it got lost in the woods, so to speak.

But don't worry. You are not alone. 99% of your fellow SAT test-takers will probably have a very similar response. You are also not alone if instead of stopping and thinking about what you read, you kept plowing forward in the mistaken notion that if you got to the end, the passage would suddenly all make sense.

The thing is, the passages on the SAT are written in such a way that after the first couple of lines or paragraphs, your attention very well might wander off to daydream-land. The good news is we can use the predictability of SAT passages to our advantage. To do so, we need to understand how a passage is designed.

Active reading

By simplifying all the major components in your head, you will easily be able to come up with what we call a “snapshot”, which is a simplification of the important parts of the paragraph. By paying attention to structure words, you won’t get lost in the sea of words but will be able to focus on what is important.

So let’s talk about how to read actively so you are not desperately stringing words together hoping for a miracle at the end.

The three tenets of active reading

1. Notice connections between paragraphs

The reading passage above is but one possible way in which a paragraph can unfold. You’ll want to open up an SAT book (preferably the Official College Board guide) and see how the passages are organized.

Here’s a typical structure for an SAT nonfiction passage. The topic is introduced, maybe with an anecdote or some other general examples or statements. Evidence supporting a theory on the topic will typically follow. Or if the passage examines multiple sides of the issues, maybe several perspectives with evidence will be discussed. Then a conclusion wraps up the issue, maybe offering some food for thought for the future.

(Special note for the “U.S. Founding Documents and Great Global Conversation” passage: this structure may not apply as neatly if we are looking at a famous speech or letter, but typically the author will still be introducing a concern and then supporting it with various arguments and then wrapping up his or her thoughts.)

Once, you can anticipate and recognize the typical structure of an SAT passage, it will be a lot easier for you to categorize the copious information the passage throws at you.

2. Pay attention to “structure words”

“Structure words” are the glue that holds the paragraph together. But they are more than that; they show us how the sentences are logically connected.

Here are five of the most important types of structure words. Out of these, the one you should pay most attention to is “contrast words”.

Contrast words

however, (al)though, still, nonetheless, at the same time, on the other hand, otherwise, but, yet, notwithstanding

Intensifying words

indeed, moreover, in fact

Illustrative words

for example, for one, to illustrate

Cause words

because, since, for that reason

Effect words

therefore, thus, hence, consequently, as a result

Underline structure words whenever you see them. They are incredibly helpful clues in determining the twists and turns the passage is taking.

3. Make connections within paragraphs

It’s okay to slow down for a second and even look away from the page. You’ll want to “digest” what’s being said. This is the golden pillar to active reading. Specifically, ask yourself, “what is the paragraph saying?” I call these

paragraph snapshots. You force yourself to make important connections in the paragraph, while summarizing key points in your head. Do this at the end of every paragraph (or two if they are really short).

You might balk, thinking, “Doesn’t that take a long time?” Well, when you get to the end of the passage, you’ll have a very good idea about what the passage is about. Consequently, you’ll be able to answer the questions much more easily, saving you time (instead of having to go back and forth between possible answer choices, which typically happens when you have an imperfect understanding of the passage).

Finally, you don’t need to understand every detail in every paragraph. Especially towards the end of the paragraph there will be a density of detail. It is best to come back to this only if this material is related to a question (which it typically is). Seeing this text for a second time, and within the context of the question, will often make it is easier to digest.

Applying what you’ve learned

It’s easy to understand how active reading works. It is much harder to apply. See, our basic instinct is to try to get through the passage as quickly as possible. Therefore, if you are currently timing yourself, thinking that the only way you’ll get better is to get faster, you might want to reevaluate how you approach the passage in the first place. Again, by more effectively “packaging” the information in the passage the first time around, you’ll be both more efficient and more accurate when you answer the questions.

Here are few tips to help you actively read:

1) Look away from the passage after each paragraph

This strategy is to get your brain used to taking snapshots of the paragraph. By not looking away from the page, it is easy to become distracted by the words dancing in front of your face. Looking away, you can easily come up with a quick summary/snapshot: “It’s about two different theories on the population increase after WWII. One is that people were more optimistic about starting families; the other that women who were working were able to go back home and start a family.”

Saying that in your head, and you can do so in an even more abbreviated fashion, takes a mere few seconds. Then, when the next paragraph deals with, say, an analysis of that theory, you’ll have a much easier time following along.

2) Take notes

Sometimes, it's hard to organize the clutter of thoughts pinballing through your head as you read a passage. Take shorthand notes after each paragraph.

3) Look away after you've read the passage/jot down the main idea.

The same as point #1. Except, now you'll just want to answer the question: "What was the primary purpose of the entire passage?" Putting this in your own words is a good idea, since there will likely be a question that asks you to do exactly this. Jot it down (in shorthand form) so you can confidently refer to it while answering questions.

Active reading in action

Now, let's actually take the paragraph from the beginning of this section and dissect it, much the way your mind would if actively reading the passage.

*With most women reverting to their domestic role, the dramatic increase in the number of infants born is perhaps not too surprising. **Yet**, such factors alone cannot explain the increase in the number of births from 1946-1951. Murray suggests that both women and men's perspectives changed, mostly because of America's success in the war. This optimism, in part, fueled the rapid growth in population. **However**, many argue that women, in returning to the home, were able to focus on raising a family, regardless of their levels of optimism.*

The most important structure words are contrast words, because they change the direction of the paragraph. In other words, a person—it could be the author or somebody the author talks about in the passage—disagrees with something or somebody else in the passage. It is understanding the twist and turns in the paragraph that result from "contrast words" that is the key to understanding the passage. Remember, the passage is not just about imparting information; it is about the distinctions that arise from a debate in which people take varying positions.

In the paragraph above, notice how the first sentence introduces the topic. After that, it is straight into a contrast word. Therefore, the second sentence does not agree with the first.

1st sentence: women returning to home because of more babies

2nd sentence: other factors also account for more babies

Notice, that the 2nd sentence does not completely disagree with the 1st sentence. It just qualifies or limits what that sentence says (an important distinction for those aiming for top scores to notice!)

In the next sentence we get Murray's view. Always notice when the author brings up another point of view.

Murray's view: people became more optimistic; had more babies

Now, there is another "contrast word": "however". This signals that we are getting another point of view.

Other view: women were able to focus on raising a family

One final point

Once you've noticed the relationship between sentences in a paragraph and the meaning they convey, you will be able to deal with the SAT questions pertaining to the passage far more confidently. Indeed, you'll be able to formulate an answer in your head. And if you do have to consult the passage (as you should), you'll know where to look.

All in all, becoming an adept active reader will help you hone in on the correct answer, instead of having to fumble frantically through the mass of words that make up the answer choices.

Pacing

We won't beat around the bush. There's a lot to read on the SAT Reading test. And if you aren't careful with balancing your time between reading and question answering, you very well might find yourself in a panic when the proctor announces 5 minutes left. So let's talk about how you can learn to pace yourself appropriately.

Time per question

On average, you have one minute and fifteen seconds to answer each question on the SAT Reading test, but this includes reading time. The time you actually have per question will depend on exactly how long the passage is, how complex the passage is, and how fast of a reader you are.

Time per passage

Since everyone reads at a different pace and some passages are denser than others, it's better to think about the approximate time you can spend per passage rather than per question. With 65 minutes for the whole SAT Reading test, this means you have 13 minutes per passage for each of the 5 passages if you pace evenly. So check your watch after each passage and make sure you are roughly on track. Don't panic if you are a little bit over; some passages might take you longer than others, but try to make up the ground as you go.

Time to spend reading

The trick to conquering the SAT Reading section is finding the perfect balance between reading time and question-answering time. This is going to vary based on the individual, but in an ideal world you want to have enough time to carefully read and understand the passage and enough time to answer each question thoughtfully.

For most people, this is easier said than done. But you should definitely figure out whether you are wasting too much time trying to understand every morsel of what you read or whether you are reading too quickly and thus wasting too much time re-reading or simply getting answer questions wrong because you blew through the passage in a mad sprint.

To help you figure out your pattern, we suggest that once you become familiar with the test, you spend at least one practice section carefully noting your time both for reading the passage and for answering questions.

Don't change your natural pace or worry about the overall time limit for the passage! Just jot down how long it took you to read the passage and then how long it took you to answer the questions for each one. If you are taking the SAT under regular time, you should ideally be finishing the total test within 60 to 65 minutes. If you finish much under that, then you aren't using your full time to read passages or answer questions carefully. If you finish in much more than that, then you might need to make some decisions about increasing your reading time, skipping some questions, or even skipping an entire passage so you can be more careful on the ones you do do. (Of course, always make sure to bubble in guesses for everything: NO PENALTY FOR INCORRECT ANSWERS on the new SAT. Happy dance!)

A Note on SAT Reading Passages

Before we get into the individual passage types, let's talk a little about SAT Reading passages as a whole. SAT Reading passages aren't written specifically for the test. Instead, they're taken from high school or college-level reading sources and adapted to make them fit into the 700 words or so that the SAT likes. Of course, that means that test-makers have to make some pretty significant changes to the original texts—creating clear introductions and conclusions—because these books or essays weren't written with the SAT exam in mind.

Unless you're a voracious reader, there's not much chance you're going to come across a passage that you recognize (*UNLESS* it's a passage from a U.S. Founding Document that you've studied in school; then you might get lucky). But it's rare, and no matter how much you read between now and the day of your SAT, you're not going to better your odds in any significant way.

SAT reading passages are academic

Generally, SAT readings come from books that you might read in high school or college, and that makes sense. Of course, there are all sorts of different things you might study in college. So that's why the new SAT makes sure you see a little bit of everything from fiction to history to science.

If you read through an article or two from *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, or other similar publications, you'll get a sense of the level of reading the SAT expects of you.

SAT readings aren't super dense, old, or full of jargon

Even if they're academic, SAT Reading passages are supposed to be readable for people who aren't actually in the field of study that the passages come from. So you won't get anything really old (e.g. Shakespeare or Kant) or highly specialized (e.g. linguistic theory from Chomsky). As long as you stay focused while reading, you'll be able to understand the information in the passage without any background knowledge.

Fiction on the SAT

There's always a literature passage on the SAT, but it's not usually the kind of thing most people have read for fun—sorry, no Harry Potter. It's more likely to be something, well, literary. The books you read in high school are a good comparison. While you won't see *The Great Gatsby* on your SAT, since so many students read it in school, it's the right type of book.

Passage Types

The Literature Passage

On every SAT, there's one fiction passage from "U.S. or World Literature" (yeah, that does basically mean anything in the world, as long as it's written in English). The literature passage is the first passage in the Reading section.

The SAT likes relatively recent fiction, but it's not unheard of to see something older--works anywhere from the nineteenth to twenty-first century are pretty fair game. There's a wide range of time periods and writing traditions that the story might come from. There are two things you can be sure the Reading passage won't be, though: written in totally antiquated English (such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*) or taken from a young adult series (such as *Twilight*. Sorry, Bella).

Sometimes the literature passage will be the easiest reading in the entire section, and sometimes it will be the hardest. You'll usually know within the first paragraph. Sometimes you'll think the story is engaging, which is such a nice bonus. But don't get too caught up in the tale. This the SAT, afterall. Questions are coming, and we need to be ready to answer them.

Here are some tips on approaching the Literature passage:

Read the intro information

Before every Reading passage on the SAT, there are a couple of sentences that tell you where the text is taken from and give you a little bit of background info if necessary. You should always read this, especially when it's a fiction passage. For one, it tells you it's fiction and that affects what your note-taking strategy will be (more on that in a moment). Besides that, it may give you some important background info on the setting and characters to help orient you. The copyright date is also an important clue regarding the era a passage was written in, which can tell you a lot about the author and his or her world.

Gradually describe characters

As you read, keep track of the characters you meet. There will only be a few--maybe two or three--so this shouldn't be too tough. But as you read, build up a list of descriptions of those characters. Focus on their personalities and motivations especially; how does the author paint them? Any adjectives you see to describe

their personas are worth underlining or circling. It's good to be thinking about the author's intentions when you're doing this. Is the attitude toward a character positive, negative, or neutral?

Describe the relationships between the characters

You want to build up not just an image of each personality but a description of the relationships between them. Take careful note of how characters feel about each other or react to each other. The SAT will almost always ask you about this.

Write these character traits in your notes

Jot down notes about the characters alongside the passage as you read. They don't need to be extensive. "Mary = mean-spirited; Susan = naive" will suffice. This will be a really helpful guide for when you answer questions about characters.

Note the turning point(s)

Pretty much every literature passage on the SAT is going to have some type of "turning point" where something happens to a character, a character remembers something happening to them, or a character has a revelation. This turning point is often crucial to understanding the point of the story. Put a big star by it when you find it. As a bonus, looking for the turning point helps keep you actively engaged in your reading.

The Nonfiction Passages

After the Literature passage, you'll see two History/Social Studies passages and two Science passages--typically alternated. These passages should be approached a little differently than the Fiction passage. Here's what you need to know:

One of the History/Social Studies passages and one of the Science passages is going to include a graphic.

We'll talk about how to deal with questions on graphics in the next section, but for now, I would suggest not focusing on the chart or graph at all when you are reading until you get to the question(s) on it. The questions might be very specific or more general, and you never know exactly what they are going to ask. There is going to be a lot more information on the graphic than you need to answer the question, so don't waste your time until the question tells you exactly what you need to find.

One of the History/Social Studies passages is going to be from a U.S. Founding Document or the Great Global Conversation.

It's particularly important to check the author and the date on these passages, which will appear in smaller font before the passage. You may be familiar with the author ("Oh hello there again, Dr. Martin Luther King or Harriet Tubman!") or the time period in which it was written ("Hmmm, 1775 sounds suspiciously like the start of the American Revolution"). Although the questions will never rely on outside knowledge, some familiarity with the author or situation will orient you before you begin reading so you can get more out of the passage without having to piece together the clues.

Just because it's non-fiction doesn't mean the author won't have a personal perspective.

The History/Social Studies passage may be something like a memoir; in this case, it may sound almost like a fiction passage. Or it might be a letter or a speech that is making a persuasive (and personal) argument. If it seems pretty personal, be prepared for questions that ask about the author's feelings or attitudes. You can bet your bottom dollar there will be one or two.

More on the History/Social Studies Passage

There's a range of subjects that can be drawn on in these passages, but there tends to be a heavier focus on sociology, psychology, economics and political science. As a sampling, the official practice tests in the College Board guide have passages on the psychology of gift giving, ethical economics, public transportation, theories on education in 18th century America, growth of cities, speeches by Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Cady Stanton on the roles of women, and the French Revolution.

More on the Science Passage

Don't be too intimidated by the Science passages, although they will often include some jargon, they are written for everyday people. However, at the same time don't be lulled into a false sense of belief that a strong background in science won't help you out here. It's a lot easier to make sense of theories on the DNA double helix if you've studied them in class. If you are uncomfortable reading about science, we suggest reading some

articles written for the everyday person on science topics. *Scientific American*, *National Geographic*, or *Discover* magazines will give you a good feel for the type of passages you might encounter on the SAT.

The Science passages pull from a range of topics in the natural sciences: this means earth science, biology, chemistry, and physics. A sampling from the Official Guide includes passages about DNA, the prospect of mining in space, the effect of the internet on our brains, ocean waves, evolution of birds, the disappearance of honeybees, genetic modification, and sources of volcanic eruptions.

The Takeaway

The SAT calls most of the nonfiction passages “informational passages” because this is precisely what they do: communicate information. Your job is to distill this information into its most important elements:

1. the main idea
2. any different theories or perspectives on the topic presented
3. the examples used to support the topic
4. the author’s conclusion about this topic

If you can do this, you will be prepared for almost all of the questions that follow.

The Paired Passage

So here's the gist: there will always be on paired passage set on the SAT (two passages adding up to the typical single passage length of 500 to 750 words.) What exactly is a paired passage? Well, just as its name implies, it is a set of two passages written on a similar topic. The passages usually do not completely agree with one another, but this doesn't mean they are always on opposing sides either. More often, the relationship between them will be more subtle. Maybe the second one picks up on a detail in the first and describes it further. Or maybe it provides a personal perspective on a global issue. In any case, these excerpts have been carefully chosen as passages to compare, so you can assume there are going to be several connections between them. Thank you, Captain Obvious, you say? You're welcome.

On the paired passage, you can expect roughly 4 or 5 questions to be on both passages. The other questions will only pertain to one or the other.

The SAT's Favorite Paired Passage Questions

Here's one of the SAT's absolute favorite questions to ask about both passages:

- **Which choice best describes the relationship between the two passages?**

Now you know. And knowing is half the battle. You can expect that almost every single paired passage is going to ask you this question or a variation of it. Sometimes the answer choices will have to do with the different perspectives of the passages (how does each author feel about the topic?). Sometimes they will have to do with the content or structure of the passage (e.g. "Passage 1 takes a high-level view while Passage 2 describes one example in depth"). You should be on high alert to the relationship between the passages as you read, as you are almost guaranteed to see this question.

Other popular SAT Reading paired passage questions include:

- How would the author of Passage 1 respond to the author of Passage 2? (or vice versa)
- On which of the following points would the authors of both passages most likely agree (or disagree)?

Comparison questions might be about a detail in the passages; these tend to be the easiest, although you might have to hunt the answer down. (e.g. “Both the author of Passage 1 and Passage 2 describe pigeons as being...”), but oftentimes they are about higher level issues, so you want to be tracking the main idea of each passage and any similarities and differences between them as you read. If you do this in advance, you will be much more prepared to answer the synthesis questions that follow.

Read One Passage at a Time if you Struggle with Reading

Typically, questions on paired passages will appear in this order: 1. questions only on the first passage 2. questions only on the second passage 3. questions on both passages. If you are not strong on the Reading section, you can chunk your reading by tackling Passage 1 first and answering those questions and then reading Passage 2 and answering those questions before answering questions on both. This will help you retain more information and not get distracted by answer choices that appeared in the other passage.

Reading one passage at a time is also a great strategy if you are running out of time, but in this case, start with whichever passage has more questions on it.

Below you’ll find an example of a paired passage to practice with. As you read, try to anticipate the comparison questions that might follow (guess what, there will one!).

Passage 1

It’s a pattern as old as time. Somebody makes an important scientific breakthrough, which explains a piece of the world. But then people get caught up in the excitement of this breakthrough and try to use it to explain everything. This is what’s happening right now with neuroscience. The field is obviously incredibly important and exciting. From personal experience, I can tell you that you get captivated by it and sometimes go off to extremes, as if understanding the brain is the solution to understanding all thought and behavior.

This is happening at two levels. At the lowbrow level, there are the conference circuit neuro-mappers. These are people who take pretty brain-scan images and claim they can use them to predict what product somebody will buy, what party they will vote for, whether they are lying or not or whether a criminal should be held responsible for his crime.

At the highbrow end, there are scholars and theorists that some have called the “nothing buttists.” Human beings are nothing but neurons, they assert. Once we understand the brain well enough, we will be able to understand behavior. We will see the chain of physical causations that determine actions. We will see that many behaviors like addiction are nothing more than brain diseases. We will see that people don’t really possess free will; their actions are caused by material processes emerging directly out of nature. Neuroscience will replace psychology and other fields as the way to understand action.

These two forms of extremism are refuted by the same reality. The brain is not the mind. It is probably impossible to look at a map of brain activity and predict or even understand the emotions, reactions, hopes and desires of the mind.

Passage 2

Critics of fMRI cite its inability to pinpoint exact areas of the brain responsible for complex emotional states. The thinking goes that if scientists can’t identify a complex state in the brain that state exists elsewhere, in some nebulous mind. But that claim is simply false. Just because a given activity or response is spread across the brain—involving many different regions rather than just a single section—does not mean it is beyond understanding, or that it doesn’t exist in the brain at all. It just means we need to work harder to discern its underlying principles—even if doing so entails understanding how many different regions of the brain work in tandem.

In the current backlash against brain science, it is also important to realize that neuroimaging is just one of many tools used in neuroscience. Equally important is the fact that it is widely viewed as rudimentary in its current state—the equivalent of a one-megapixel camera when we are striving to build a gigapixel camera. It seems all but certain that we will continue to understand the brain better as technology allows us to zoom in tighter, with greater precision.

But the idea that the mind is separate from the brain no longer makes sense. They are simply different ways of describing the same thing. To talk about the brain is to talk about physiology, neurons, receptors, and neurotransmitters; to talk about the mind is to talk about thoughts, ideas, beliefs, emotions, and desires. As an old and elegant phrase puts it, “The mind is what the brain does.”

The worst possibility of a full-scale, reckless backlash against neuroscience, to the exclusion of the field’s best work, is that it might sacrifice important insights that could reshape psychiatry and medicine. If critics are too pessimistic about what the future holds, they are right about one thing: over the past decade, neuroscience has become over-privileged as a method of examining the mind. Journalists, courts, and sometimes even scientists seem to believe that a brain scan can be more telling than a profile of an individual’s behavior. Perhaps as

neuroscience progresses, it is possible for objective, physiological assessment of the brain to win out as the ultimate arbiter of truth when it comes to the mind. But that's a long way off, if it ever will be possible at all. For now, we still need fields like psychology and psychiatry, which take the mind as their starting point, rather than the brain, to complement neuroscience. The basic elements of psychology, like beliefs, desires, goals, and thoughts, will likely always play a key role in our understanding of human behavior, which is why science needs researchers who study the mind every bit as much as it needs researchers who study the brain. Our aim should not be to pick the brain over the mind, or vice versa, but to build stronger bridges between our understandings of the two.

