

General Information

The essay portion of the SAT exam, while discontinued for the general SAT administration, is still available for certain state partners as part of SAT School Day administrations. It occupies a **50-minute period**, during which you will **read, analyze, and comment** on an author's success at building an **argument**. You won't need to decide if you agree or disagree with the author, but you will need to **find evidence that the author did a good job** or that he/she failed in any way. You will only write **one essay** based on **one prompt** and the **reading of a 650- to 750-word passage**.

Essay Test Conditions

While the passage on which you will reflect will be different each time the SAT exam essay is administered, there are certain things you can count on, no matter when you take the test. Here is a list of things you can expect on the SAT exam essay.

Order of Testing

The essay portion of the SAT exam is **always the last section** you will take. It is given after all of the multiple-choice sections. This allows students who choose not to take the optional essay test to complete their tasks and leave the test center.

Format

All essays will be written in an **essay booklet** (separate from the test booklet containing the reading passage you will analyze) that will be provided at the test center. You will complete the essay **in your own**

handwriting and only within the pages of the essay booklet. You may not write in the booklet containing the reading passage.

Introduction

The same, or virtually the **same, introduction and directions are used for all administrations** of the SAT exam essay. Only the given reading passage will differ, but it will **always be an argumentative or persuasive piece** on a topic considered to be **general knowledge**. The directions will tell you exactly what to do.

No Life Experience Necessary

Unlike many other essay tests, the SAT exam essay will not ask you to recount one of your past experiences or voice your opinion on an issue. In fact, your score will be higher if you **rely solely on the material contained in the reading passage** you are given to analyze. Combine that with your **analytical and writing skills**, and you'll have the objective essay the test is seeking.

Scoring

As you approach this test, it is important to consider just how your response will be scored. **Two trained people** will review your essay, and each one of them will assess the following three areas of performance and give you a score between 1 and 4 points, on each skill. These scores are based on a detailed scoring “rubric,” or set of guidelines, that is very specific. Then, the **two scores for each skill area are added** and you will receive an essay score of 2–8 points for each area.

Here is a brief description of the skill areas, or “dimensions” that will be assessed. You can find a detailed explanation of what constitutes the scores between 1 and 4. Looking at it will help you know *exactly* what level of writing is expected for each score level.

Reading

Yes, your *reading* ability is assessed in this writing test. While the test does not ask comprehension questions, your **level of understanding** will become very apparent through your writing. Scorers will consider things like your use and the interrelation of text details in your writing. You have to really understand a passage to do these things well.

Analysis

Scorers will be looking for **insight in your writing** as proof you can analyze the given argumentative passage. Things like finding **evidence** in the passage and your **commentary** on the author's style and use of writing conventions will be important. Citing **support for every assertion** you make in your essay is key. This evidence must be explicitly stated or implied in the given passage and you must point it out in your writing.

Writing

A high score on the SAT exam essay will also reflect your actual writing ability. Your essay will be evaluated for organization, language usage, sentence structure, and correct use of Standard Written English. Note that the scorers are looking for a **formally written, objective** essay—one that is free of errors and free of opinion. All statements must be based on something stated in the passage you read.

Specific Skills to Look For and Exhibit

Writing has many components. As you complete the essay portion of the SAT exam, it is important for you to focus on those skills on which you will be assessed. You know, from your high school writing experience, how well you can do the following things. It is interesting that you will be looking for these things in the passage you read for this test, so spend a little extra time on anything here that has given you trouble in the past.

Evidence

While you will be looking for specific statements by the author that support his/her argument, a major focus should be on *how* the statements were used. Were they just listed, all at once, or did the author take time to connect the reader through explanation? What kinds of **examples** were given and are they **relevant** to the author's argument? Did the author rely too much on one piece of evidence and, thereby, weaken the argument? How can you use evidence when you write?

Reasoning

A writer can produce a very long passage, yet say nothing that really supports an argument. Examine the **reasoning of the author** and be sure the reasoning in your writing is sound and not just "fluff." Does it **speak to the point** and is it **valid**? What is the **premise** of the author's argument and is that premise true or valid? What **assumptions** does the author make and are they accurate and true? Finally, does the **conclusion** to which the author comes **make sense**, in light of the evidence he/she has presented? Is there **anything missing** from the argument? These are all questions that will help you formulate a well-written essay.

Style and Elements of Persuasion

A writer's style can make all the difference in passage effectiveness. The organization and structure of a passage are important. Sometimes, it is important to deal with the most important and strongest points first. For other purposes, authors may build to the strongest point, in a sort of "save the best for last" method. Know what **style and structure** to use for different purposes and be able to analyze what kind of style and structure the writer of a passage uses. For example, some writers use repetition of a phrase to emphasize a point. Others may use a questioning format to introduce topics, thus engaging the reader.

Word Usage

While basic structure and content form the skeleton of an essay, the particular words you use help flesh it out and can make your argument more effective. Look for **varied and appropriate word usage** in your writing and the writing of others. Develop an extensive vocabulary in both reading and writing. This does not mean that you should strictly pepper your writing with high-level words. Scorers will be looking for **variety** and **appropriate use**, so be sure you really understand the meaning of the words you use.

Standard Written English

If you find that you make a lot of mistakes in **grammar, punctuation, or spelling**, take some time for extra practice in these areas and learn to spot mistakes. Be sure you know the rules. This will be important during the essay test as you proofread your finished essay. One important thing to watch for is the use of commonly confused words, like *affect* and *effect*. Part of your essay score will reflect errors of this type.

Other Tips and Tricks

In general, specific types of practice will make your SAT exam essay practice more productive. Here are some ideas.

Read a Lot!

It is hard to accurately judge the strength of another writer's argument unless you have read the good and the bad, as well as the in-between. Seek out known, published authors and experts to get an idea of what is contained in a "good" argument. Don't forget to also look for inaccuracies in this writing—not every subject expert is an "argument expert." Then, look for less formal writing, like newspaper editorials, which are written by others who may be less apt to present a well-thought-out argument that is well-supported by details. Practice assessing how well each author did and be sure to cite exact evidence from the text.

Analyze Everything You Read

Even when you don't have a pen in hand, get in the habit of reading "with an analyst's eye." Just because an author makes a statement, that doesn't mean it's fact, or even believable. Demand evidence in your mind and look for it as you read further. Constantly ask the question, "What makes him/her so sure this is true? How was this presented and why was it effective, or not effective?" This habit will not only prepare you for this test, but it will make you a better reader.

Practice Proving

As you are reading the writing of others, practice finding evidence. If you finish a paragraph that is written to prove a point, go back afterward and try to find what the author used to prove the point. Was it a stated fact from an authority, a documented statistic, or did the author just make a statement and use unrelated facts to finish the paragraph, never really proving anything? If you read something and end up with a new opinion on a subject, go back through the text and find reasons for your new thoughts. Be sure to note rhetorical tools the author used to present points, including style, use of language, and structure.

Practice *Objective* Writing

Historically, a great deal of school writing involves stating your opinion or giving an account of an event. SAT essay writing should involve neither of these. Practice analyzing a piece of writing based strictly on what is contained in the passage, citing evidence directly from the passage. The only judgment required in your SAT exam essay writing is that of deciding if another author did a good job and telling why that is the case.

Test Day "Do Nots"

Do not write off-topic. Your essay will not be scored.

Do not express your own feelings on the issue in the passage. Your score will be low.

Do not forget to keep the time limit in mind. Although 50 minutes has been shown by careful study to be plenty of time for this task, you still need to pace yourself. This way, you are more likely to finish and have a few minutes to proofread and do minor edits to your finished piece.