Practice Question

How would the author of passage 1 regard the idea stated in passage 2 that ("Perhaps as neuroscience... the mind")?

- A. With little reservation
- B. With reluctant approval
- C. With marked skepticism
- D. With outright enthusiasm

Tips

To answer this question, you will not only have to read both passages, but will also need to have a good idea of what each author is talking about. Here's your plan of attack:

1. Get the big picture of both passages (as you read).
2. Understand how the passages disagree and, when it applies, how they agree (again, as you read you should be on the lookout for this).
3. Answer questions by going back to the passage, finding relevant information, and then phrasing a response based on the text.

Explanation

The author of Passage 1 speaks out very strongly against the notion that neuroscience will be able to tell us everything about the mind. The two are different, he believes: "The brain is not the mind" he says. In other words, he believes a brain scan will be able to tell you all about the brain, but not much about the mind or such

subtle states as emotion, mood, etc. This matches up best with C), which means strong doubt. A) is incorrect because the author of Passage 1 does have reservations that neuroscience will be able to eventually tell us everything about the mind. If you picked this one, you might have made the mistake of reading the opinion of the “nothing buttists” as the author’s opinion. The “nothing buttists” believe that “neuroscience will replace psychology,” but the author doesn’t. B) and D) are incorrect for the same reason: the author does not “approve” of the idea that the brain will become the ultimate arbiter of truth when it comes to the mind, and he is certainly not enthusiastic about it!

If you struggled with this one, practice, practice, practice with comparing texts and finding all the similarities and differences between them. It will get easier!

Passage Complexity

If you are at all familiar with the SAT Reading test, you probably know that the passages vary in difficulty. You might breeze through some of them and then be sweating bullets through others not having any idea what the heck the last paragraph was talking about. This is ok. This is what makes the SAT hard, and you should know that there are a lot of other students struggling along right beside you. But, if you are prepared, there can be a huge difference between you and these other freaked-out students gnawing off their pencil erasers around you, and that is, the level of panic you experience when you encounter a difficult reading passage. Knowing what to expect can help you make strategic decisions about which passages to do first.

The new SAT makes this a little easier on you since you'll face 5 different passages, all about the same length and all with the same number of questions. So if you struggle with Reading, you can start with the easier passages first and make sure you have the time to do a solid job answering those questions.

Although you won't know in advance which passages are going to be easier or harder, you do know that the SAT has a predetermined difficulty range for these passages. **The easiest passage is going to be at about a 9th grade reading level and the hardest passage is going to be at an early college level.** The others are going to be somewhere in the middle.

You can apply one of the following strategies to quickly determine which passages you should tackle first:

1. Read the first paragraph (or first two paragraphs if the first paragraph is only a sentence or two). Particularly on non-fiction passages, the introductory paragraph should be one of the most readable paragraphs of the text, and the passages often get more dense in the middle or two-thirds of the way through. So if you read the first paragraph and think, "Whoa, this is going to be hard," chances are it is a hard passage and you can come back to it after you've knocked off some easy ones.
2. Skim through the passage quickly, reading just a few select sentences throughout. You're probably better at eyeballing passage complexity than you think you are. Just think about if your English teacher handed you a printout of excerpts from *The Three Little Pigs* and *Crime and Punishment* with the titles removed. You could probably tell at a glance which is the harder passage, right? The differences might not be so extreme on the SAT, but chances are your gut instinct after a 10-second scan might tell you which passages to tackle first.

Definitely don't waste a lot of time making decisions, and if you've already read half of a passage before deciding it's difficult, this is not the time to bail. Skipping around the test reading parts of passages is not going to help you get answers on your bubble sheet, so make quick decisions and go all in.

A note on passage topics

Some students just HATE fiction. It is the WORST. Other students find themselves stifling snores when they read about science. If you have strong feelings about genre or passage topics, you may want to make some ordering decisions based on this rather than passage complexity. Remember that there will be one fiction passage, two history/social studies passages, and two science passages on every test (hint: the fiction generally comes first and the history/social studies and science passages alternate), so if you've had a bad breakup with one subject or another in the past, you might want to arrange your reading order based on personal preference rather than passage complexity.

SAT Reading Question Types

Command of Evidence

Ever get a graded essay back from your English teacher and it's bleeding red with passive-aggressive questions such as "Examples?" "Support?" "Evidence for this?" "How do you know?" or the backhanded compliment, "Interesting arguments, but they need support"?

Well, this is precisely what the new SAT is trying to test with its category of questions pertaining to "Command of Evidence." You'll find Command of Evidence questions throughout the SAT, but on the Reading test, they break down into three categories:

1. questions that ask you to determine the best evidence in a passage or a pair for the answer to a previous question
2. questions that ask you how the author of an argument uses evidence to support a claim (these are more general than the first category, but the idea is the same)
3. questions pertaining to informational graphics

Best Evidence Questions

The first category should be pretty recognizable to you if you've looked at an SAT Reading test: they are the questions that ask you, "Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?" followed by answer choices quoting different lines from the passage.

You have two basic approaches you can employ to answer these questions: 1. If you remember where the support for that answer is in the passage, you can anticipate the answer choice, and find it in your answer choices, but be very careful! Always make sure to check every answer choice to make sure there isn't a better piece of support that you missed. 2. find each answer choice and mark it in the passage: putting brackets around the selected line numbers is a good way of highlighting the excerpt without scribbling on the passage too much. This way, you can evaluate them all together and make sure you pick the best answer. This second

method is preferable for most students, because, well, the SAT is tricky, don't let it trick you into picking a wrong answer because you haven't seen them all.

Because there is no incorrect answer penalty on the new SAT, you should always bubble in an answer for these questions, but if you are particularly weak in Reading or if you are not confident in your previous answer choice, you may want to quickly put in a guess and come back to the question if you have time. These ones can be difficult and they are not worth agonizing over.

The upside to this question type is that you might find that an evidence question will help you fix a mistake you made in the previous question, but don't count on it. The SAT is very good at finding answer choices that will match up with all the previous answer choices, so you may not even notice.

Informational Graphics

The new SAT is sprinkled all over the place with fun little charts and graphs, including on the Reading and Writing tests. On the Reading test, you will encounter two informational graphics. One on one of the History/Social Studies passages and one on one of the Science passages. Related questions will ask you to use the information presented on the graphics in combination with the information in the text. Maybe the chart will present a bar graph of the number of butterflies captured in specific areas, for example, and a question will ask you which claim provided in the passage could be supported by the graph. It's often not as scary as it sounds. And you'll only see a few questions like this on the test, so it's no big deal if you aren't a fan, but you should know that they will be there.

We suggest that you don't worry too much about studying these figures while you are reading; they often include far more information than is required to answer whatever question the test throws at you. So wait until you get to the question and then study the table or graph to find the specific answer the question requires.

Words in Context

The old SAT tested a lot of difficult vocabulary. No more. Now the focus is on "high-utility academic words and phrases" which basically means words that are used in multiple subjects and genres and words that have multiple meanings.

There are two types of Words in Context questions. The first type requires you to correctly identify the definition of a word (remember these are typically common words with multiple meanings). The second type will ask you to identify how an author uses a word or phrase to influence the meaning, tone, or style of a passage.

Here's an example of what a word in context question looks like:

As used in line 22, the word "contained" most nearly means to

- A. sheltered
- B. suppressed
- C. enclosed
- D. incorporated

Contain is not a hard vocab word. So it's not about knowing what "contain" means; it's about what it means "in context." In different contexts, "contain" can mean different things. So we need to figure out what it means in *this* passage.

Your strategy should be to go back to the passage and read not only the sentence the word appears in but also the sentence above and below it. Make sure that you understand how that sentence is supposed to connect to the ones around it.

Then put a blank in the sentence where the word appears. Go ahead and cross it out. Come up with your own word or phrase that expresses what the sentence is saying. Don't worry about finding the perfect word, just get something down that communicates what the sentence is trying to communicate.

Let's try it.

It may seem as if the Bubonic Plague is a vestige of the Middle Ages. Most high school students have read about it and its mass devastation of European lives in the fourteenth century. But although the plague may occasionally have been contained, it has resurfaced periodically in various locations around the globe from the 6th century to the 21st century. It is hardly a historical relic.

If I replace the word “contained” myself, I might come up with “stopped” or “prevented from spreading.” These match up best with answer choice (B) “suppressed.” We can see how, in other contexts, “contained” might mean the other answer choices: “The school contained/sheltered the students during the tornado.” “The sheep were contained/enclosed within the pen.” “The lesson contained/incorporated six modules on good writing.” But that’s not what it means here.

Try not to just start plugging in the answer choices from the very beginning. This turns on the how-it-sounds part of your brain instead of the analytical part of your brain (you can probably guess which one the SAT rewards). Only plug words in if you are totally confused and can’t come up with your word.

Remember that the SAT often chooses a second (or third or fourth) definition of a word and not the one that you are most familiar with. So always go back to the passage.

Although they are far less common, a word in context question may also ask you to determine why an author chose to use a certain word to achieve a certain effect.

Here’s an example:

In line 34, the author most likely used the word “heralded” to:

- A. echo the idea that the press release acted like a live messenger.
- B. emphasize the global acclaim the discovery received.
- C. imply that the announcement was fortuitous.
- D. highlight the fanfare the press release received.

These questions are tougher because you can’t use the fill-in-the-blank technique. Rather these questions rely on an understanding of main idea and tone and are really more like analysis questions. So let’s talk about those next:

Analysis Questions

Your SAT Reading test will include many questions that look something like this:

The primary purpose of this passage is to...

The author's tone towards his subject is...

Which choice best describes the developmental pattern of the passage?

And in order pick the right answers for big picture questions like these ones, you need to zoom out. There are a lot of details in SAT Reading passages, of course, and not being clear on the more important ones can really throw you off. There will be a couple of wrong answers that focus too closely on specific details in the passage, which just aren't universal enough in scope.

It's pretty easy to get tricked by these types of questions, unless you have a method.

Sketching the big picture

If you take one thing away from this section, it should be this: take notes about the big picture while you read. In addition to keeping you focused, notes also help by giving you a zoomed out picture. You're only going to note the most important details and how they relate to each other (thinking about their function in the overall passage) so that when you look at the notes later, you won't be distracted by the little details.

Why zooming out is important

Imagine I have a picture of a river. I took the picture while sitting on the bank, skipping stones and eating a sandwich. What's in the picture? Water, trees, rocks, sky, moss, bugs...lots of stuff. Then I ask you what shape the river is. Is it curvy? Straight? While you might see a curve in the picture, you'd have a pretty hard time sketching the river's overall shape. Even if I gave you a whole bunch of river snapshots, determining the entire river's shape would be pretty hard.

You don't want that; you want a satellite image to see the river's shape. Sure, it won't show the bugs, the rocks, or my sandwich, but it'll show the big picture. And that's how these Primary Purpose questions work. They're asking for the main point of the passage, not the details.

Making sure you're ready for the main point

Taking the right kind of margin notes on your SAT is a skill that takes practice. You have to remember to ask yourself some questions to keep your notes focused: "What's the main idea of this paragraph?" "How does this paragraph relate to the next one?"

Practice that, and these big-picture questions will be a cinch.

Be wary of extremes

On questions about main idea, purpose, or tone, always be wary of answer choices that seem too extreme for the circumstances. They are almost always wrong. Jot down the author's perspective and tone at the end of each passage and you'll be much better equipped to answer these analysis questions.

Direct Reference/Line Reference Questions

This question type will direct you to a specific part of the passage or even a specific line. Once we read the passage, we want to answer the question ourselves. That's right—do not dive straight into the answer choices thinking they will offer salvation. The answer choices are meant to trick you and corrupt your interpretation of the passage. Next thing you know, you imagine the passage is saying something completely different from your mini-narrative. Once you have an answer in your head, match it with one of the answer choices.

Let's take a look at a full-fledged example for this question type (remember to come up with your own answer first!):

I recently dug up a photograph of myself from freshman year of college that made me smile. I have on the wrong shoes, the wrong socks, the wrong checkered shirt tucked the wrong way into the wrong slacks. I look like what I was: a boy sprung from a middlebrow burg who affected a secondhand preppiness. I look nervous. Compare that image to one from my senior-class dinner: now I am attired in a gray tweed jacket with a green plaid bow tie and a sensible button-down shirt, all purchased at the Yale Co-op. I look confident, albeit still a bit contrived.

In the first paragraph, the change the author observes in his former self can best be described as one from

- A. uncertainty to despair
- B. confidence to conformity
- C. awkwardness to poise
- D. genuine to phony

Explanation: In the first paragraph, the author is looking at two pictures – one of himself as a freshman at Yale, the other as a senior. As a freshman he is wearing, “the wrong socks...shirt...slacks.” He notes that he is nervous,

aware that he doesn't fit in. In the senior photo, he is wearing—with confidence—a suit and shirt bought from the Yale store.

Answer (D), awkwardness to poise, best captures this transition. This is a tough question if you get distracted by the words “affected” and “contrived” and are tempted to answer (D) -- this is a classic SAT trap. But if you read carefully, you'll see that the author thought he was trying a bit too hard both at the beginning and the end of his college career, so the transition is not from genuine to phony. Think through your own answer first and you'll be less likely to be distracted by wrong answer choices.

Inference Questions

Inference questions are a tricky bunch. We have to choose the answer that can best be supported by information in the passage. The trick is not falling prey to those answer choices that are somewhat correct, but go a little beyond the information in the passage.

Questions typically try to trick us in a variety of ways. Many aren't incorrect—that is, nothing in the passage directly refutes them. However, these answer choices assume too much. They cannot be completely backed up by the passage.

Let's have a look at the following challenging passage and question.

That it means little now, to most Americans, is evidence of how strongly language drives the perception of mental struggle, both its sources and its remedies. In recent years, psychiatrists have developed a more specialized medical vocabulary to describe anxiety, the core component of neurosis, and as a result the public has gained a greater appreciation of its many dimensions. But in the process we've lost entirely the romance of neurosis, as well as its physical embodiment — a restless, grumbling, needy presence that once functioned in the collective mind as an early warning system, an inner voice that hedged against excessive optimism.

In today's era of exquisite confusion — political, economic and otherwise — the neurotic would be a welcome guest, nervous company for nervous days, always ready to provide doses of that most potent vaccine against gloominess: wisecracking, urbane gloominess.

Some of the reasons that “neurotic” has fallen out of colloquial usage are obvious. Freudian analysis lost its hold on the common consciousness, as well as in psychiatry, and some of Freud's

language lost its power. And scientists working to define mental disorders began to slice neurosis into ever finer pieces, like panic disorder, social anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder — all evocative terms that percolated up into common usage, not to mention into online user groups, rock lyrics and TV shows.

According to the passage, it can be most reasonably inferred that the Freudian school of psychology

- A. coined the term neurosis
- B. was associated exclusively with the word neurotic
- C. ultimately abandoned the use of word neurosis
- D. employed the term neurosis to describe certain behavior

Explanation:

A: The passage says that Freud made the term “neurosis” popular, and that he used it to describe certain states. However, we do not know if Freud came up with the word.

B: The red flag is the word “exclusively.” It means “only,” and is almost always a stretch in an Inference Question—we typically want to go with a safe answer, meaning the answer that doesn’t assume too much. To say that the Freudian school was only associated with the word “neurotic” is a stretch.

C: The term fell into disuse. The passage never says that the Freudian school itself abandoned the term.

D: This is the safe answer. It is simply saying that the Freudian school used the word “neurotic.” Here these lines back up the answer: being neurotic meant something more than merely being anxious, and something other than exhibiting the hysteria or other disabling mood problems for which Freud used the term. (So this is the answer.)

How to Improve on New SAT Reading

Wrong Answers on SAT Reading

Although the SAT is perhaps less tricky than it was in the past, that doesn't mean you don't need to be on guard. The New SAT Reading section is in some ways even better at luring you into tempting wrong answer choices because many of them seem so plausible. The new SAT is all about close and careful reading, so tread cautiously when it comes to the answer choices and always go back to the passage.

Here are some of the reasons wrong answers on the new SAT are just so darn tantalizing:

1. They are true based on information in the passage

Sometimes an answer choice is wrong because it doesn't actually answer the question being asked. Sure, you can find supporting text for this wrong answer choice, but since it is not answering the specific question being asked, it's not the right answer.

2. They sound plausible

This is particularly true on the new SAT Reading test. Many of the answer choices will seem to be "on theme" with the main idea of the text. You may even think you remember reading a wrong answer choice in the passage. This is where careful reading comes in. You should always be going back to the text to backup your answer; you may find that the passage says something a little bit different from what you remembered, meaning this wrong answer is related, but not a precise recollection of the text.

3. They relate to the passage (but distort its meaning)

Be careful! Did the passage actually say what the answer choice is saying? Or did it just talk about something similar? Or did it talk about the opposite of what the answer choice says? Again, always go back to the text and stay true to your overall understanding of the main idea and author's purpose.

4. They use words and phrases from the passage (but incorrectly)

Sometimes you are going to struggle with understanding a part of the passage. If a question deals with this part of the passage, you'll often find yourself going straight for the answers in the hope that they will offer some guidance. Doing so, however, is dangerous—the SAT is waiting for you.

It will often take words that appear in the passage and throw them into an answer. But if you are not processing the entire answer choice, and are just grasping on to those familiar words, you are likely to become trapped.

5. They are too specific or too general

Particularly for big-picture questions such as the main idea of the passage or a paragraph, or the purpose of a passage or section, make sure you don't pick an answer choice that only mentions part of what the entire paragraph/passage addresses or something that is far bigger than the scope of the passage.

6. They seem ok (but not the best)

This one is specific to the Command of Evidence questions you'll find on the new SAT, the ones where you have to pick the best lines of evidence in the text to support your answer to another question. Be careful to check all of the answer choices! You might come across an answer choice that seems to be decent support for the answer to the previous question (or at least you can rationalize that it is), but there might be a BETTER line to quote. So make sure you look at all of the options, even though it may feel tedious.

7. They are *almost* referring to the right line

This one is also specific to the Command of Evidence questions on the new SAT. The answer choices will look something like this: A. Lines 32-35 "The witch....her prey." Sometimes you might see another answer choice that looks like this: B. Line 32 "The monster...the muffins." In this case the same line number appears in both answer choices, because their respective text share a line, and if you aren't being careful you might pick the wrong one, even though you correctly identified where the answer was. So be super careful you are looking at the right lines.

Below is a short paragraph with an SAT question following it. Your goal is to read the passage and answer the question (duh!), but, more importantly, to determine which wrong answer choices fall into which category above. Once you've done this, look at the analysis below the passage to see if you are right.

Practice Passage

Arvo Part's famous musical composition *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* begins and ends in silence. After three beats of stillness, one musician rings a bell three times with the slow solemnity of a death toll. The sounds of silence and death give way to the pure voice of strings which flows along in their wake. After a sublime, sorrowful opening in A minor, the violin beckons the warmer C major scale into the pulse of the piece. The strings follow one another on a quest for the deepest note, until finally each holds a long, steady low C, then breaks into silence. It is just one of Part's modern compositions in the classical style, and it perfectly reveals the man and his music.

Practice Question

The main purpose of the paragraph is to:

- A. explain the purpose of Part's music.
- B. describe the experience of listening to Part.
- C. explain how Part's musical composition reveals his personal feelings.
- D. demonstrate the importance of silence in music.

Explanation and Analysis

First of all, the answer is B. The paragraph describes the movements of a piece of music, focusing on the listener's subjective experience as he or she listens to the “slow solemnity of a death toll” followed by the “pure voice of strings” and so on.

Now let's talk about what makes each of the other answer choices wrong, and why they are such common wrong answers on the SAT:

A. Yes, the paragraph is about “Part's music,” but go back to the text and look carefully. Is an answer ever given as to its purpose? I would put this answer choice in category 2: “sounds plausible.” You have to go back to the passage and think carefully.

C. There is a phrase at the end of the paragraph that might make this one tempting: “reveals the man and his music.” And there are sensory words throughout that might seem to reflect feelings: “sublime,” “sorrowful” etc. But the paragraph does not say anything about Part’s personal feelings. And it does not say that the feelings the music might evoke in listeners are Part’s personal feelings, so be careful of inferring too much. This is a category 3 error: it is based in the passage but distorts its meaning.

D. Silence is mentioned several times, making this a tempting answer choice. But be careful! This paragraph is specifically about Part’s music, not music overall. This means this wrong answer choice fits into category 5; it’s too general.

When you practice SAT Reading, and review your practice tests, train yourself to look for the patterns in wrong answer choices. Doing so will help you avoid making these mistakes on the real deal.

Reading SAT Passages Faster

Okay, so picture this: it's Saturday morning and you're taking the SAT. You're working on the Reading test, and you've got about 5 minutes left in the section. You think you're golden; you're just about to answer the last question on your last reading passage.

Then, after you bubble in your answer, you realize you're screwed. On the next page, there's another passage. You're not sure how you didn't realize that before, but it's going to be impossible to read it and get any of the answers before time's up, right?

Maybe this isn't such a hypothetical situation for you... we've all faced moments of panic on a test when we realize the hourglass is quickly emptying out. But don't let this paralyze you; instead you can switch gears to a special strategy that can greatly improve your chances of picking up some more points on SAT reading: speed reading.

Speed reading for the SAT

Alright, so I'm not going to tell you you're going to read this post and come out a speed reading master. And I'm not going to recommend any courses, videos, or software that does promise you that, because I have a hard time believing that anybody's going to go from reading 200 words per minute to reading 500 words per minute and keep their level of comprehension.

That being said, there's something to be learned from the common speed reading wisdom. First off, don't reread. Minimize it, at least. Your goal is to get the structure and key information from the passage, not to understand every detail perfectly.

Secondly, try to see larger chunks of text at once. You should be looking at sentences—or at least significant chunks of sentences—not at individual words.

Focus on the right parts of the passage

SAT passages tend to have the main point in the first paragraph, so read that paragraph more carefully. Each paragraph is also going to have one more important idea, and that's more often than not brought up in either the first or last sentence of the paragraph.

So then, read the first paragraph (or two if they're really short) at your normal, comfortable pace. Make sure you really absorb that one.

Keep that pace for the first sentence of the next paragraph, but then speed up. If your comprehension goes down a bit, that's alright. You're on the lookout for the main ideas of each paragraph—not the details.

Once you get to the end of the paragraph, slow down again. Read that last sentence or so more carefully, looking for hints about the main point of that paragraph.

After you finish the paragraph (having only skimmed the middle of it), ask yourself questions. "What did the author want to communicate? How did it relate to other paragraphs?" and note it down.

Use the questions as a guide

Once you have that overview understanding, move right on to the questions. You're going to do a lot of rereading as you answer them, and that's the time to pay attention to detail—especially if the question is asking you about specific lines of text.

That's why you don't want to reread while you're going through the passage the first time. You're going to see the important parts again anyway.

Read a lot of SAT passages before the day of your test

Because the SAT is standardized, there are a lot of similarities between passages. They're on similar topics, are from similar eras, and use pretty common vocabulary and typical SAT grammar. The best way you can get comfortable with that language and those topics is to get exposed.

Stop subvocalization

If you are like many people, you say the words aloud in your head when you are reading. This can seriously hinder your speed. You can actually read a lot faster without the subvocalization, but once it has become a habit, it's very difficult to shake off. Try to quiet down that voice and let your eyes do the work on the page.

Follow these tips and, I dare say, reading becomes much more like a fun game. (Or you can at least tell yourself that.)

How to Stay Focused on SAT Reading Passages

Have you ever found yourself reading the same sentence or paragraph over and over? It doesn't have to be when you're going through something as dry as an SAT reading passage; it might even happen with something you're reading for fun, like a magazine, a book, or a blog post. (Is it happening now?)

Even if we're supposed to be enjoying it or we're trying really hard to pay attention, sometimes our eyes get stuck in what seems like an infinite loop. We look at the words, sure, but they don't do anything. They don't mean anything. So we look at them again, and...huh?...still nothing. We've all gone through whole pages like that, reading on autopilot, then suddenly realizing that we've soaked up a whole lot of nothing in the process.

The danger of this happening on your SAT is huge, and there isn't a second to waste.

Why SAT Reading can be boring

Personally, we think reading passages on the new SAT are far more interesting than they used to be. The test has moved light years away in this sense; on the old test, it sometimes almost felt like the test rewarded students with a high tolerance for tedium more than anything else. Now you might even find that you learn some cool things as you go. While this is a huge improvement, you'll probably still find yourself bored with some topics. The official areas that SAT reading passages draw from are social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, and literary fiction, which is a pretty broad scope. That includes just about everything academic, excluding math. (Sorry: no Kim Kardashian or Bruno Mars.)

So how do you make yourself care? Other than reminding yourself of the importance of the SAT, of course.

How to stay sharp

The best way to stay on task is to focus on taking mental snapshots as you read, or taking brief, purposeful notes if you find it hard to keep track of your mental notes. But that doesn't mean trying to commit everything you read to memory or mindlessly copying down details in the margin. You should be focusing on what the function of each paragraph is as you read through the passage. With the exception of fiction, SAT reading

passages will pretty often follow a predictable pattern of introducing a topic, explaining some context or history, giving some specific details on the topic, and wrapping up with some more general thoughts on the main point. The truth is, that's most non-fiction writing in a nutshell, including your essay.

So you should constantly be asking yourself questions like these:

- What's the main topic going to be?
- Is this background information?
- What information in this paragraph is the most significant?
- Does this paragraph agree with the previous one?
- Will the author return to his point in paragraph 2?
- Does the conclusion have a different message than the introduction?

Constantly asking yourself why the author wrote each paragraph and how it relates to the rest of the passage is the best way to stay involved. If you keep trying to get blueprints for each passage jotted down in the margins, you'll be a lot more stimulated.

Read with a pencil in hand at all times.

Taking Notes on SAT Reading Passages

Throughout this eBook, we've been stressing the importance of pausing and evaluating what you are reading as you go (taking "mental snapshots"). Here's a quick recap of everything you should be noticing as you read:

1. Main idea of the entire passage
2. Main idea of each paragraph
3. Author's/narrator's point of view/tone
4. Author's purpose
5. Structure (how the paragraphs connect; transition words)

Mental Snapshots at Work

After each paragraph → stop and note its main idea.

At the end of the passage → stop and summarize the main idea of the passage as a whole.

As you go → be aware of how the author is approaching his or her topic (point of view and tone). If the author seems to have a particularly strong opinion or angle on the topic, chances are there will be questions on it.

As you go → notice the structure of the passage: how does a paragraph build on a previous one? Is it developing an example? Is it offering a counter-argument? You should include this in your paragraph summaries: e.g. "Beanie Baby example to support prev. paragraph" or "argues against idea that collecting is a fad." If the author's tone is particularly strong, note it at the end, e.g. "he's angry" or "skeptical."

Written Notes

Now, we know that is a lot to keep track of. As we mentioned earlier, if you need to take notes and work towards mental snapshots, that is totally fine. But you may find when it comes time for the test, you are still in the note-taking phase. Or maybe you find that it's difficult for you to keep track of all your mental notes when it comes to the longer Reading passages that dominate the new SAT. It's totally ok to use the strategy of jotting down summary notes on the side. Just be careful that you don't spend all day annotating the passage--the clock

is ticking! A 4-6 word summary next to each paragraph can do the trick, and remember, the only one who needs to understand it is you.

If you commit yourself to taking good notes (either in your head or on paper), you'll never face that terrible moment again when you reach the end of the passage knowing you "read" the entire thing but have no recollection of what you just read. That's called passive reading, and it gets you nowhere on the SAT (or in life).

A Tip if You are Still Finding it Impossible to Focus

Some people have a REALLY hard time keeping focused on their reading. There are so many more important thoughts going on in their heads. If you've tried taking mental snapshots and/or jotting down very brief summary notes (remember, you need to at least try a few times! These are skills that need to be honed before you see them bear fruit!), underlining as you read may help.

If you underline as you read, don't freak out about whether or not you are underlining the right things; **the very act of looking for what you should underline keeps you focused, and that is a WIN.** In a certain sense, it almost doesn't matter what you are marking up: looking for what you should underline, or take a note on, keeps you actively reading. That being said, don't underline EVERYTHING, because then you aren't doing your job. Try focusing on underlining the points where new ideas or people are introduced. This will keep you engaged, and you will get far more out of the passage than you would otherwise.

Practice Passage

Now that you know just about everything there is to know about SAT Reading, try your hand at this sample passage. Answers are at the end with links to video and text explanations for these questions on [Magoosh SAT!](#)

Ethan Frome

He hung back, and she came out alone and paused within a few yards of him. **E1** She was almost the last to leave the hall, and she stood looking uncertainly about her as if wondering why he did not show himself. **E2** Then a man's figure approached, coming so close to her that under their formless wrappings they seemed merged in one dim outline.

"Gentleman friend gone back on you? Say, Matt, that's tough! No, I wouldn't be mean enough to tell the other girls. I ain't as low-down as that." (How Frome hated his cheap banter!) "But look a here, ain't it lucky I got the old man's cutter down there waiting for us?"

Frome heard the girl's voice, gaily incredulous: "What on earth's your father's cutter doin' down there?"

"Why, waiting for me to take a ride. I got the roan colt too. I kinder knew I'd want to take a ride to-night," Eady, in his triumph, tried to put a sentimental note into his bragging voice.

B1/F1 The girl seemed to waver, and Frome saw her twirl the end of her scarf irresolutely about her fingers.

B2/F2 C1 Not for the world would he have made a sign to her, though it seemed to him that his life hung on her next gesture. **C2**

"Hold on a minute while I unhitch the colt," Denis called to her, springing toward the shed.

G1 She stood perfectly still, looking after him, in an attitude of tranquil expectancy torturing to the hidden watcher; Frome noticed that she no longer turned her head from side to side, as though peering through the night for another figure. **G2** She let Denis Eady lead out the horse, climb into the cutter and fling back the bearskin to make room for her at his side. Then, with a swift motion of flight, she turned about and darted up the slope toward the front of the church.

"Good-bye! Hope you'll have a lovely ride!" she called back to him over her shoulder.

A1 Denis laughed, and gave the horse a cut that brought him quickly abreast of her retreating figure. **A2**

"Come along! Get in quick! It's as slippery as thunder on this turn," he cried, leaning over to reach out a hand to her.

She laughed back at him: "Good-night! I'm not getting in."

By this time they had passed beyond Frome's earshot and he could only follow the shadowy pantomime of their silhouettes as they continued to move along the crest of the slope above him. He saw Eady, after a moment, jump from the cutter and go toward the girl with the reins over one arm. The other he tried to slip through hers; but she eluded him nimbly, and Frome's heart, which had swung out over a black void, trembled back to safety.

D1 A moment later he heard the jingle of departing sleigh bells and discerned a figure advancing alone toward the empty expanse of snow before the church. **D2**

In the black shade of the Varnum spruces he caught up with her and she turned with a quick "Oh!"

"Think I'd forgotten you, Matt?" he asked with sheepish glee.

She answered seriously: "I thought maybe you couldn't come back for me."

"Couldn't? What on earth could stop me?"

"I knew Zeena wasn't feeling any too good to-day."

"Oh, she's in bed long ago." He paused, a question struggling in him. "Then you meant to walk home all alone?"

"Oh, I ain't afraid!" she laughed.

They stood together in the gloom of the spruces, an empty world glimmering about them wide and grey under the stars. He brought his question out.

"If you thought I hadn't come, why didn't you ride back with Denis Eady?"

"Why, where were you? How did you know? I never saw you!"

H1 At this point, she dropped all pretense and their laughter ran together like spring rills in a thaw. Ethan had the sense of having done something arch and ingenious. **H2** To prolong the effect he groped for a dazzling phrase, and brought out, in a growl of rapture: "Come along."

Questions

1. Which choice best summarizes the passage?

- A. Two characters are unable to reveal their true feelings for each other.
- B. A rebellious character finds ways to avoid those who approach her.
- C. Two characters make a pretense of not seeing each other until one of them takes the initiative.
- D. A character is able to avoid an unpleasant situation

2. Ethan primarily perceives Denis Eady as

- A. a slight nuisance
- B. a potential obstacle
- C. a worthy rival
- D. an unwitting ally

3. The passage implies that Ethan is most worried that

- A. Mattie will not reciprocate Eady's feelings for her.
- B. Mattie will decide to go with Eady.
- C. he will act too impulsively.
- D. Mattie will have to walk home alone.

4. Which choice provides the best evidence to the previous question?

- A. A1-A2 "Denis laughed . . . retreating figure."
- B. B1-B2 "The girl . . . her fingers."
- C. C1-C2 "Not for . . . next gesture."
- D. D1-D2 "A moment . . . the church."

5. For most of the passage, there is tension between

- A. Ethan and Denis Eady.
- B. Mattie and Ethan.
- C. Ethan's desire to act and his reluctance to reveal himself.
- D. Mattie's desire for a means home and her desire to walk alone.

6. During the course of the passage, Ethan's predominant mood shifts from

- A. apprehension to relief
- B. disconsolation to ecstasy
- C. optimism to pessimism
- D. reflective to boisterous

7. In the last paragraph, Ethan's attitude can best be described as

- A. self-congratulatory
- B. oblivious
- C. insincere
- D. unforthcoming

8. Why does Mattie most likely not allow Denis Eady to whisk her away on his father's cutter?

- A. She is hoping Ethan will approach her
- B. She thinks Dennis Leady is dishonest
- C. She wants to walk by herself
- D. She is conservative by nature

9. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A. E1-E2 "She was . . . show himself."
- B. F1-F2 "The girl . . . her fingers."
- C. G1-G2 "She stood . . . another figure."
- D. H1-H2 "At . . . ingenious."

10. Mattie answers Ethan's question regarding why she did not go with Denis Eady by being

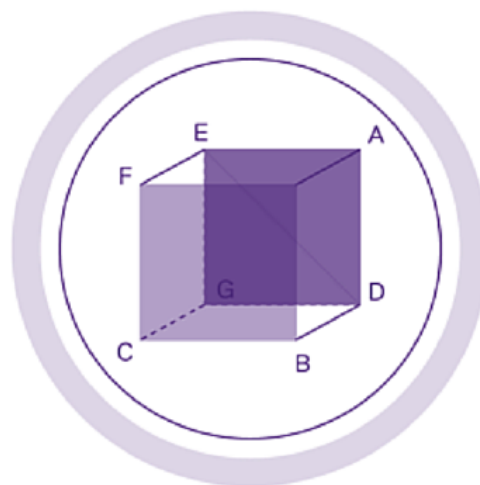
- A. frank.
- B. coy.
- C. hostile.
- D. evasive.

Answers: Click on the links below to see text and video explanations for each question! Or go to [Magoosh SAT](#) and sign up for a free trial for these answer explanations, more questions, and lesson videos!

- 1. [C](#)
- 2. [B](#)
- 3. [B](#)
- 4. [C](#)
- 5. [C](#)
- 6. [A](#)
- 7. [A](#)
- 8. [A](#)
- 9. [C](#)
- 10. [B](#)

For video and text explanations for the above questions (and hundreds more), check out [Magoosh SAT](#)!

SAT Math Test



Intro to SAT Math

What to Know about the Changes in New SAT Math

The SAT has undergone profound changes: four answer choices have replaced five, vocabulary exercises have been banished, the essay nearly so (it's optional now), and the sections are much longer. Amidst all this chatter, however, talk about how the math section has changed has been relatively muted.

While some of the changes to the math section are not as noticeable as the absence of words like *platitudinous*, they are equally profound. So if you are used to the old test format, then you might be interested in the following changes:

1) The SAT has become less of a logic game/IQ test and more of a direct measure of how well you remember the math you learned in school.

Going over math questions on the old SAT in class, I'd usually get a couple of "a-has" from my students (so that's what it was asking for!) The test was wrapping up relatively straightforward math with tricky wording and confusing diagrams. As soon as you saw what the test was asking for or that one little "trick" needed to solve the question, the test became easy.

With the new SAT if you don't remember a specific concept, you are likely to get the problem wrong. Know the concept and things will fall into place. And instead of having questions that are confusingly worded, now you'll have questions that simply have lots of words to sift through.

2) There will be more higher-level math

Granted, there won't be a whole lot of trigonometry but compared to the zero trig on the old test, the couple of trig questions you'll see test day is something you'll need to prepare for.

There will also be a lot of higher-level polynomials and you will have to face off against a couple of questions that can only be solved by using the quadratic formula (yes, you'll need to memorize this).

3) There will be more--and longer--word problems

While the SAT was never short on word problems, the test writers have really stepped it up with the latest test, including word problems as long as twelve lines. In one section, there were eleven problems in a row that had at least 5 lines. Essentially you might be doing more reading than “math-ing”. But if you pay attention to the underlying math to a question you’ll be able to eliminate a lot of unnecessary words.

4) One section will prohibit the use of a calculator

Back when I was young, the SAT didn’t allow a calculator on any part of the test. Times changed and the SAT cared more about your ability to understand mathematical concepts than your ability to do arithmetic. Well, apparently times have changed back again—somewhat. You will only be allowed to use a calculator on one of the two math sections. In the calculator math section, you might be expected to do stuff like figure out the exact figure for a sum of money compounded semiannually for four years (the set up would look something like this: $100(1.025)^8$ —good luck doing that in your head!).

The no-calculator section will thankfully offer up tamer specimens for mental or pen-and-paper math. Still, it might be a good idea to start doing mental math drills or practicing long division on paper. I know, that might sound like a drag—but that’s the way the test is changing. My inner teacher, however, is saying that knowing how to crunch basic numbers is an essential facet of life, even with a smartphone constantly at your fingertips. So don’t tell yourself you are learning a worthless skill. Or, if you can’t convince yourself otherwise, know that you’ll still have to be on your “number game” come test day.

One last thing: the no-calculator section is always the third section of the test, which is the shorter of the two math sections (it contains 20 questions and has a time limit of 25 minutes).

SAT Math Concept and Section Breakdown

Unlike the previous test in which the concepts varied over tests, the New SAT is very specific about exactly the types of questions that you’ll see test day. While this knowledge might seem academic (Why should I care? Don’t I just have to get the question right?), knowing how often a certain concept pops up will help you prioritize your prep time.

Trigonometry, one of the concepts that everybody is worried about, falls under a section called Additional Topics in Math. Since there are a few other question types that fall under Additional Topics, you'll likely seeing a grand total of two trigonometry questions. So before you knock yourself out over SOHCAHTOA and the unit circle, back away from the 600-page trig book and take a deep breath--there are far better ways to spend your prep time.

Basic facts about the math section

Time Allotted: 80 minutes

Total Questions: 58

Calculator portion: 38 questions, 55 minutes (about 1:30 minutes per question)

No-Calculator portion: 20 questions, 25 minutes (1:15 minutes per question)

Question types:

Multiple-choice (always with four options): **45 questions**

Student-produced response (fancy speak for "what's the answer, buddy?"): **13 questions**

Concept	# of questions	Percent of the test
Heart of Algebra	19	33%
Problem Solving and Data Analysis	17	29%
Passport to Advanced Math	16	28%
Additional Topics in Math	6	10%

Here is a high-level breakdown of each concept:

Heart of Algebra: this is your meat-and-potatoes algebra—the basic stuff. No exponents next to your 'x's. This is what we call linear equations. $4x + 1 = 7$. Of course, the test won't ask you to solve basic equations like that. Instead, it'll give you really long word problems in which the solutions amounts to something like $3n - 3 = 12$. And assuming that's the right equation, all you'll have to do is solve for 'n'.

Problem Solving and Data Analysis: This is basically the graph and table section: bar charts, pie graphs, tedious tables with a bunch of figures for you to sort through. There will also be a fair number of word problems that ask anything from ratios and percents to median and mode.

Passport to Advanced Math: This is the part most are dreading. High-order polynomials, but often nothing more than the $ax^2 + bx + c$ variety, will often be buried under a mass of verbiage, as in a 12-line word problem that you must solving using a polynomial. Often, you'll have to find creative ways to balance the equation and solve for 'x'.

Additional Topics: This is the frustratingly vague section, in which all the remainders got throw in. In no particular order, they are geometry, coordinate geometry, and trigonometry.

In the following pages, I will go over each section in detail. So if you are questioning whether algebra really has a heart, you'll get the full scoop below.

Heart of Algebra

Important stuff first: 27 of the 58 questions, or nearly half of the questions will be “Heart of Algebra” questions. When devising the new format of the test, the College Board seems to have come up with more than a categorization of concepts. Utilitarian tags, such as “algebra fundamentals”, have been invested with a poetic flair. Now we have “Heart of Algebra” (I can’t but help think of a plump cardioid next to an unknown variable). But don’t be thrown off for even a beat: “Heart of Algebra” simply means linear algebra.

What exactly is linear algebra, you ask? Well, anything that has an algebraic equation in which none of the powers next to a variable is higher than 1.

$$3x + 5 = 2$$

$$y + 5 < -1$$

This might look pretty easy, and indeed the actual computation underpinning the math is straightforward. However, do not think the SAT is going to give you equations like the ones above and ask you to solve for the variable. Rather, and this is where the New SAT is trying to differentiate itself from the old test, the math will be wrapped up in long, real-life world problems that you’ll have to unwrap, i.e. read several times over to figure out what is going on.

Here is an actual example from the College Board, found in the Official SAT Study Guide:

In 2014, County X had 783 miles of paved roads. Starting 2015, the county has been building 8 miles of new paved roads each year. At this rate, if n is the number of years after 2014, which of the following functions f gives the number of miles of paved road there will be in County X? (Assume that no paved roads go out of service.)

The answer, C) $f(n) = 783 + 8n$ doesn’t even ask you to solve an equation. Rather, you have to choose the equation that accurately models the information in the text. And that’s really the essence of the test:

- 1) Plenty of text to sort through
- 2) Understanding of the concept hidden in the text
- 3) Real life scenarios where you often have to match a variable to a situation in the word problem
- 4) Little to no computation or solving for variables (at least in word problems)

How does knowing this affect your prep? Well, don't think that Heart of Algebra means you have to do algebra drills all day long. Your time is best spent doing actual SAT word problems, or word problems that capture all of the four elements listed above. So, you'll want to learn to think in terms of how equations can explain real-life scenarios. In other words, can you translate the information into a mathematical equation?

Before we dive into some actual practice questions, it'll be a good idea to review some algebra basics.

Combining like terms

In order to combine two or more terms, every term must have the same variable and the same power next to that variable. By "combining", I mean adding or subtracting terms.

Here is an example of terms that cannot be combined:

$$\begin{aligned}x^2 + x \\ 2y + x \\ m + n + n^3 + p\end{aligned}$$

Here is an example of terms that can be combined (and I've gone ahead and done just that!)

Similar variables:

$$\begin{aligned}4a + 5b + 3b + 2a &= 6a + 7b \\ x + 2y + 3z + 4y &= x + 6y + 3z\end{aligned}$$

Similar exponents (will need to know for Passport to Advanced Math):

$$\begin{aligned}x^2 + 4x^2 &= 5x^2 \\ x^4 + 2x^3 + 3x^4 + 5x^3 &= 4x^4 + 7x^3\end{aligned}$$

Solving equations

#1 – Isolate the variable

$$2x - 5 = 7$$

In this equation, we want to make sure x is by itself. To do this, we want to make sure all the numbers are on one side of the equal side and the variable, assuming there is one variable, is on the other side of the equal side.

#2 - What you can do to one side of the equation, you have to do to the other side.

We want to make sure that the equation always remains the same. Therefore, we can't add or subtract something to one side of the equation without doing the same thing to the other side of the equation. Since we want to get rid of the number on the left hand side, or at least "move" it to the other side, we have to add 5 to both sides, giving us the following:

$$2x - 5 + 5 = 7 + 5$$

$$2x = 12$$

Now we divide both sides by 2 so that we can "isolate" the x:

$$2x/2 = 12/2$$

$$x = 6$$

Here now are a few questions that capture the range of word problems that you can expect from the Heart of Algebra section: linear equations, systems of linear equations, and linear functions.

Practice Questions

1. Steve and Brian are taking a cross-country road trip. They have agreed to split the cost of gas evenly. The price of gas is \$4 per gallon. If the minivan, when traveling at a constant rate of 60 mph, is able to travel x miles on one gallon, which of the following expressions represents the dollar amount that each pays for a trip covering 150 miles in which the minivan is traveling at a constant rate of 60 mph?

- A) $2(150/x)$
- B) $4(x/150)$
- C) $8(150/x)$
- D) $1(x/150)$

Explanation

The key to getting this question quickly is to figure out how many gallons it will take the minivan to travel 150 miles. Is it $(x/150)$ or $(150/x)$? You can do a little thought experiment. Imagine that it travels 10 miles on one gallon. How many gallons would it need to travel 150 miles? $150/10 = 15$. Therefore, we want $(150/x)$, or either answer choice A) or C). Notice that the two split the cost of gas, which is \$4 per gallon. Therefore, it's like each is paying \$2 per gallon, or answer A).

If you are struggling to get that, a good idea is to plug in a number for 'x' and backsolve. So if we use $x = 10$, we get $150/10 = 15$ gallons at \$4, which equals \$60. The two split that, meaning that each pay \$30. Only A) equals 30.

2.

In the systems of equations below, what is the value of $x - y$?

$$2x - 1 = 4(y + 2)$$

$$x + 4y = 6$$

A) $1/4$

B) $19/4$

C) $21/4$

D) 5

Explanation

We want to make sure, when solving for x and y in an equation that has two variables, that x and y are on the same side of the equation. Then, we multiply either the top or the bottom by a number that will allow us to isolate for either 'x' or 'y'. We then solve for that variable and plug that value back into one of the two equations to find the value of the second variable.

$$2x - 1 = 4y + 8$$

This can be simplified to

$$2x - 4y = 9$$

Adding the second equation underneath we get:

$$2x - 4y = 9$$

$$x + 4y = 6$$

Adding the two equations vertically, we get

$$3x + 15$$

$$x = 5$$

Plugging 'x' back in

$$5 + 4y = 6$$

$$4y = 1$$

$$y = 1/4$$

$x + y = 21/4$, which is (C).

3. Which of the following lines is not perpendicular to the line with equation $2x + 5y = -11$?

A) $5y = 2x + 3/2$

B) $y = -5/2x + 6$

C) $10y - 5 = 4x$

D) $-5y = -2x - 4$

Explanation

Coordinate geometry, when it deals with a linear equation like the one above, is categorized as Heart of Algebra. In this question, we need to find a line that is not perpendicular to $2x + 5y = -11$. Perpendicularity is defined as the negative reciprocal of the slope. The slope of that line, once we move things into the $y = mx + b$ form, is

$$2x + 5y = -11$$

$$2x = -5y - 11$$

$$x = -5/2y - 11$$

Therefore the slope is $-5/2$. The negative reciprocal, or a line that is perpendicular, would have a slope of $2/5$. All the answer choices have a slope of $2/5$ except answer choice B), which has a slope of $-5/2$. Therefore, answer B).

Conclusion

Most “Heart of Algebra” questions that you see on the first math section (this will always be section 3 and will always contain 20 questions) will be more likely to give you an equation that you solve. The second math section (this will always be section 4 and will always contain 38 questions) will contain word problems like the one I referenced from the College Board above. The reason for this, or so my theory goes, is that section 3 is the no calculator section. Solving simple algebraic equations requires very little arithmetic. Sure, you might have to subtract seven from 22. But if doing so without a calculator causes you to break out in a hot sweat, you might want to focus more on mental math than algebra.

The main point here is that much of what is challenging about “Heart of Algebra” is the word problems. So practice doing these as much as possible. They are long and therefore require lots of concentration, something that is likely to break down by the time you get to the last section, which, yep, is the one that has all the long word problems.

Passport to Advanced Math

The SAT has given us this whimsical (and slightly intimidating) title. The good news is that it is actually not advanced math but the skills that underpin some of the more advanced stuff you’ll be doing in pre-calculus calculus. In this light, the name passport doesn’t seem as fanciful, since in order to travel in the land of advanced math, you’ll need a “passport” showing that you have the fundamentals down.

So what exactly are these skills required to approach advanced math? Well, the new SAT wants you to be able to deal not just with linear equations, as you do in the Heart of Algebra section, but polynomials. However, we are talking about not your basic quadratic, no power higher than 2, but polynomials in which the powers can be very high, as in the following:

$$256t^{16} + 81s^{27}$$

$$5x^4 + 6x^3 - 2cx^2 + x + 1$$

That doesn’t mean quadratics will be absent. But most will not be your garden variety $x^2 - 2x + 1$ kind but will require you to use the quadratic formula (yes, you’ll have to memorize that).

Other topics include the graphs of complex polynomials. The point of the test, though, isn’t to throw ridiculously complex equations at you; it wants to test your ability to recognize simple patterns in all that complexity. In other words, can you navigate around all the noise to find a relatively straightforward approach to solving the question?

For example, look at the following question:

Which of the following is equivalent to $9a^8 - 4a^4$?

- A. $a^4(9a^4 - 4a)$
- B. $(3a^4 - 2a^4)(3a^4 + 2a^4)$
- C. $(3a^4 - 2a^2)(3a^4 + 2a^2)$
- D. $a^4(3a - 2)(3a + 2)$

The key here is noticing that the form $(x - y)(x + y)$, or $x^2 - y^2$ can be applied to the original equation, since both '9' and '4' are perfect squares and the exponents are even integers, giving us (C).

Here are a few more practice questions to give you an idea of what to expect.

1.

$$x + 4 = \sqrt{x + 6}$$

What is the solution set for the above equation?

- A) {-2}
- B) {-2, -5}
- C) {-5}
- D) No solutions.

Explanation

To solve for 'x' we want to remove the square root sign. To do so, we have to square both sides, giving us:

$$x^2 + 8x + 16 = x + 6$$

Balancing the equation gives us:

$$x^2 + 7x + 10$$

$$(x + 5)(x + 2)$$

$$x = -5 \text{ and } -2$$

But wait!

This seems like a pretty straightforward question, but here's the twist: whenever you have a square root sign over the variable one side of the equation, watch out for the quantity under the variable equaling a negative when you plug the value back in. The reason is if you get a negative number underneath the square root sign, you do not have a valid solution.

Another possibility in which one of the 'x's you solve for is not valid is if one side of the equation is a square root sign and the other side of the equation—the one that does not have a square root sign—is a negative number. The reason is that the square root of a negative number will never equal a negative number. This is what is going on here, since when you plug in $x = -5$ into the original equation you end up getting the following:

$$-1 = \sqrt{-1}$$

This is not valid, so therefore -5 is not an answer. Only -2 is, giving us A).

2.

If $g(x) = x + 5$ and $f(x) = 2g(x) - 1$, what is $f(3)$?

Student-Produced Response: _____

Explanation

Functions—or the application of a certain “rule”—falls under Passport to Advanced math. These question types can take on many different varieties. I'd recommend practicing these if you are not comfortable with them. For this question, when you see $f(3)$ that translates loosely to the following: where you see 'x' on the right side of the equals sign, place a '3'. In this case, the 'x' is inside the 'g'. So you end up getting:

$$f(3) = 2g(3) - 1$$

Since $g(x) = x + 5$, where you see 'x', place a 3 $\rightarrow g(3) = 3 + 5 = 8$.

Knowing that $g(3) = 8$, we go back to the original equation:

$$f(x) = 2g(3) - 1 =$$

$$f(x) = 2(8) - 1 = 15, \text{ which is the answer.}$$

Coordinate Geometry and Passport to Advanced Math

Coordinate geometry, or more colloquially “graphing”, is another area which is filed under Passport to Advanced math, as long—and here's the important part—the equation is a polynomial. Most of the times, this will mean a parabola. Sometimes, though, you'll get a graph of some monstrous polynomial like $y^5 + 3y^4 - 2y^2 + 1$.

The good news is you'll probably only have to decipher the graph to figure out how many times it crosses through the x-axis or something else relatively straightforward.

It's really the parabola that is going to show up more often. What you need to know is that parabolas are symmetrical, meaning that each side occupies the same area on both sides of either the y-axis or x-axis. The equation of a parabola can be defined as $f(x) = ax^2 + bx + c$, where a, b, and c are constants (meaning they are some fixed number). Since a will often equal 1, it helps knowing good-old fashioned FOIL, as the following question shows.

What is the sum of x-intercepts of the equation $f(x) = x^2 - 6x + 8$ in the xy-plane?

Student-Produced Response: _____

Explanation:

Really all we are doing here is old-fashioned FOIL so that can find out the solutions for x. Those solutions are the same as an x-intercept, since when you plug either value for x back into the equation, $f(x)$, or the y-coordinate, will equal 0.

$$\begin{aligned} x^2 - 6x + 8 \\ (x - 4)(x - 2) \\ x = 4 \text{ and } x = 2 \end{aligned}$$

The sum equals 6.

Sometimes, the test might ask you to find something that requires a little more knowledge of parabolas. One useful form is $y = (x - h)^2 + k$, where a, h, and k are constants and (h, k) is the vertex of the parabola.

Since a polynomial usually isn't in that form, you'll often have to get it there by "completing the square" as we'll see in the next problem:

Which of the following is an equivalent form of the equation in the xy-plane, from which the coordinates of the vertex V can be identified as constants in the equation?

- A) $f(x) = (x - 1)^2 - 25$
- B) $f(x) = (x - 6)(x + 2)$
- C) $f(x) = (x + 6)(x - 2)$

$$D) f(x) = x(x - 2) - 24$$

Explanation

It helps to know the following equation for a parabola: $(x - h)^2 + k$, where (h, k) is the vertex.

Getting the equation into the form above will help us determine the vertex. First, we need to complete the square, because $x^2 - 2x - 24$ does not lend itself to the $(x - h)^2$ format.

Notice how the two '1's cancel each other, thereby leaving us with the original equation. Why did we even put the '1s' in the first place? Well $x^2 - 2x + 1$ becomes $(x - 1)^2$. This is called completing the square, which I did by dividing the quantity that has the 'x' in it (in this case $2x$) by '2' and squaring it. Whatever number results (in this case positive '1'), I take the negative value of it and stick it at the end of the equation (in this case the '-1'). So now I have:

$$(x - 1)^2 - 25$$

Therefore, h is equal to 1 and k is equal to -25. So the vertex (1, -25). This question did have us write the vertex out, but asked for the way we could best identify it. That's the equation directly above.

Conclusion to Passport to Advanced Math

Passport to Advanced Math only includes 16 of the 58 questions spread out over the two math sections.

However, if you're already comfortable with the other math (which many are), you should spend more time in this area. The reason is you are likely to get very flustered by this question types test day, and this can affect your performance on easier question types.

To get a sense of all the different type of concepts that pop up in the Passport to Advanced Math section, check out the Official Study Guide. Take the practice tests to see the 16 questions per test. If you miss a question because of conceptual misunderstanding, you'll want to go back to pages 263-276.

Problem Solving and Data Analysis

Covering 29% of the concepts on the test, this section is the second most common on the test, after Heart of Algebra. Many of these questions will be familiar to you, especially the ones from ratio and proportion. What I've done here is to provide a few practice problems instead of spending much time with concept review. The latter part, Data and Statistics, covers concepts that are new to the SAT. I'll spend a little bit more time covering these concepts.

This is a part of the New SAT that has definitely been fleshed out since the old SAT. Keeping in line with real world scenarios, many problems will ask you to infer information based on a study with any number of participants. This is actually something that the SAT has never done before (we'll get to this question type when we get to item #3 above) and is a welcome change, given that you'll be learning lots about cause and effect and inferential statistics in college.

Ratio, Proportion, Units, and Percentage

But for now, let's talk about the first part: Ratio, Proportion, Units, and Percentage.

This question type shouldn't come as a surprise since it has probably been part of your math courses for the last five years (yep, you most likely went over this stuff, in some form, all the way back in early middle school). I'll start with ratios.

Ratios

A good way to think of ratios is apples and oranges. Say I have two oranges and three apples, the ratio of oranges to apples is 2:3. Seems straightforward. What if I have 4 oranges and 6 apples? If you answered 4:6,

that is not quite correct. You have to think of the ratio the way you would a fraction—in lowest terms. Both 4 and 6 can be divided by ‘2’, giving you 2:3.

This highlights an important conceptual idea: **ratio is not about total number**. It is about the number of one thing to the number of another thing, reduced so that the ratio is expressed as two prime numbers.

Let’s try a few practice questions.

1. Tom is selling apples and oranges. The ratio of apples to oranges in his cart is 3:2. If he has 12 oranges, how many apples does he have?

- (A) 2 (B) 3 (C) 8 (D) 18 (E) 30

Solution:

Again, a ratio is basically a fraction that has been reduced as much as possible. In this problem the ratio 3:2, can be represented as $\frac{3}{2}$. One way to solve this problem is to set up a simple equation:

$$\frac{3}{2} = \frac{x}{12}$$

Notice I placed the 12, the number of oranges, in the denominator. We have to make sure that the number 12 corresponds to 2, the oranges in the ratio. Solving for x, we get 18 (D).

An even quicker way is to notice that we have (x6) the oranges (from 2 we go to 12) so we just have to (x6) the apples in the ratio: $3 \times 6 = 18$.

Now’s let’s try the same question but with a spin:

2. Tom is selling apples and oranges. The ratio of apples to oranges in his cart is 3:2. If he has a total of 30 fruits, how many apples does he have?

- (A) 2 (B) 3 (C) 12 (D) 18 (E) 30

Solution:

This question, while essentially the same, is the one that gives students a lot more trouble. The problem is combining two concepts: ratio and total. To do so simply add the ratios. We have 3:2 so the total is 5.

One way to solve the problem is to set up the table. Tables are great both from a teacher's and beginner's standpoint. In this case, I get to show you a nice, tidy way of solving the problem and you have an easy way both to conceptualize and solve the problem.

However, once you become used to tables, in the interest of time, learn to solve a ratio without one (I'll show you how to do so in a second!).

	<u>Apples</u>	<u>Oranges</u>	<u>Total</u>
Ratio	3	2	5
M(x)			
Actual	?	?	30

What do we multiply the total ratio by to get the actual total? (x6).

So in the middle row in the total column we can place a 6.

	<u>Apples</u>	<u>Oranges</u>	<u>Total</u>
Ratio	3	2	5
M(x)	6	6	6
Actual	18	12	30

Notice the (M)x, which stands for multiply (you can dispense with the M, I just didn't want anyone thinking there is this random variable x floating around).

Now we multiply the apples and oranges by 6 to get 18 and 12, respectively.

Remember the faster way I mentioned?

- Add the ratio
- Figure out the x6
- Multiply 3 x 6

The answer is 18 (D). Also remember not to mix up apples and oranges!

One last thing about ratios. Let's say you have a ratio of 1:2. This is **not** the same thing as $\frac{1}{2}$. The bottom number in a fraction is always the total. The total of a ratio is always the parts of a ratio added together. In this case, 1:2 is $1 + 2 = 3$. So if I have 1 apple to two oranges, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the fruit are apples and $\frac{2}{3}$ are oranges.

If you have more than two ratios, make sure to add up all of the ratios. For instance, if the ratio of blue marbles to red marbles to green marbles is 2 : 5 : 7, blue marbles account for $\frac{2}{14}$ of the total ($2 + 5 + 7 = 14$).

You think you got that? Well, here's a final question on ratios:

Easy

1. The ratio of shirts to shorts to pairs of shoes in Kevin's closet is 5 : 2 : 3. If Kevin owns 10 shirts, how many pairs of shoes does he have to give away so that he ends up having the same number of shorts as he does pairs of shoes?

- A) 1
- B) 2
- C) 4
- D) 5

Explanation

Okay, this question is slightly evil, since shorts sounds like shirts and it is easy to get the two mixed up when you are reading fast. So always pay attention, even on easier questions!

Since we know that Kevin has 10 shirts, and that 10 therefore corresponds to the number '5' in the ratio, that the actual number of shorts, shirts, etc. he owns is double the number in the ratio. Thus, he owns four shirts and six pairs of shoes. So he'll have to give away two pairs of shoes so that he'll have the same number of shoes as he does shirts. Answer: (B).

Proportions

On some questions, you'll have to figure out the proportion between two different units.

Easy question

Niles takes an interstate road trip over the course of two days. If he covers 610 miles in nine hours the first day and 300 miles in four hours on the second day, what is his average speed per hour?

- A) 55 miles per hour
- B) 65 miles per hour
- C) 70 miles per hour
- D) 75 miles per hour

Explanation

To figure out the average speed of the entire trip, divide the total distance by the total number of hours. The handy equation $D = rt$, where D is total distance, r is rate, and t is time, will make this easier.

$$D = 910, r = ?, t = 9 + 4 = 13 \text{ hours.}$$

$$910 = 13r, r = 70, \text{ answer (C).}$$

Difficult question

A cartographer owns a square map in which one inch corresponds to $\frac{7}{3}$ of a mile. What is the area of the map in square inches if the map covers a territory of 49 square miles?

Student Produced Response: _____

Explanation

We know that $\frac{7}{3}$ of mile = one inch.

We also know that the area is 49 square miles, meaning that each side = 7: $\sqrt{49} = 7$). To find how many inches correspond to 7 miles, we set up the following equation:

$$7 = \frac{7}{3}x, x = 3$$

Here is the little twist that you want to watch out for. The question is asking for square miles in inches, so we have to take 3^2 , which equals 9.

Another possible question type, and one that most are familiar with and probably dread, is the percent question.

To reduce something by a certain percentage, either turn that percent into a ratio over 100 or convert the percent into a decimal by moving the point back two spaces. For example, 40% equals both $\frac{40}{100}$ and .40.

For the following percents, convert each to a fraction and a decimal:

$$5\% =$$

$$26\% =$$

$$37.5\% =$$

$$125\% =$$

(Answers at the end of the section.)

Now here are two practice questions.

Medium

1. There are 200,000 voters in district X, 60% of whom voted in the 2008 state election. In 2010 state election, the number of voters in district X increased by 20% but if only 55% voted in this election, how many total votes were cast in the 2010 state election, assuming that no voter can cast more than one vote?

- A) 12,000
- B) 120,000
- C) 132,000
- D) 176,000

Difficult

2. In a popular department store, a designer coat is discounted 20% off of the original price. After not selling for three months, the coat is further marked down another 20%. If the same coat sells online for 40% lower than the original department store price, how much percent less would somebody pay if they were to buy the coat directly online than if they were to buy the coat after it has been discounted twice at the department store?

- A) 4%
- B) 6.25%
- C) 16%
- D) 36%

Explanations:

1. The # of voters who voted in 2008 election is equal to $200,000 \times 60 = 120,000$

In 2010, the number of overall voters increased by 20%, so 20% of 200,000 is 40,000 giving us 240,000 total voters.

55% of 240,000 gives us 132,000. Answer (C).

2. When you are not given a specific value for a percent problem, use 100 since it is easiest to increase or decrease in terms of %.

1st discount: 20% off of 100 = 80.

2nd discount: 20% off of 80 = 64.

Online, the coat sells for 40% off of the original department store price, which we assumed is 100

Online discount: 40% of 100 = 60.

This is the tricky part. We are not comparing the price difference (which would be 4 dollars) but how much percent less 60 (online price) is than 64 (department store sale price).

Percent difference: $(64 - 60)/64 = 1/16 = 6.25\%$. Answer B).

Fraction conversion exercises answers

1) .05, 5/100 or 1/20 (you don't always have to reduce for quick calculations)

2) .26, 26/100 or 13/50

3) .375, 375/1000 or 5/8

4) 1.25, 5/4

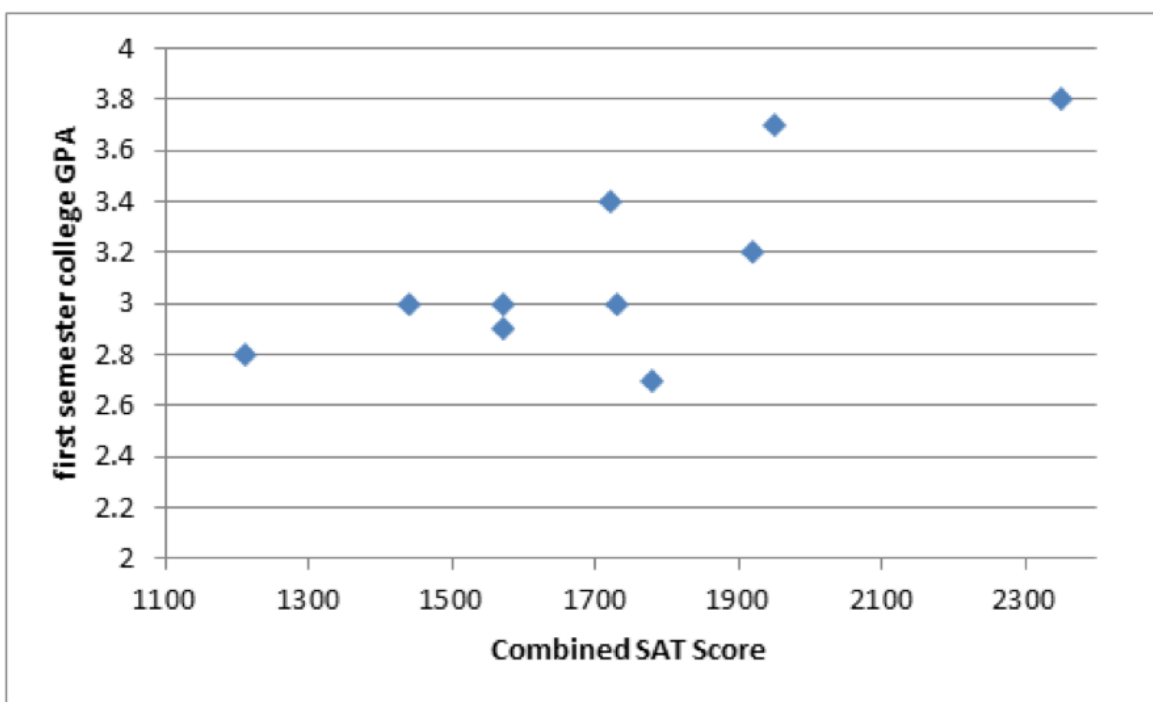
Graphs, Tables, and Scatterplots

I'm assuming that most know about bar graphs and pie charts. While you might see a few of those, I'm going to spend time on graphs and tables that aren't as familiar. The first is called the scatterplot.

Scatterplots

Understanding scatterplots is important on the new SAT since you'll likely see such a question. The thing is if you have no idea what a scatterplot is you'll most likely answer the question. However, just a little exposure to this seemingly daunting concept will show you that it is not too difficult to understand.

So what's a scatterplot? Well, think of it this way. When each data point (each person, each car, each company, etc.) gives you a value for two different variables, then you can graph each data point on a scatterplot. Here's an example. Suppose we survey ten students who came from the same high school to the same college. We ask each student for their total SAT score (M + CR + W) and their GPA in the first semester of their freshman year in college. Each student appears below as a single dot, the location of which shows that student's SAT score and first semester GPA.



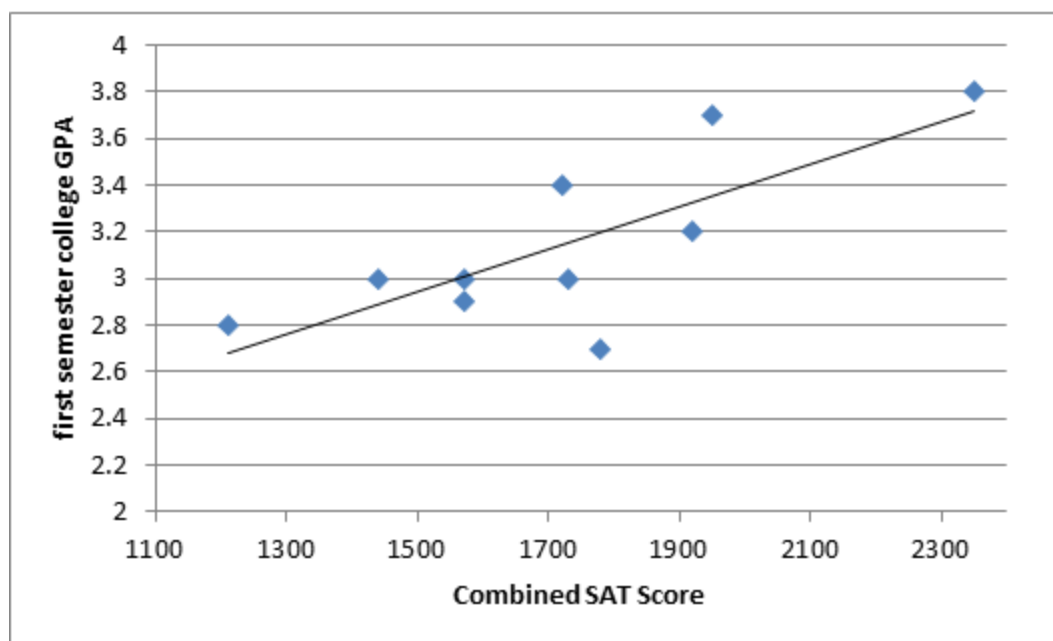
As one would expect, there's a general "upward" trend: students with higher SAT scores tended to perform better in their freshman year of college. At the same time, there's some chance variation: right in the middle, three students all scored in the 1700's on their SATs but, for whatever reasons, had different results in the first semester of their freshman year.

A Best Fit Line

We see there's a general "upward" pattern to this scatterplot. Suppose we wanted to make a *prediction* based on that pattern. For example, a current high school senior in this high school, planning to attend this same college, would know her SAT score and might be curious about her predicted GPA in her upcoming freshman year of college.

We formalize this pattern by drawing what is sometimes called a "best fit" line. Excel calls this a "trendline." The official name in Statistics is the Least-Squares Regression Line, but you don't need to know that. Nor do you need to understand the mathematical details of why this line, as opposed to any other possible line, is in fact the "best fit."

Here's the same graph with a best fit line:



The best fit line abstracts a common pattern from the individual data points. The best fit line represents the expected relationship: if we know a new student's SAT score, then, on average, what would we predict for that student's first semester college GPA? One student appears almost exactly on the best fit line (sometimes a data

point or two will be on the trendline, and sometimes none will be); in this case, we can say that student's GPA is more or less what we would expect from her SAT score. There are five dots clearly above the best fit line: these five students had higher GPAs than what we would have predicted from their SAT scores. Four dots are below the line: those four students had first semester GPAs lower than what we would expect, given their SAT score. Notice that questions of the form "how many individuals had a higher/lower (y-value) than what we would expect from their (x-value)?" are simply asking you to count dots above or below the best fit line.

We also need to make a distinction between people or data used to generate the line, and the new data points predicted by the line. In this case, we used 10 people to generate the best fit line. We have no predictions to make about those 10 people: both their SAT scores and first semester GPAs are known, now things of the past. If we are asked for the now-completed first semester GPA of the person who had a 1780 SAT score, we look for that dot: that's the low dot in the middle of the graph, with a value of 2.7 for the GPA (too much first semester partying for that person?) A very different question is: suppose a new person, a high school senior, has a 1780 SAT score and would like to predict her first semester college GPA. For a prediction, we are looking not at any individual point but at the line: the line has a y-coordinate of about 3.2 there, so, on average, we would predict GPA of about 3.2 for this current high school senior.

The past are the dots, the future is the line.

A table is simply an arrangement of information in grid form. But if you aren't used to this set up you might want to practice a few such questions.

Time (hours)	Number of bacteria A	Number of bacteria B
0	9×10^4	9×10^5
1	4.5×10^6	8.1×10^6
2	2.25×10^n	7.29×10^t
3	?	?

The New SAT is fond about things growing, whether bacteria (as in this problem) or bison in a national forest. A table is a perfect way to represent this information. As you can see below there are two questions following the table. The New SAT will often have a set of two questions that both refer to the same chart or table, as with the next two questions.

Very Difficult

1. Which of the following conclusions can be drawn based on the information above?

- A) $t > n$
- B) $t = n$
- C) After three hours, the number of bacteria A will be less than that of bacteria B.
- D) The number of bacteria A will surpass the number of bacteria B closer to the two-hour mark than the three-hour mark.

Very Difficult

2. Which of the following models the number of bacteria A, $N(t)$, after t hours?

- A) $N(t) = 90,000 + 10^{t+2}$
- B) $N(t) = 90,000 + 50t$
- C) $N(t) = 90,000(50t)$
- D) $N(t) = 90,000 (50)^t$

Explanations:

1. When analyzing the number of bacteria of A notice how the exponent increases by 2 and the number that is multiplied to the base 10 is halved. So basically, $\frac{1}{2} \times 10^2 = 50$. Therefore, $n = 8$ and $t = 7$. So we can eliminate A) and B). At the three hour mark, bacteria A will be 10^8 multiplied by something while bacteria B will only be 10^7 multiplied by something so C) is out. That leaves us with D). Notice that the number of bacteria A surpasses the number of B before 2 hours. Therefore, D) has to be correct.

2. From the explanation for #1, we know that bacteria A increases by $\times 50$ after each hour. That can be represented by 50^t . If the original is 90,000 that gives us D).

Data and Statistics

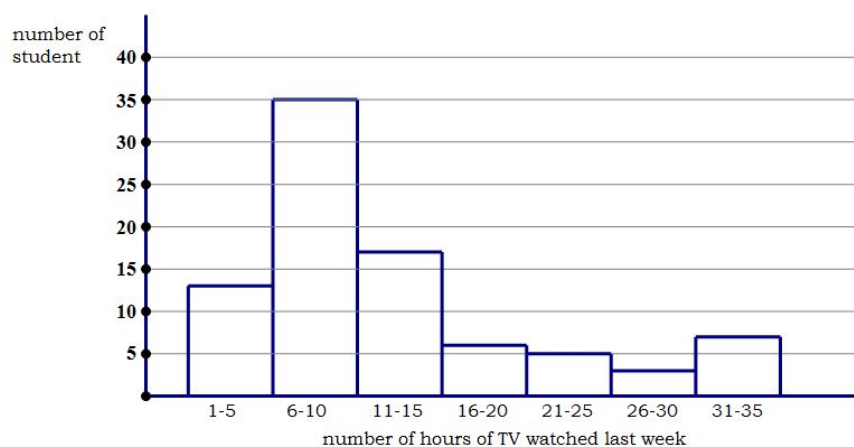
Histograms

The following is an example of a histogram. Let's first start off with a practice problem to see if you can infer what a histogram is all about. If you struggle, read the concepts behind the histogram and then take another stab at the problem.

Which of the following is true regarding the histogram below?

- A) The mean number of hours of TV watched last week is greater than the median number of hours of TV watched last week.
- B) The median number of hours of TV watched last week is greater than the mean number of hours of TV watched last week.
- C) The number of students who watched more than 30 hours of television is greater than the number of students who watched less than 5 hours of TV.
- D) The mean number of TV watched last week is greater than 20 hours.

In a survey, 86 high school students were randomly selected and asked how many hours of television they had watched in the previous week. The histogram below displays their answers.



Histograms are not simple bar or column charts. A histogram shows the distribution of a single quantitative variable. Here, we ask each high school student, “How many hours of TV did you watch last week?”, and each high school student gives us a numerical answer. After interviewing 86 students, we have a list of 86 numbers. The histogram is a way to display visually the distribution of those 86 numbers.

The histogram “chunks” the values into sections that occupy equal ranges of the variable, and it tells how many numbers on the list fall into that particular chunk. For example, the left-most column on this chart has a height of 13: this means, of the 86 students surveyed, 13 of them gave a numerical response somewhere from 1 hr to 5 hrs. Similarly, each bar tells us how many responses were in that particular range of hours of TV watched.

The median

The median is the middle of the list. Here, there is an even number of entries on the list, so the median would be the average of the two middle terms — the average of the 43rd and 44th numbers on the list. We can tell that the first column accounts for the first 13 people on the list, and that the first two columns account for the first $13 + 35 = 48$ people on the list, so by the time we got to the last person on the list in the second column, we would have already passed the 43rd and 44th entries, which means the median would be somewhere in that second column, somewhere between 6-10.

The mean

To calculate the mean, we would have to add up the exact values of all 86 entries on the list, and then divide that sum by 86. In a histogram, we do not have access to exact values: we only know the ranges of numbers — for example, there are seventeen entries between 11 hrs and 15 hrs, but we don’t know exactly how many students said 11 hrs, how many said 12 hrs, etc. Therefore, ***it is impossible to calculate the mean from a histogram***. No one will ask you to do that. No one could reasonably expect you to do that, precisely because it is, in fact, impossible.

Median vs. Mean

If it’s impossible to calculate the mean, then how in tarnation can the GRE expect us to compare the mean to the median? Well, here we need to know a slick little bit of statistical reasoning. Consider the following two lists:

List A = {1, 2, 3, 4, 5}

median = 3 and mean = 3

List B = {1, 2, 3, 4, 100}

median = 3 and mean = 21

In changing from List A to List B, we took the last point and slid it out on the scale from $x = 5$ to $x = 100$. We made it an “**outlier**“, that is a point that is noticeably far from the other points. Notice that median didn’t change at all. The median doesn’t care about outliers. The median simply is not affected by outliers. By contrast, the mean changed substantially, because, unlike the median, **the mean is sensitive to outliers**.

Now, consider a symmetrical distribution of numbers — it could be a perfect Bell Curve, or it could be any other symmetrical distribution. In any symmetrical distribution, the mean equals the median. Now, consider an asymmetrical distribution: if the outliers are yanked out to one side, then the median will stay put, but the mean will be yanked out in the same direction as the outliers. **Outliers pull the mean away from the median.**

Therefore, if you simply notice on which side the outliers lie, then you know in which direction the mean was pulled away from the median. That makes it very easy to compare the two. The comparison is purely visual, and involves absolutely no calculations of any sort. (Yes, sometimes you can “do math” simply by looking!)

Practice problem explanation

1) If you think you have to calculate both the median and the mean, then this question would be impossible, since it’s impossible to calculate the mean from a histogram. If you know the trick discussed above, then all we have to notice is that the outliers, the points most distant from the central hump, are at the upper end. They are on the “high side” of the hours scale. The median probably just sits inside that central hump, but the mean has been pulled away from the median in the direction of the outliers, that is, in the direction of the high side of the scale. That means, the mean is higher up on the hours scale than is the median. That means, the mean is greater than the median. Answer = **A**

Notice, this solution involves zero calculations. It is 100% visual. For instance, you can eliminate D) by looking at the bars and noticing that the vast majority of students spend far less than 20 hours each week watching television.

Subjects and Treatments

This is not an official title but the name we are giving to questions that deal with studies trying to determine cause and effect. I'm guessing that sounds pretty vague, so here is a practice question.

A high school track coach has a new training regimen in which runners are supposed to exercise twice a week riding a stationary bike for one hour instead of doing a one-hour run twice a week. Her theory is that, by biking, students will not overly exert their running muscles but will still exercise their cardiovascular system. To test this theory out she had her varsity athletes (the faster runners) incorporate the biking regimen and the junior varsity athletes (the slower runners) incorporate usual training. After three weeks, the times of her varsity athletes on a 3-mile course decreased by an average of 1-minute, whereas her junior varsity athletes decreased their time on the same 3-mile course by approximately 30 seconds.

Which of the following is an appropriate conclusion?

- A) The exercise bike regimen led to the reduction of the varsity runners' time.
 - B) The exercise bike regimen would have helped the junior varsity team become faster.
 - C) No conclusion about cause and effect can be drawn because there might be fundamental differences between the way that varsity athletes respond to training in general and the way that junior varsity athletes respond.
 - D) No conclusion about cause and effect can be drawn because junior varsity athletes might have decreased their speed on the 3-mile course by more than 30 seconds had they completed the biking regimen.
- Before we answer this question, let's talk about randomization. The idea of randomization is the essence—the beating heart—of determining cause and effect. It helps us more reliably answer the question of whether a certain form of treatment causes a predictable outcome in subjects.

Randomization can happen at two levels. First off, when researchers select from the population in general, they have to make sure that they are not unknowingly selecting a certain type of person. Say, for instance, that I want to know what percent of Americans use Instagram. If I walk on a college campus and ask students there, I'm not taking a randomized sample of Americans (think how different my response rate would be if I decide to poll the audience of retired adults).

On the other hand, if I had everybody living in the U.S. drop their names into a gigantic hat the size of the Grand Canyon (there are many of those floating around!), and if we had a person pick a name from the hat, after the hat

had been adequately shuffled, we would have a method that is both randomized and inclusive of the entire population—though in practice this method is about as likely to pull off as NASA landing a brontosaurus on Mars.

Now, if we were to draw a name from the gigantic hat and ask them about their Instagram use, our findings would align far better with the general population. Therefore, this method would allow us to make generalizations about the population at large.

However, when dealing with cause and effect in a study, or what the SAT calls a treatment, researchers need to ensure that they randomly select amongst the participants. Imagine that we wanted to test the effects on the immune system of a new caffeinated beverage. If researchers were to break our 100 subjects into under-40 and over-40, the results would not be reliable. First off, young people are known to generally have stronger immune systems. Therefore, once we have randomly selected a group for a study, we need to further ensure that, once in the study, researchers randomly break the subjects into two groups. In this case, those who drink the newfangled beverage and those who must make do with a placebo, or beverage that is not caffeinated.

At this point, we are likely to have a group that is both **representative of the overall population** and **will allow us to draw reliable conclusions about cause and effect**.

Another scenario, and this will help us segue to the practice question above, are treatments/trials in which the subjects are not randomly chosen. For instance, in the question about the runners, clearly they are not representative of the population as a whole (I'm sure many people would never dare peel themselves of their couches to something as daft as run three miles).

Nonetheless, we can still determine cause and effect from a non-representative population (in this case runners) as long as those runners are randomly broken into two groups—exercise bike vs. usual one hour run. The problem with the study is the runner coach did not randomly assign runners, but gave the slower runners one treatment. Therefore, the observed results cannot be attributed to the bike regimen; they could likely result from the fact that the two groups are fundamentally different. Think about it: a varsity runner is already the faster runner, one who is likely to improve faster at running a three-mile course than his or her junior varsity teammate. Therefore, the answer is C).

While D) might be true, and junior varsity subjects *might* have become faster had they been in the bike group, it doesn't help us identify what was flawed about the treatment in the first place: the subjects were not randomly assigned.

Conclusion:

Here is a summary of the key points:

- 1) Results from a study can only be generalized to the population at large if the group of subjects was randomly selected from the population at large.
- 2) Once subjects have been selected, whether or not they were randomly selected, cause and effect can only be determined if the subjects were randomly assigned to the groups with in the experiment/study/treatment.

Additional Topics in Math

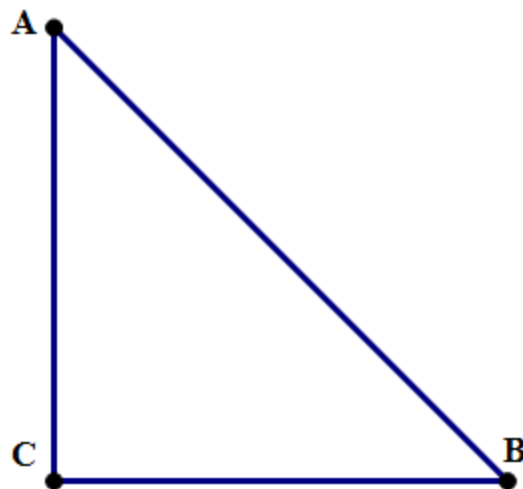
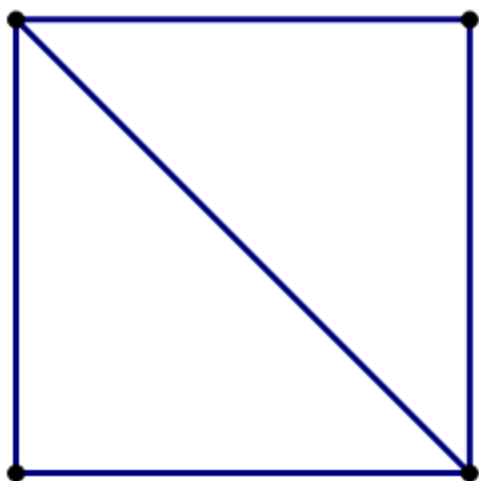
For all the colorful titles the College Board added, it suffered a lack of creativity for the rest of the concepts covered in the SAT math. What we have is everything from coordinate geometry to imaginary numbers unceremoniously dumped into “additional topics”. I’ll refrain from giving any snazzy descriptions and instead tell you the exact topics covered.

Geometry

Triangles

The 45-45-90 Triangle

Let’s start with the square, that magically symmetrical shape. Assume the square has a side of 1. Cut the square in half along a diagonal, and look at the triangle that results.



We know $\angle C = 90^\circ$, because it was an angle from the square. We know $AC = BC = 1$, which means the triangle is isosceles, so $\angle A = \angle B = 45^\circ$. Let’s call hypotenuse $AB = x$. By the Pythagorean Theorem,

$$(AC)^2 + (BC)^2 = (AB)^2$$

$$1 + 1 = x^2$$

$$x^2 = 2$$

$$x = \sqrt{2}$$

The sides have the ratios $1 : 1 : \sqrt{2}$. We can scale this up simply by multiplying all three of those by any number we like: $a : a : a\sqrt{2}$

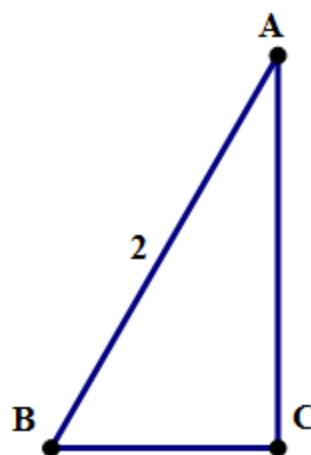
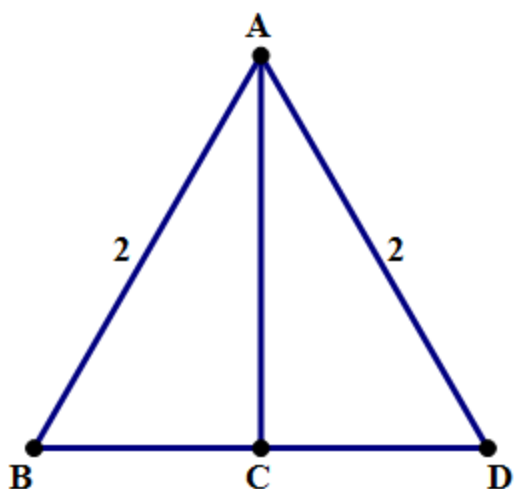
So, the three “names” for this triangle (which are useful to remember, because they summarize all its properties) are

- 1) The Isosceles Right Triangle
- 2) The 45-45-90 Triangle
- 3) The $1 : 1 : \sqrt{2}$ Triangle

The 30-60-90 Triangle

Let's start with an equilateral triangle, another magically symmetrical shape. Of course, by itself, the equilateral triangle is not a right triangle, but we can cut it in half and get a right triangle. Let's assume ABD is an equilateral triangle with each side = 2. We draw a perpendicular line from A down to BD, which intersects at point C.

Because of the highly symmetrical properties of the equilateral triangle, the segment AC (a) forms a right angle at the base, (b) bisects the angle at A, and (c) bisects the base BD.



So, in the triangle ABC, we know $\angle B = 60^\circ$, because that's the old angle of the original equilateral triangle. We know $\angle C = 90^\circ$, because AC is perpendicular to the base. We know $\angle A = 30^\circ$, because AC bisects the original 60° angle at A in the equilateral triangle. Thus, the angles are 30-60-90. We know $AB = 2$, because that's a side from the original equilateral triangle. We know $BC = 1$, because AC bisects the base BD. Call $AC = x$: we can find it from the Pythagorean Theorem.

$$x^2 + 1^2 = 2^2$$

$$x^2 = 4 - 1 = 3$$

$$x = \sqrt{3}$$

The sides are in the ratio of $1 : \sqrt{3} : 2$. This can be scaled up by multiplying by any number, which gives the general form: $a : a\sqrt{3} : 2a$.

So, the three “names” for this triangle (which are useful to remember, because they summarize all its properties) are

- 1) The Half-Equilateral Triangle
- 2) The 30-60-90 Triangle
- 3) The $1 : \sqrt{3} : 2$ Triangle

Angles of a Circle

Suppose you stand at the center of a circle and turn around so that you face each and every point on the circle. You would turn all the way around, which is an angle of 360° . In this sense, a whole circle has an angle of 360° . If you divided a circle equally, you could calculate the angle of each “slice”. Here are a few division results that could help you to know on test day (I’m just giving the ones that come out as nice round numbers, not the ones that result in ugly decimals):

$$360/2 = 180$$

$$360/3 = 120$$

$$360/4 = 90$$

$$360/5 = 72$$

$$360/6 = 60$$

$$360/8 = 45$$

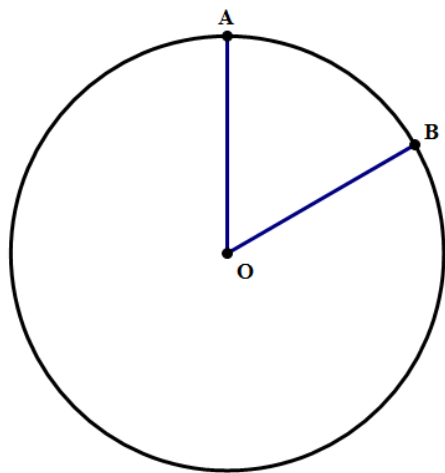
$$360/9 = 40$$

$$360/10 = 36$$

$$360/12 = 30$$

Arcs and Arclength

Suppose we look at a “slice” of a circle, like a slice of pizza.



The curved line from A to B, a part of the circle itself, is called an **arc**. This corresponds to the crust of the pizza.

We can talk about the size of an arc in one of two ways: (a) its angle, sometimes called “arc angle” or “**arc measure**“, and (b), its length, called **arclength**. The angle of the arc, its arc measure, is just the same as the angle at the center of the circle. Here $\angle AOB = 60^\circ$, so the measure of arc AB is 60° .

We find the [arclength](#) by setting up a proportion of part-to-whole. The angle is part of the whole angle of a circle, 360° . The arclength is part of the length all the way around, i.e. the circumference. Therefore:

$$\frac{\text{part}}{\text{whole}} = \frac{\text{angle}}{360^\circ} = \frac{\text{arclength}}{2\pi r}$$

Here, let's say the radius is $r = 12$. Then, the circumference is $c = 24\pi$. Since the angle is 60° , the ratio on the left side, angle/360, becomes $1/6$. Call the arclength x .

$$1/6 = x/24\pi$$

Cross-multiply:

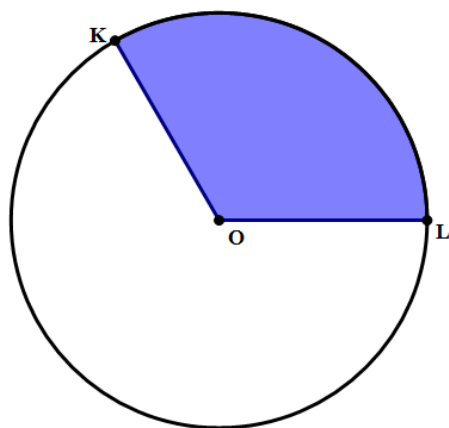
$$24\pi = 6x$$

$$4\pi = x = \text{arclength}$$

In other words, since the angle 60° is one sixth of the full angle of a circle, the arclength is one sixth of the circumference.

In the next post, I will discuss straight lines and circles. Here's a practice question.

Practice Question



1) In the shaded region above, $\angle KOL = 120^\circ$, and the area of the entire circle is . The perimeter of the shaded region is

- (A) $12 + 8\pi$
- (B) $12 + 16\pi$
- (C) $24 + 8\pi$
- (D) $24 + 16\pi$
- (E) $24 + 24\pi$

Practice Question Explanation

1) The area $144\pi = \pi r^2$, so $r = 12$. This means $KO = 12$ and $OL = 12$, so those two sides together are 24. The remaining side is arc KL. The whole circumference is $c = 2\pi r = 24\pi$. The angle of 120° is $1/3$ of a circle, so the arclength is $1/3$ of the circumference. This means, $\text{arclength} = 8\pi$, and therefore the entire perimeter is $24 + 8\pi$.
Answer = C.

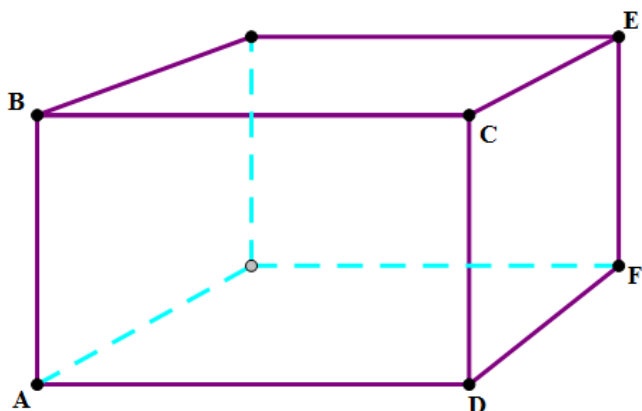
Rectangular Solids

Also known as just a box or a brick, these are pretty straightforward. Let's say a solid has a length L , a width W , and a height H . The volume, of course, is $V = LWH$. The surface area is a little trickier: the solid has two faces that are $L \times W$, two that are $L \times H$, and two that are $W \times H$, for a grand total of:

Total Surface area: $2LW + 2LH + 2WH$

For the special case of a cube with side s , the volume is $V = s^3$, and the surface area simplifies to $6s^2$

What's a little subtler about these: the three-dimensional version of the Pythagorean Theorem.



Let's say that $AD = L$, $DF = W$ and $AB = H$, and . Lengths like AC , DE , or BE are called "face diagonals", and to find them, you would just use the ordinary Pythagorean Theorem with the sides of the relevant rectangle. If we were, though, to construct segment AE , that would go through the empty center of the solid. In geometry, that's called a "space diagonal." You don't need to know that vocabulary, but you need to recognize this when it appears, and you need to know you can apply the three-dimensional version of the Pythagorean Theorem. Let's say that AE has a length of D . Then: $D^2 = L^2 + W^2 + H^2$

Occasionally, a math problem will ask you to use this formula to evaluate the length of a space diagonal of a rectangular solid.

Cylinders

Cylinders are very familiar from everyday life: a circle at the bottom, a congruent circle directly above it, and smooth curving side (the lateral face) joining one circle to the other. The volume is simply $V = (\text{area of base}) \times h$
 $= \pi r^2 \times h$.

Geometry Formula Cheat Sheet

Here are some good formulas and rules to keep in mind.

Angles

A right angle is made up of 90 degrees.

A straight line is made up of 180 degrees.

If two lines intersect, the sum of the resulting four angles equals 360.

Polygons

A polygon is any figure with three or more sides (e.g., triangles, squares, octagons, etc.).

To find the total degrees of a polygon: $180(n - 2)$, where n is the number of sides.

Geometry Formulas: Triangles

Area equals $\frac{1}{2}$ (base x height)

An isosceles right triangle (45-45-90) has sides in a ratio of $x : x : x\sqrt{2}$

An equilateral triangle has three equal side. Each angle is equal to 60 degrees.

Any given angle of a triangle corresponds to the length of the opposite side. The larger the degree measure of the angle, the larger the length of the opposite side.

Each side of certain right triangles are integers (e.g., 3 : 4 : 5, 5 : 12 : 13).

The length of the longest side can never be greater than the sum of the two other sides.

The length of the shortest side can never be less than the positive difference of the other two sides.

Geometry Formulas: Circles

Circumference equals $2\pi r$ or πD (where r = radius and D = diameter)

Area = πr^2 .

A fraction of the circumference of a circle is called an arc. To find the degree measure of an arc, look at the central angle.

Now the properties of inscribed squares (If x is the side of the square the diameter of the circle will equal $x\sqrt{2}$).

Geometry Formulas: Quadrilaterals

The area of a square is s^2 (s = side).

The diagonals of a square bisect one another, forming four 90 degree angles.

The diagonals of a rhombus bisect one another, forming four 90 degree angles.

Twice the length plus the twice the width equals the perimeter of a rectangle.

The area of a parallelogram can be found multiplying base x height (the base always forms a right angle with the height).

Geometry Formulas: Three-Dimensional Shapes

The surface area of a cube is equal to $6s^2$, where s is the side of the cube.

The volume of a cube is equal to s^3

The volume of a cube and the surface area of a cube are equal when $s = 6$.

Volume of a cylinder is equal to $\pi r^2 h$, where h is the height and r is the radius of the base.

Coordinate Geometry

The slope of a line can be found subtracting the y values of a pair of coordinates and dividing it by the difference in the x values

To find the y-intercept plug in zero for x

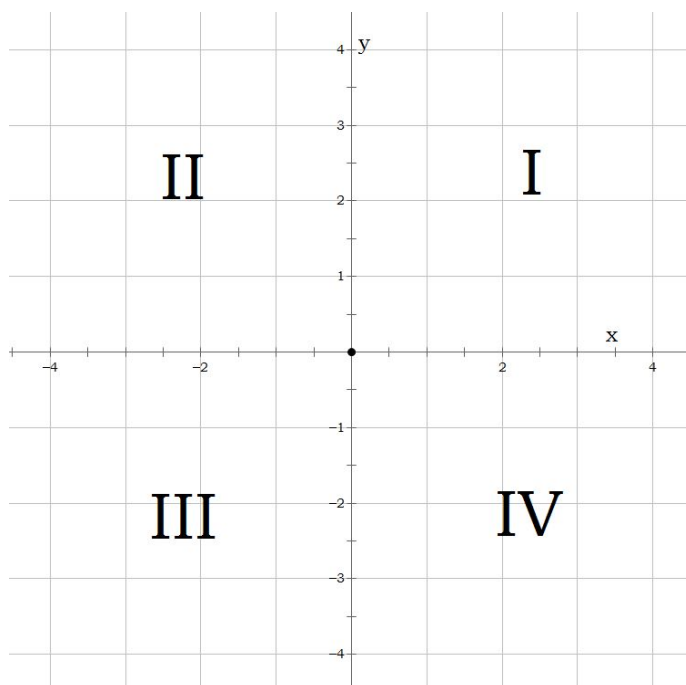
To find the x-intercept, plug in zero for y and solve for x

The slopes of two lines which are perpendicular to each other are in the ratio of $x : -1/x$, where x is the slope of one of the lines (think: negative reciprocal).

Coordinate Geometry

Here are the basics at a really high-level. This should be familiar to you from math class, even if you spent half the time snoozing.

Quadrants



The quadrants begin with I, where both x and y are positive, and rotate counterclockwise from there. Notice

- In Quadrant I, $x > 0$ and $y > 0$
- In Quadrant II, $x < 0$ and $y > 0$
- In Quadrant III, $x < 0$ and $y < 0$
- In Quadrant IV, $x > 0$ and $y < 0$

For many, coordinate geometry is already a daunting concept. When a question dispenses with the graph all together, students can feel even more at a loss. If you fall into this group, do not despair. Here is a helpful guideline:

Do Not Always Draw the Graph

This advice may seem counterintuitive. After all, the problem didn't provide a graph. Wouldn't the first step be to graph the problem out?

Many coordinate geometry concepts sans graph are testing your conceptual thinking. Take the follow problem:

Which of the following lines do not contain coordinate points that are both negative?

1. $y = x + 2$
2. $3y = 4x - 2$
3. $x + y = 2$
4. $3y - 4x = 2$
5. $x - y = 2$

Solution:

The slope formula is important – if the question is explicitly asking for the slope. What is often more important is knowing that a line with a negative slope – from left to right – slopes downward. A positive slope, unsurprisingly, slopes upward.

Think of it this way – start at a negative x -coordinate (say -2) of a line. If you were to place a ball on the line would roll down the line as it move into positive territory for the x -coordinate? If so the line is negative, if not the line is positive.

For this problem, we are looking for a line that does not pass through the third quadrant – the quadrant in which x and y are both negative. Graph the point $(-2, -2)$. That's in the third quadrant.

Now here's the big conceptual part – any line that slopes upwards will always pass through Quadrant III. Graph it if you have to – or simply imagine a line of infinite length sloping upwards. Anyway you try to do so there will always be the Third Quadrant waiting to claim a part of your line.

Now, imagine a downward sloping line. Is it also crossing through the third quadrant? Well, move the entire line to the right. At a certain point, your line will no longer be in the Third Quadrant. As long as that line cross the y -axis at a positive value, it will never cross through the Third Quadrant.

Now you only need to find two things: a line that has a positive y -intercept and a negative slope. And that is much better than having to graph every one of the equations in answer choices A – E!

Only answer (C) $x + y = 2$, which can be re-written as $y = -x + 2$, has a negative slope (-1) and positive y -intercept $(+2)$.

Trigonometry

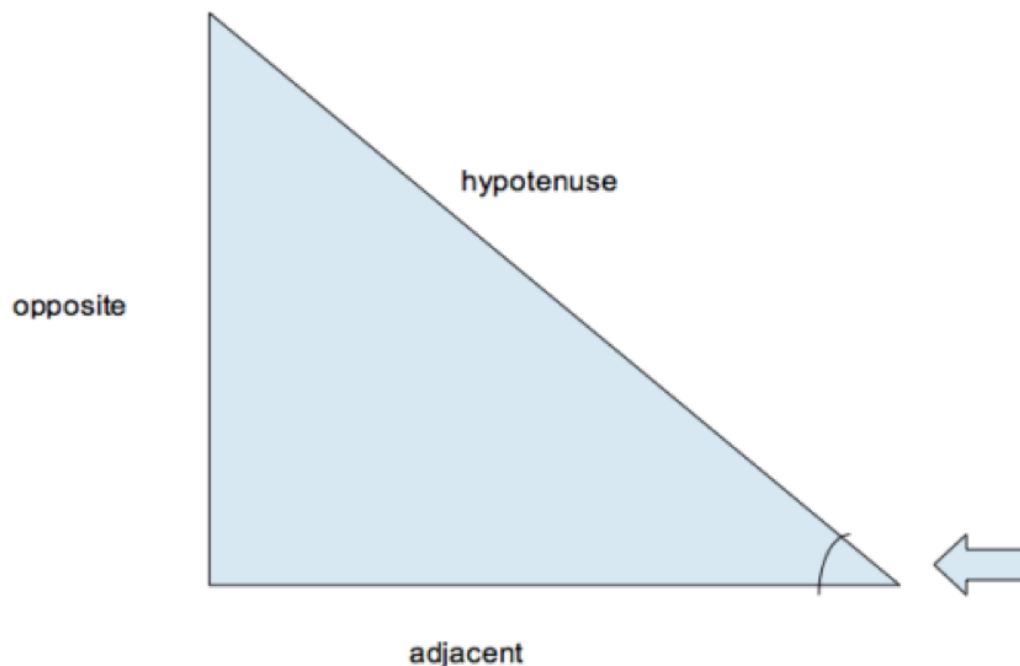
The final member in the triumvirate of “-metry”, trigonometry is perhaps the most feared. For one, many students might be learning it for the first time months, or even weeks, before they take the SAT. If you fall into this category, don't fear: the trigonometry on the test is pretty basic/general concept stuff. In fact, if you are just learning trigonometry that might work to your advantage because the concepts will be fresh in your head. And the questions in the exam might seem downright easy compared to what you are learning in Ms. Ficklebottom's class.

For those who have never taken trigonometry, here is what you'll need to know.

First of all: What is trigonometry?

Trigonometry is the field of math that deals with triangles—specifically, the relationships between the three sides and the three angles that make up every triangle.

And typically the first thing you study in a trig class are right triangles:



So here's a right triangle. Let's say that we are looking at the angle the arrow is pointing to. The side next to it is the adjacent side, the side opposite it is the opposite side, and the hypotenuse is, of course, the hypotenuse. It is important that you think about the sides this way because the next thing you typically learn in a trig class is a mnemonic called **SOHCAHTOA**, and these As and Os and Hs stand for adjacent, opposite, and hypotenuse.

But what do the S, C, and T stand for?

The next things you need to memorize about trig are these three terms and their abbreviations:

Sine (sin)

Cosine (cos)

Tangent (tan)

These three terms are used to designate the ratio of a pair of sides in a triangle.

So here is where **SOHCAHTOA** comes in. This helps you remember which ratio is which:

$$\sin = \text{opposite/hypotenuse}$$

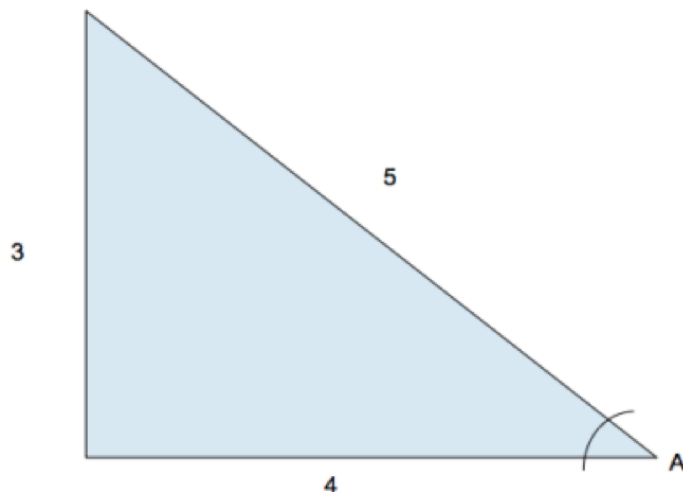
$\cos = \text{adjacent/hypotenuse}$

$\tan = \text{opposite/adjacent}$

I suggest anytime you see a right triangle with trig terms on the SAT that you write down **SOHCAHTOA** next to the problem because it's very easy to accidentally use the wrong ratio.

Example 1:

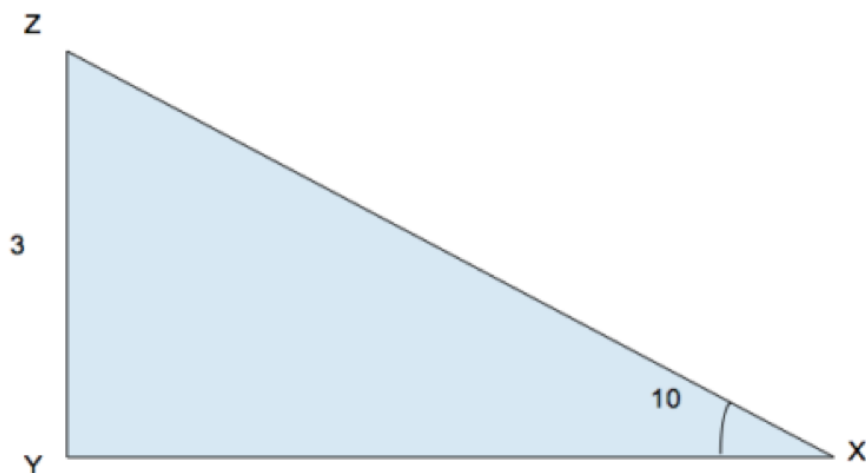
What is the sin of A?



Knowing SOHCAHTOA, you would be able to answer that it is opposite/hypotenuse or $3/5$. Easy as that!

Example 2:

What is the length of XZ?



Knowing SOHCAHTOA means that if we are given a right triangle with one known length and one known acute angle (meaning not the right angle) we can always find the other two lengths.

So in this case we can use sine to find the length of the hypotenuse.

$$\sin(10) = 3 / XZ$$

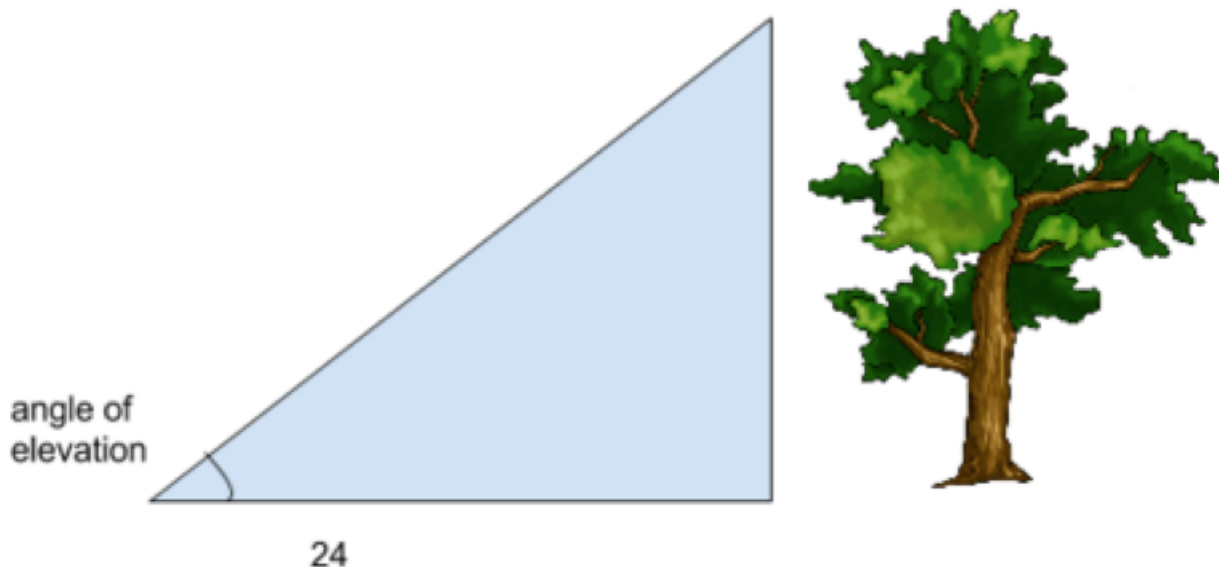
$$XZ = 3 / \sin(10)$$

We can divide sin of 10 degrees (make sure calculator is in degrees mode) by 3 in our calculator to get the answer: approximately 17.28. On the SAT, however, you won't be expected to have a calculator that can do this and so the answer would likely be given as $3/\sin(10)$.

Example 3

Here's one that's just a teensy bit harder, but we are just going to apply the same principles.

The tree below casts a shadow that is 24 feet long, and the angle of elevation from the tip of the shadow to the top of the tree has a cosine of $4/5$. What is the height of the tree?



The problem tells us that the cosine of the angle of elevation is $\frac{4}{5}$. Remember SOHCAHTOA, so we are concerned with the adjacent side over the hypotenuse. The fact that the cosine is $\frac{4}{5}$ means the ratio of the adjacent side to the hypotenuse is $\frac{4}{5}$. So we can set up a proportion:

$$\frac{4}{5} = \frac{24}{x}$$

Cross-multiplying to solve for x gives us $x = 30$.

But remember that this is the hypotenuse and we need to find the length of the vertical side to find the height of the tree. We can use the Pythagorean Theorem to find the length of the vertical side.

$$\begin{aligned} 24^2 + b^2 + 30^2 \\ = 18 \end{aligned}$$

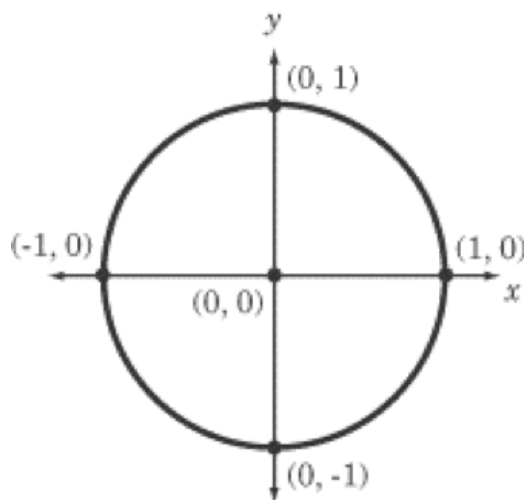
So the height of the tree is 18 ft.

If you recognized that we had a 3-4-5 triangle in the beginning, you could actually take a shortcut and just use tangent of the angle of elevation to figure out the height.

Knowing SOHCAHTOA just about guarantees you will be able to nab at least one trig question on the test.

The Unit Circle

THIS is a unit circle. It's a circle with radius of 1 centered about the origin.



There are a cornucopia of fascinating aspects to the unit circle: I suggest you consult the interwebs or your math teacher to find out more. We're just going to go through the absolute basics here, but that's really all you'll need to answer most SAT questions relating to the unit circle (I'm going to stand by that statement until the SAT releases a tough unit circle question—something they've yet to do).

The SAT will test whether you know where angles larger than 360 degrees lie, and the unit circle helps us visualize this.

There are 360 degrees in a circle, but we can just keep swinging the arm of the angle around counterclockwise (just like the hands of the clock) to get to an angle bigger than 360. So, for example, if you want to know where an angle of 760 would be, you would circle around the circle twice (for a total of 720 degrees) and we would have 40 leftover degrees. So that angle would lie in the upper right quadrant of the unit circle (Quadrant I).

The SAT will also often use radians on trig questions, and the unit circle helps us wrap our heads around this.

You should know that:

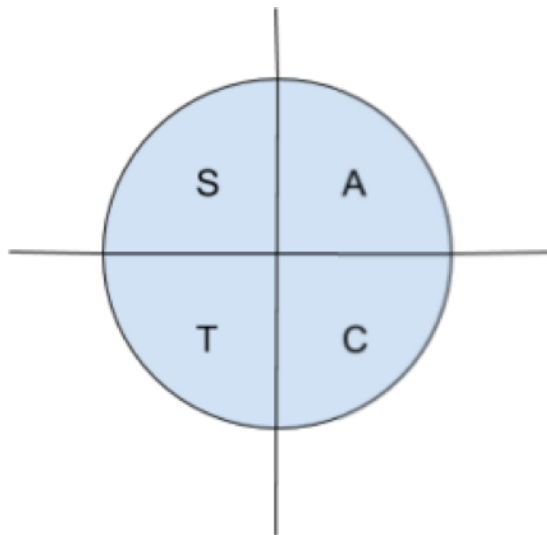
90 degrees on the circle = $\pi/2$

180 degrees = π

270 degrees = $3\pi/2$

360 degrees = 2π

The SAT will also test whether you know where the sine, cosine, and tangent of angles are positive or negative on the unit circle.



There's a great mnemonic to help you remember where trig functions are positive or negative:

All **S**tudents **T**ake **C**alculus

This helps you remember that:

In Quadrant 1 → **A**ll (sine, tangent, cosine) are positive

in Quadrant 2 → only **S**ine is positive (and cos and tan are negative)

in Quadrant 3 → only **T**angent is positive (and sin and cos are negative)

in Quadrant 4 → only **C**osine is positive (and sin and tan are negative)

If the measure of the angle all the way around the circle once is πx , what is the value of x ?

Imaginary Numbers

Ah, imaginary numbers—the imaginary friends of the math world. But really speaking that’s an unfortunate name, since these numbers don’t exist in some fantasy realm, but are actually just a different type of number and, for SAT purposes, a very helpful one: imaginary numbers allow you to get around that pesky you-can’t-take-a-square-root-of-a-negative-number rule.

For the most part what you’ll be doing is not understanding the niceties of the concept but applying algebraic rules of balancing the equation. The key to unlocking any imaginary number problem on the SAT is the following:

$$i = \sqrt{-1}$$

From this, we can figure out the following:

$$i^2 = -1$$

$$i^3 = -i$$

$$i^4 = 1$$

Tips and Strategies for Preparing for New SAT Math

With the increase in number of concepts on the test, it is my sense that many students are going to get bogged down in the minutiae of each kinds of question (gee, I don't think I really understand how to divide complex polynomials to figure out what the remainder is). What is ultimately the most important is how well you are able to focus for a few hours and wade through all the language to get at the answer. In the end, you'll miss many questions you could have answered had your mind not been so worn down.

Why is this? Well, you will not have likely done as many timed drills on dense word problems. This is a skill in of itself, and one that most will end up ignoring in favor of studying some concept that has a relatively low chance of showing up on the test—and showing up the way you think it will.

At the same time, do concept review in weak areas. And this is especially the case if you are struggle at math. But remember, the time practice sessions are going to make you a better test taker and that's where you'll be able to see a lot of your score improvement.

Another good strategy, when doing drills, is to make sure you do mixed practice sets. That is, don't only focus on algebra or passport to advanced math. Do actual practice tests that have the random variety of question types that you'll see test day. Part of difficulty is often figuring out the subject that is being tested. By having that given to you from the get go, it dulls your ability to recognize this concept.

Yet, one last area in which practice tests will help you is in the grading of difficulty. Remember, the test is written in such a way so that a certain difficulty-level question is usually at a certain spot in the section. This relationship tends to be pretty linear in the sense that the higher the number within a specific math section (the difficulty will "reset" when you get to Student-Produced Response (SPR) questions), the harder the question. Knowing this can help you catch careless errors. Did the last question in the section seem too easy? You might have missed something. Does one of the earlier questions seem impossible? Make sure you read the question again, because there might be some vital information that you are forgetting.

Finally, make sure you take those practice tests about once a week. That way you can get exposure to the nuanced ways the test is constructed; you can get information on whether or not you are improving (and use this

to tweak how you've been studying); and you can get used to what's going to happen test day: lots of sitting and lots of focusing.

SAT Study Schedules



Making the Most of Your SAT Study Schedule

The first challenge of studying for the SAT is finding the time and energy to get started. The second challenge? Committing to your study plan.

If you haven't already noticed, high school is a game of time management. And of finding a way to complete all your homework, study for your tests, finish your projects, manage all your extracurricular activities, sleep, and maybe even have some time leftover for yourself.

Then, you throw standardized tests into the mix, and your well-organized schedule falls apart at the seams. Don't be overwhelmed! There are ways to make your life easier.

Finding an SAT study plan that works for you, and sticking to that plan, can help you stay organized and self-motivated while keeping procrastination at bay. With a good study plan, you'll study a little bit every day, preventing the weekend-long cram sessions that murder your sleep pattern and social life.

Rather than create your own study guide, from scratch, check out the [Magoosh SAT Study Schedules](#) online. They list all the materials and resources you'll need to study for the SAT (many of which are even free), and then give you day-by-day assignments covering all SAT topics and test strategies.

How to Use an SAT Study Guide

There's no such thing as a one-size-fits-all study schedule. However, adapting a study schedule to your needs shouldn't take too much effort. Here's what you do:

1) Honestly assess your SAT strengths and weaknesses.

Do you always struggle with a certain SAT test (that's what they call each section), or with a certain question type? Focus extra time and energy here. For example, you could do extra practice problems, read up on the subject, or learn specific strategies for outsmarting the SAT's questions on that subject. Is your problem time management? Practice with a timer, and always answer the easiest questions first.

2) Determine how much time you can realistically devote to your SAT prep.

If you're working, playing sports, volunteering, and maintaining your course load all at the same time, you probably can't commit to an hour of SAT prep each day. In this case, you might want to break the One Month SAT Study Schedule into smaller units, and tackle it over two or three months. It's okay if you need to reschedule your exam to give yourself more time to study. Try to set realistic goals for yourself – it's important that you have time to sleep!

3) Always check your work and understand where you are making mistakes.

Just doing practice problems won't improve your SAT score very much. You need to figure out why you miss the problems that you get wrong, and then re-do those problems until you get them right. There's no use in making the same mistakes over and over during your SAT prep – it just means that you'll get the same types of problems wrong when they show up on the SAT.

4) Set small goals and keep track of your progress.

Tell yourself – by the end of the week, I will be able to do SOHCAHTOA problems without consulting my notes. Or, decide to follow the One Month Schedule day by day, and reward yourself at the end of the week with a trip to a guilty pleasure food joint or an hour of TV time. Make sure you're logging your progress in a notebook, or on your computer, so you can keep track of your goals and note which topics give you the most trouble.

5) Incorporate SAT prep into the rest of your life.

Achieving your goal score on the SAT takes more than just studying. Be sure to eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep. If your body and mind are healthy, you'll be much more calm and confident heading into this challenge. So, take some meaningful study breaks! Hang out with your friends, watch your favorite show on Netflix, go on a leisurely jog ... all in the name of test prep.

Which Strategy Will Work Best for Me?

It's ok if your SAT study plan is unique! Making the most of your SAT study schedule requires adapting it to your particular needs. Experiment with various strategies from the College Board's official book, and see which ones work best for you (there's no "one size fits all" approach to the SAT). Be patient if you don't see your scores

shoot up immediately. The new strategies may slow you down or mess you up at first but practicing them will give you extra tools on test day.

Once you've practiced enough problems, so that you've refreshed your knowledge and test-taking skills, schedule a time for yourself to sit down and take a full-length practice test. Set a timer for each section and try and find a quiet room to mimic test-taking conditions. The goal is not to get every question correct, but to get a feel for what the timing of each section is like. You may not finish each test on your first try, but you'll know what strategies you need to practice.

How Do I Know if My Study Plan Works?

Focus on your progress, and don't be upset if your first couple practice tests aren't as high-scoring as you'd like. Preparing for a test takes organization, practice and a positive mental attitude. There is no such thing as a "good" or a "bad" test-taker. Some students are just more familiar with the content areas and strategies than others. Test-taking is a learned skill, so don't be discouraged. Create a checklist of your study sessions so you can reward yourself as you get work done!

Finding and Using Great SAT Resources

A great place to begin learning about the test itself is at collegereadiness.collegeboard.org. If you can, order an official copy of the The Official SAT Study Guide (2016 Edition). It includes full-length practice tests as well as answers and explanations.

Free SAT practice materials abound online, but make sure that they are high quality, or you may be practicing with outdated materials. For help finding great SAT resources online, check out our [Free SAT Practice Tests](#) post on our blog.

Start doing some practice problems to get a feel for the format of the test and to begin to learn your personal strengths and weaknesses. Don't worry if you get a lot of questions wrong at first. Create an SAT study folder and add a "Formula Sheet" and a "Vocab Sheet," where you can write any unfamiliar math formulas and vocabulary you come across in your studies. Make flashcards if that is an easy way for you to learn!

SAT Resources



Test Day Tips

After all this time, SAT test day is finally looming. Here are some tips to make sure it goes as smoothly as you hope.

SAT Tip #1: Pack the day before.

The last thing you want to worry about as you shake yourself awake on test day is what you need to bring.

Here's a complete list:

- admissions ticket (print from collegeboard.org)
- photo identification (crucial! You will not be admitted without it.)
- several sharpened soft lead No. 2 pencils (the old fashioned wooden kind; NOT mechanical.)
- a permitted calculator
- extra batteries
- a watch to pace yourself (you can't rely on the fact that the test room will have a clock.)
- eraser
- pencil sharpener
- healthy snacks (see below)
- a water bottle
- gum (Did you know chewing gum improves accuracy and reaction times? Check out this and other test prep [lifehacks](#) on our blog!)
- an outfit with layers (Your test room may be too hot or too cold. It is rarely just right, Goldilocks.)

SAT Tip #2: Go to bed early.

Make sure you are giving yourself a solid night of sleep. For most teenagers, this is 8-9 hours. Figure out when you need to get up to be completely ready and at the test center stress-free and work backwards from this time to figure out when you need to go to bed. If you can't sleep, though, don't force it. Get up and do something else and try again in a half hour. Don't lie there agonizing.

SAT Tip #3: Wake up early and do some physical and mental exercise.

Go for a jog; do some jumping jacks. Waking your body and mind up is crucial. Read some articles from the newspaper and focus on finding the main idea. Try a couple math problems. Avoid the urge to do any last-minute SAT prep, but it is important that your brain is warmed up for the test.

SAT Tip #4: Eat a healthy, long-sustaining breakfast.

We like granola, fruit, eggs and veggies. Drink coffee only if you are used to it. Don't try it now if it is new— you might get crazy jitters.

SAT Tip #5: Bring a cheat sheet.

Not THAT kind of cheat sheet. But we recommend bringing an "SAT strategy cheat sheet" that you can review before the test and then tuck safely away in a bag. This should include the most important reminders you've learned from your test prep such as "Don't forget to watch out for comma splices!" Having a last-minute review list can help you remember that you are, in fact, prepared and you do, in fact, got this.

SAT Tip #6: Don't lose your cool before the test.

Libraries or cafeterias full of arriving test-takers are generally not good places. You could cut the nervous energy with a knife. So many anxious students fretting about whether or not there will be a comparison reading passage or quizzing each other on logarithms. Or even worse, the kid leaning up against the wall who looks like he could care less. Or a group of your friends pulling you into some Homecoming Dance drama that distracts you from the task at hand. Of course, eventually you need to check in, but if you get to the test center early, by all means, pull out your headphones, blast your favorite pump-me-up music and hang out outside. You've done too much preparation to let these other students shake your confidence.

SAT Tip #6: Keep your focus during the test.

A surefire way to not get the score you want is to constantly pay attention to the test-takers around you. How does that girl in front of you answer math problems so fast? Why can't that kid stop tapping his foot? Try to stay in the zone and focus on your particular strategies. Everyone is different, and what these other students are doing is irrelevant. And it should go without saying that you should avoid any temptation to peer at your neighbor's answer sheet. Cheating is not a risk you want to run here. And he's probably wrong anyway.

SAT Tip #7: Eat on your breaks even if you aren't hungry.

Your brain needs fuel just like the rest of your body, even if your nervous stomach doesn't think so. And the last thing you want is to let a perfectly good snack break go to waste only to regret it later when your stomach is howling halfway through the Science section. Fruit is great test fuel: the natural sugars help give you energy.

Make sure to have something with protein too, like a handful of nuts. Many of our students swear by peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or trail mix with chocolate for the perfect combo of sugar and sustenance. Don't forget the water!

SAT Tip #8: Reward yourself.

You worked hard for this, and no matter how you think the test went, afterwards treat yourself to something you enjoy. You need the mental break and relaxation. But as important as an after-test reward is, I think that what is even more important is rewarding yourself during the exam. No, you can't whip out a cookie in the middle of the English section, but give yourself mental pats on the back when you catch yourself doing something right. So many students beat themselves up during a test for what they think they are doing wrong. Put a stop to this destructive mentality and instead congratulate yourself when you find yourself doing something right: sticking to your pacing or recognizing a grammar error you've missed before. It's a long test and a positive attitude is crucial!

Cheers to a fantastic test day!

Book Reviews

Most of the big test prep book publishers (I'm talking College Board, Princeton Review, Kaplan, and Barron's) have released, or are on the cusp of releasing, a book for the redesigned SAT. But not all New SAT prep books are created equal: some you'll want to use in their entirety (though only a few), others you'll want to use only parts of, and others you'll want to steer clear of.

To help you maximize your study time (and save your hard earned cash) I've reviewed the top options for best SAT books on the market and broken them down into the good, the bad, and the (not so) ugly. If you see the same book in multiple sections, don't worry – you're not going crazy. That just means that some publishers do a good job on some things (like practice tests or a specific section of the New SAT) while doing a sub-par job on other things. This doesn't necessarily mean that you shouldn't buy the book, but it might mean that you won't use the book in its entirety.

Then, for even more, scroll down for my complete book review of each SAT book.

The Good (the Best SAT Books of 2016)

The Official SAT Study Guide (2016 Edition)

(The Practice Tests)

The Official SAT Study Guide is the holy grail of SAT test prep: a book that contains questions by the writers of the test (The College Board). Nowhere will you get a better sense of what to expect test day. Specifically, there are four full-length practice tests with explanations (see "The Bad" for a comment on the explanations).

Barron's New SAT

Barron's overall does a decent job of recreating test questions and a good job of dissecting the test and offering helpful examples. Out of the main third-party publishers (Kaplan and The Princeton Review are the two others), this book is the one you should get. Scroll down for a review of Barron's Strategies and Practice for the New PSAT.

The Bad

Kaplan New SAT 2016

(The Math Section)

Kaplan does such a poor job of approximating the verbal section that I think students would be better off not using any Kaplan verbal content. The writing section questions, for instance, make the test seem overly easy. To boot, the passages are supposed to be written by a professional; the person writing these sentences is anything but a professional, laboring to string sentences together in a way that is cohesive (eloquence be damned!).

(Read my full review of Kaplan New SAT 2016 below.)

The Official SAT Study Guide (2016 Edition)

(The Explanations)

College Board explanations leave something to be desired. So if you didn't quite understand why you missed a question, the explanations often aren't very helpful. The strategy/test overview section of the book, which comes at the beginning, isn't very useful. I can imagine many students scratching their heads after reading some of the tedious and vague explanations of question types.

The (not so) Ugly

Kaplan New SAT Premier 2016

(The Verbal Section)

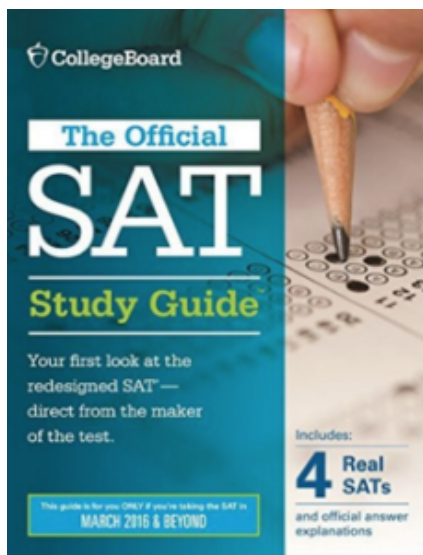
Though Kaplan's math is mentioned in the section above, the verbal section is a different breed altogether. Kaplan's general guide does a good job of breaking up math concepts so you can get a sense of the different areas covered. Additionally, there is a helpful practice quiz at the end of each section.

Princeton Review 500+ Questions for the New SAT (2016 Edition)

The Princeton Review has, on the whole, done an okay job. The questions aren't totally aligned, sometimes they are flat off, but in general what you get is a simplified version of the SAT: good for beginners, not so good for those wanting to prepare for the rigors of the actual test. Head down below for a full book review of Princeton Review's 500+ Questions for the New SAT.

2016 Best SAT Book Reviews

The Official SAT Study Guide 2016



This is like reviewing the Bible: The Official SAT Study Guide is so foundational to SAT success that it seems sacrosanct to suggest otherwise. So, instead of giving my five-star stamp of approval rating, I'm going to say something that might seem heretic: this book is flawed.

Sure, the questions in this book might be indispensable, but is the book uniformly useful? No. And here's why.

The Questions

The questions in this book are Mt. Sinai level. In other words, it is the SAT gods parting the skies and giving us a taste of what to expect when the test debuts in a couple of months. All the nuances, all the traps, all the idiosyncrasies are

there for us to behold; and the more you understand them, the better prepared you'll be test day.

However, there are a couple of 'buts', some of which are big...

The practice questions contained in this book are available for free online and since the questions are by far the best thing about this book, you might rightly start to wonder if you actually need to purchase this book. What follows might indeed make you think you don't need the book at all.

The Explanations

Hi, I'm going to play pretend today. I'm going to pretend I'm the person or people who wrote the explanations for the questions.

Choice (A) is the best answer because the information in the passage best supports (A). Line 11-13, <insert quote here> show this.

(B), (C), and (D) do not specifically answer the question.

To be fair, often the explanation to the right answer is more thorough. As for why the wrong answer is wrong, forget about it. That is about as specific as it gets. In the end, you are likely to find these explanations vague to the point of infuriation and truly understanding your mistakes, is one of the best ways to improve.

The Strategy

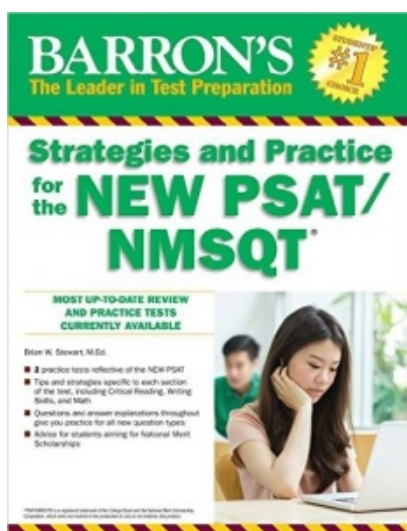
I like the way that the book breaks down the test so we can see what has changed since the old test. However, there is so much terminology that I imagine students getting bogged down thinking that they have to know first off what nonrestrictive and parenthetical elements mean, and that this mouthful of a description for something relatively straightforward, is filed under “conventions of punctuation”.

What we don’t get in the case of writing, is a solid review of the grammar concepts and a straightforward way of describing how those relate to the test. Nor do we get strategies on how to approach these questions. In fact I feel like the first few hundred pages is more for people like me that want to understand how the test is constructed and less for actual students who need help understanding the how to the material, not the what.

The Verdict

For review, you are much better off going with any of the major publishers on the market. Though for questions there is no better source than the College Board. The fact that the College Board has made this content free online, however, makes this book unnecessary, if not unhelpful. Now let’s hope the clouds don’t part and the College Board strikes me down with lightning.

Barron’s Strategies and Practice for the New PSAT/NMSQT



Sure, this is not a guide for the New SAT, which Barron’s is still working on. But did you know that the PSAT and SAT are the same content-wise? Sure, there are subtle differences in the way the easy and difficult questions are arranged. For instance, the PSAT tends to have more ‘easy’ questions and fewer ‘hard’ questions. But, honestly, most can’t really tell the difference.

So if you are looking for practice content for the redesigned SAT exam (debuting in March 2016), Barron’s Strategies and Practice for the New PSAT/NMSQT is a great place to find it. There are two practice tests at the end of the book and some practice content, albeit not much, at the beginning (this is a slim volume, coming in at a mere 257 pages).

Given that there are so few practice books out there for the New SAT, and those few that are out there don't have the best practice content, Barron's for the PSAT is a valuable addition. So if you find that you have burned through the tests in the College Board SAT Study Guide, or if you'd like a warm up for the real test, the Barron's is a good place to start. You'll get used to the format and the question types.

That is not to say the book is not without flaws. After all, nobody can really create questions that are of the standard of the actual test. But Barron's does a decent job; prepping with this book will likely help you raise your score. Using this in conjunction with the College Board book, though, is best to really get a feel for the test, specifically the wrong answer choices the test will try to fool you with.

Also, this book is about practice questions and advice on strategies and techniques is scant. So at the very least you'll need to supplement this book with one that provides tips on how to approach the test and a review of fundamentals and concepts covered on the test.

Verdict:

A good place for a couple of practice tests.

Grade: B+

Kaplan New SAT 2016 Strategies, Practice and Review with 3 Practice Tests



Kaplan has created a Jekyll and Hyde guide. On the one hand there is an excellent math section. Kaplan really takes time to teach basic strategies. Students will understand many of the concepts before moving on to the practice questions—questions that reinforce many of the principles learned in the review section. I had typically avoided using Kaplan for the last SAT, since the content was too easy; students would often gain a false sense of confidence. In this book, some of the questions are actually more difficult—or at least involved—then the questions offered in College Board book.

Then there is the verbal. To be honest, it is flat out terrible. Sure, the strategies are hackneyed—Kaplan fells whole rainforests to tell students obvious approaches (“Don’t forget to xyz”). But it’s the creation of the actual questions and passages that Kaplan just

can't seem to bring it together. What that means for the student is that they are getting a test that doesn't really prepare them for the actual SAT. Questions and prompts are shoddy imitations of the real thing.

For instance, the essays that are part of the Writing section are supposed to be well-crafted pieces imparted with a strong, writerly voice. Instead, it feels like Kaplan had some hapless high-school student cobble together an essay. Gone is the sense of control and voice that even semi-professional writers can pull off. Sure, this sounds like a snobbish quibble on my part, but the truth is this shoddiness affects the questions. Many are just flat out too easy because the passage itself is too basic and doesn't lend itself to nuanced question types or tricky trap answers that are sure to be awaiting test day.

Reading Comprehension isn't quite so bad. Still, the passages are taken from textbooks not reputable journals. What that translates is a lot of dry passages, written at a level devoid of the more sophisticated prose and dense ideas the College Board expects you to be able to navigate. What you'll get—once again—is a section that looks like the New SAT Reading but is testing a comprehension level closer to that tested on the TOEFL test (that's the test for those who learn English as a foreign language).

Verdict:

Use the Kaplan book for math strategies and practice; steer clear of the verbal.

Math: B+

Verbal: D-

Princeton Review 500+ Practice Questions for the New SAT



At the time of this review, Princeton Review has yet to release a general guide. A practice test guide will be due out shortly (I'll review that as soon as I can). For now, we are left with lots of questions and very little guidance/strategies/concept review.

While I could easily fault this book (500+ Practice Questions for the New SAT: Created for the Redesigned 2016 Exam) for the lack of these things, it would be unfair to do so, because the purpose of this book is to be a question bank. And on that level it scores a resounding meh. That is not to say it won't be of use to lower-level students (you can probably see where my review is going). The

Princeton Review has created questions that while perfectly legitimate aren't quite as complex and nuanced as those found on the actual test. And you know what? That's not necessarily a bad thing—if you are just starting off.

For many that's exactly what will be happening on the new test. The question types and the format will be unfamiliar. The Princeton Review is a great introduction. You won't feel quite as challenged and will be able to focus on the new format. Once you feel confident with the Princeton Review book you can move on to College Board material.

I should make it clear that I'm not saying oh this book is just an easy version of the test. I'm saying it is an easier version of the real thing and it is a valid version. Unlike, Kaplan's verbal, for instance, which—at least for verbal—is much easier than the real test, yet an inaccurate kind of easy, the Princeton Review mostly stays true the underlying subtleties of the questions and answer choices. It just doesn't have the hard-level question that make up 15-20% of the actual test.

Of course, you'll have to pick up another book to help you with strategies and to review the fundamentals. Indeed, you'll need a book that also has practice tests, since this book is only filled with one drill after another. But as a companion guide to a book of strategies and fundamentals, this book is a great place to start.

Verdict:

A great place to start drilling, especially if you are new to the test. But for practice tests and more difficult questions you'll need another book.

Grade: B

Additional Test Prep Resources

Magoosh SAT YouTube Channel

We help you ace the SAT with short, informative videos that aren't totally boring to watch. :) Search MagooshSAT on YouTube to check us out.

ACT Prep Resources

We all know that the ACT and SAT test are pretty different from one another: different formats, different scoring, different subjects tested. However, if you're preparing for both exams, you'll start to notice that there is quite a bit of overlap when it comes to required skills.

Don't think about the two exams as the ACT vs. the SAT, but as more of an ACT/SAT venn diagram. They share a lot of content, especially at a basic level.

So, with that in mind, feel free to use some of Magoosh ACT's free resources to brush up on your basic skills:

- [ACT Flashcards](#): To improve your general math and grammar skills.
- [SAT Math Formula eBook](#): For brushing up on your basic math skills.

Your College Search

Not sure where to begin your college search? Feeling completely lost and confused?

Well guess what? In my humble opinion, I think that means you are actually one step ahead of the game. Despite all the talk out there about a “college search,” the vast majority of college applicants never truly search for a school themselves. They make a list of colleges their friends like, their parents like, their counselors like, or simply schools they’ve seen on t-shirts or on TV. I was one of these students. I never looked outside of my own backyard, and when I started learning about all the amazing colleges and universities that are out there later on, boy, did I have some regrets.

So, first, pat yourself on the back just for being on the mission to uncover the right college for you. Now, let’s talk about how you can find it.

Step 1: Take an Inventory of Yourself

Ask yourself these questions: What do I like and dislike about my current school? How do I learn best? Do I like to study alone or with a group? Do I like to have personal interactions with my teachers? Do I like socializing in large or small groups? Does climate have a serious impact on me? Do I need to be close to home? Do I like to be involved in a lot of activities? Do I need school spirit? sports? theatre? There are so many questions to ask and lots of resources for self-assessments out there. Here is one that we particularly like (on schoolbuff.com). Taking stock of what you want and need will help you know what to look for as you research schools.

Step 2: Establish Your Must-Haves

Take a look at the following list of criteria and determine what your requirements are for each category. Are there any deal-breakers? Are there any you don’t have particularly strong feelings about? Be careful of eliminating anything you aren’t sure about at this point: If you’ve never seen a small liberal arts school before, how do you know you don’t want to go to one? If you don’t know, then make some college visits before you rule anything out.

Curriculum: Have you already decided on a major to pursue? Do you want to make sure you have options? Do you want to have a core curriculum or total freedom? Do you want to double major? Do you want to design your own major?

Location: Is it important for you to be close/far from home? In a certain geographical region or climate?

Size: Small? Medium? Large? Mega? Don’t forget to consider the size of the individual program you are looking at, not just the whole school.

Resources: Do you need specific resources for learning needs or psychological, social, or medical concerns? Desire a strong cultural or ethnic group support network? Want robust internships or research opportunities?

Activities: What types of activities are you interested in participating in in college, both on and off campus? What type of leadership, service, study abroad, etc. opportunities would you like to pursue?

Cost and Financial Aid: How much can you/your family afford to pay for college? What level of financial aid do you need?

Step 3: Research, Explore, and Visit

Once you've determined what you are looking for in a college experience, you can begin exploring schools that meet your criteria. College Navigator and College Scorecard are good tools to launch your college search based on the criteria you've established. (You can also check out our list of the best free online resources for your college search below!)

Once you've developed an exploratory list, lay out a plan for visits. If you don't have the time or means to visit colleges far away, pick a selection of different types of schools within a day's drive. Plan out a handful of weekend trips to visit 2 to 4 schools each weekend (any more and they will all start to run together in your mind).

For the schools you can't visit (and even for the ones you can), do research online, get on mailing lists, visit with the rep when they come to your school, talk to current students and alumni, and go to college fairs. Learn as much as you can!

Step 4: Refine Your List

Once you've done your exploration, refine your college list. The length of this list can vary. Some students have three or four schools, others have fifteen. Whatever you do, make sure to cover your bases. You should have a balance of good bets (schools you have more than a 75% chance of getting into), targets (schools you have a 25% to 75% chance of getting into), and reaches (schools you have less than a 25% chance of getting into).

Step 5: Express Your Interest

Now that *you* know which schools you are interested in, make sure *they* know it too! Take advantage of opportunities for interviews and meetings with representatives and alumni; get on their mailing list. Even if these contacts don't seem to lead anywhere, when it comes time for your application, you will be able to check off all sorts of boxes that show your demonstrated interest in the school and your essays will reflect your effort. Go to each school's website and find the admissions representative who will be reading your application (sometimes

this is based on the alphabet or geography, sometimes on other criteria). This person is going to be your contact throughout the admissions process. Definitely don't pester them, but don't hesitate to reach out if you have important questions or if you need to follow up with information regarding your application.

Remember, this is YOUR college search! All sorts of people—from your parents to your friends to your teachers—are going to have their own thoughts about it. Listen to them, but don't be swayed by the opinions of others. If you have a better sense of who you are and what you want in a school, you'll be much less likely to fall into this trap and far more likely to fall in love with your chosen school once you get there.

Free College Search Resources

Fortunate college applicants of the Internet age! You have so many resources at your fingertips to find the right school for you! Here are ten of our favorite free resources for an online college search.

College Scorecard: A user-friendly and engaging tool to search for schools from the U.S. government College Affordability and Transparency Center based on a range of criteria. You can also find out how much the average student pays for a school, how much they borrow, and graduation and employment prospects.

College Confidential SuperMatch: A search tool that uses 20 criteria (attributes such as location, major, diversity, special services, and party scene) to help you find the right school for you. It uses a “fuzzy” approach to ranking schools based on your preferences, meaning it finds not only the perfect matches, but also the schools that are pretty darn close.

College Navigator: Not quite as fun as College Confidential’s tool, but is an authoritative one hosted by the National Center for Education Statistics. You can search for schools by criteria, compare them side by side, and pinpoint school locations on an interactive map.

Big Future from the College Board: Another well-respected search tool. Of particular note is the ability to find schools based on test scores, those that offer academic credit for advanced high school courses, and those that meet financial aid needs.

U.S. News and World Report Best Colleges: The most famous national source of college rankings, highly anticipated each year. You will need either a website subscription or a purchase of the magazine for full details on the rankings.

Colleges that Change Lives: A non-profit organization promoting a small group of liberal arts colleges supporting a student-centered college experience. Also has numerous quality resources for a general college search.

Best Colleges: Uses compiled information from various sources to rank colleges on specific features (for example, online colleges that offer free laptops, tuition-free colleges, and colleges with lowest out-of-state tuition)

eCampus Tours: Offers 360-degree virtual tours of 1300 campuses.

College Week Live: A virtual college fair. Live chat with admissions representatives and students at 300+ colleges and universities.

Niche (formerly College Prowler): aims provides the “real dirt” on colleges; students review aspects of the college experience at their respective schools, such as the sports scene or campus food. Lots of information; take individual student opinions with a grain of salt, though.

Unigo: Similar to Niche. Compiles student reviews on various schools.

Intro to Financial Aid

For high school seniors everywhere, navigating the ins and outs of financial aid can be completely confusing. So many deadlines, so many forms, so many weird acronyms that would make interesting band names (FAFSA NATION, anyone?).

In all honesty, everything can get a bit overwhelming. In this section, we'll try to guide you through the basics of the process step-by-step.

But first of all...

Why do I need financial aid?

College is a wallet demolisher. Costs not only include tuition, but room and board, textbooks, personal and travel expenses, and well, you name it. It's expensive! More and more students these days are graduating with enormous amounts of debt — debt that would not exist in such considerable quantities if more people had known how to maximize the amount of financial aid they were eligible for.

There is a nifty calculator on finaid.org for calculating how much financial aid you could qualify for based on your EFC (Estimated Family Contribution). Even if you don't think you will qualify for much aid, you should try anyways. There really is no risk involved.

Financial aid can come in the form of institution-based financial aid, given out by the school; federal aid; and separate scholarships run by private organizations. They are all important, and they can all save you from becoming bankrupt, becoming homeless, and living in a cardboard box crying over your framed diploma.



Image from speedbump.com

Deadlines

The FAFSA, CSS, scholarship applications, Cal grants, tax return information...there are so many forms to send in! All colleges usually have a specific deadline as to when they'd like to receive these.

Before you start any of this process, it's important to write down all of your deadlines for all of your schools. When you're mailing material in, deadlines are usually a lot more flexible — but it's still important to get all of your materials mailed in on time.

For a lot of colleges, these forms are due at the beginning of February. Other colleges have deadlines toward March or even April and May. If you can't find deadline information on one of your colleges, call the Admissions Office! It won't hurt to check!

So...what are all these forms I have to submit?

The most popular and well-known form is the infamous FAFSA.

It stands for the “Free Application for Federal Student Aid,” which basically speaks for itself. It’s completely free, and if you enter in all financial info and submit your application, you can receive an estimate for how much the government can give you. This application is nice because you can submit the same one to all of your schools.

Within a few weeks of submitting the FAFSA, a paper Student Aid Report will be mailed to you, detailing information from your FAFSA and your Expected Family Contribution. If you also provided an email, you’ll receive a link to your results after just a few days.

Overall, the FAFSA a bit faster and easier to complete than the other major financial aid form...

CSS

The “College Scholarship Service” is not required by every school — in fact many schools only require the FAFSA! There are about 200 colleges, however, that do require the CSS Profile. These colleges include a lot of the top schools, like the Ivy Leagues. Check with your school to see if it requires this form! Otherwise, you might be missing out on a huge portion of financial aid.

Using information provided on the CSS, they will compute how much institutional aid you are eligible for. If your Estimated Family Contribution is less than the college’s tuition fees, you can qualify for need-based financial aid! The CSS Profile is run by College Board, and because College Board hasn’t milked your wallet enough already, there is a \$25 application fee and a \$16 fee for every additional school. If you are applying to 10+ schools, we sympathize with you.

Separate financial aid documents

1) Institution-specific

There are some schools like Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania that have their own separate financial aid forms as well. For Princeton, if you already submitted a CSS form, you can sync the information from CSS to Princeton’s own application form to make the process quicker. These institution-specific forms can be difficult to find. Make sure you know if any of your schools require this!

2) Cal grants

If you are applying to any school in California, make sure you have this done! Cal grants offer financial aid/grants to anyone attending a California university — and according to its website, you can receive up to \$12,192 in financial aid that you don't have to pay back. All you have to do is fill out the FAFSA and have your counselor fill out a GPA verification form. The deadline is normally early March.

3) Tax returns

This is a particularly annoying part of the financial aid process, but it's necessary nonetheless. Lots of schools require copies of your tax returns in order to verify your imputed information. This means the entire tax return packet: all forms and schedules included, signed by both of your parents. College Board has a nifty service called IDOC through which you can send these digitally. You can also make copies and physically send it out to your colleges, but this is very labor intensive.

Other

Merit Aid

This is another type of student aid which is awarded based off of your academic, athletic, musical, etc. achievements, rather than your family situation. Unfortunately, most of the elite colleges in the U.S. do not offer academic merit aid (and only offer need-based aid), so this is considerably less common.

Private scholarships

Sometimes, you can receive an institutionally-based scholarship just by sending in your application. No extra forms needed. There are tons of other scholarships out there, however, that require a little bit more initiative on your part.

Go and look up scholarships that are being offered locally — or scholarships that pertain to your demographic, career goals, major choice, etc. Forbes has a nice list of 10 highest-paying scholarships for college. But you're not limited to just those! Be proactive — there are tons of them out there.

Takeaway

This article does not cover all of your financial aid options by far, but hopefully it helped out a bit with clearing up the process! It's tricky, but in the end it will definitely be worth it.

Don't let the cost of college get you down. With the right financial aid, you can do anything.



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