

# SAT Essay

## It's About the Real World

The SAT Essay is a lot like a typical college writing assignment in which you're asked to analyze a text. Take the SAT with Essay and show colleges that you're ready to come to campus and write.

## What You'll Do

Read a passage.

Explain how the author builds an argument to persuade an audience.

Support your explanation with evidence from the passage.

## What's New

The SAT's essay component has had a total makeover:

It's optional — but some schools will require it. Get College SAT Essay policies.

You have 50 minutes to complete your essay, 25 minutes more than the required essay that was part of the SAT students took before March 2016.

You won't be asked to agree or disagree with a position on a topic or to write about your personal experience.

## The Essay Prompt

The prompt (question) shown below, or a nearly identical one, is used every time the new SAT is given.

As you read the passage below, consider how [the author] uses evidence, such as facts or examples, to support claims.

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reasoning to develop ideas and to connect claims and evidence.

stylistic or persuasive elements, such as word choice or appeals to emotion, to add power to the ideas expressed.

Write an essay in which you explain how [the author] builds an argument to persuade [his/her] audience that [author's claim]. In your essay, analyze how [the author] uses one or more of the features listed above (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of [his/her] argument. Be sure that your analysis focuses on the most relevant features of the passage. Your essay should not explain whether you agree with [the author's] claims, but rather explain how the author builds an argument to persuade [his/her] audience.

### **The Topic**

You can count on seeing the same prompt no matter when you take the new SAT with Essay, but the passage will be different every time.

All passages have these things in common:

Written for a broad audience

Argue a point

Express subtle views on complex subjects

Use logical reasoning and evidence to support claims

Examine ideas, debates, or trends in the arts and sciences, or civic, cultural, or political life

Always taken from published works

All the information you need to write your essay will be included in the passage or in notes about it.

### **What the SAT Essay Measures**

The SAT Essay shows how well you understand the passage and use it as the basis for a well-written, thought-out discussion. The two people who score your essay will each award between 1 and 4 points in each of these three categories:

**Reading:** A successful essay shows that you understood the passage, including the interplay of central ideas and important details. It also shows an effective use of textual evidence.

**Analysis:** A successful essay shows your understanding of how the author builds an argument by:

Examining the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and other stylistic and persuasive techniques

Supporting and developing claims with well-chosen evidence from the passage

**Writing:** A successful essay is focused, organized, and precise, with an appropriate style and tone that varies sentence structure and follows the conventions of standard written English.

**The difference between the 3 and 4 essays scores in Reading, Analysis, and Writing** (a total score of 8 comes from two readers separately giving your essay a 4 in each of those three areas).

We've marked the differences between the 3 and 4 criteria in bold.

	Proficient: Score of 3 (6)	Advanced: Score of 4 (8)	Major Differences
Reading	The response demonstrates effective comprehension of the source text. The response shows an understanding of the text's central idea(s) and important details. The response is free of substantive errors of fact and interpretation with regard to the text. The response makes appropriate use of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, or both), demonstrating an understanding of the source text.	The response demonstrates <b>thorough comprehension</b> of the source text. The response shows an understanding of the text's central idea(s) and of <b>most important details and how they interrelate, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the text.</b> The response is <b>free of errors</b> of fact or interpretation with regard to the text. The response makes <b>skillful use</b> of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, or both), demonstrating a <b>complete understanding</b> of the source text.	A 3 essay demonstrates your understanding of the text's central ideas, while a 4 essay also shows that you know <b>what the details and examples in the text are and how they relate to the central idea.</b>
Analysis	The response offers an effective analysis of the source text and demonstrates an understanding of the analytical task. The response competently evaluates the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements, and/or feature(s) of	The response offers an <b>insightful analysis</b> of the source text and demonstrates a <b>sophisticated understanding</b> of the analytical task. The response offers a <b>thorough, well-considered evaluation</b> of the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements, and/or feature(s) of the student's own choosing. The response	The 4 essay delves into the structure of the author's argument more deeply. The writer not only states the techniques used in the text, but also <b>thoroughly explains their impact on the reader.</b> These explanations are backed up with evidence from the text that enhances the writer's discussion of

the student's own choosing. The response contains relevant and sufficient support for claim(s) or point(s) made. The response focuses primarily on those features of the text that are most relevant to addressing the task.

contains relevant, sufficient, and **strategically chosen support** for claim(s) or point(s) made. The response **focuses consistently** on those features of the text that are most relevant to addressing the task.

the structure of the text.

## Writing

The response is mostly cohesive and demonstrates effective use and control of language. The response includes a central claim or implicit controlling idea. The response includes an effective introduction and conclusion. The response demonstrates a clear progression of ideas both within paragraphs and throughout the essay. The response has variety in sentence structures. The response demonstrates some precise word choice. The response maintains a formal style and objective tone. The response shows a good control of the conventions of standard written English and is free of significant errors that detract from the quality of writing.

The response is cohesive and demonstrates a highly effective use and command of language. The response includes a precise central claim. The response includes a **skillful introduction** and conclusion. The response demonstrates **adefinite and highly effective progression of ideas** both within paragraphs and throughout the essay. The response has a wide variety in sentence structures. The response demonstrates **aconsistent use of precise word choice**. The response maintains a formal style and objective tone. The response shows a strong command of the conventions of standard written English and is **free or virtually free of errors**.

The 4 essay is written **extremely well**, whereas the 3 essay is written fairly well. In addition, the 4 essay is **isorganized** in a way that positively influences the impact of the writer's argument, while the 3 is just organized clearly.

Let's condense the information above. **A perfect 4 essay:**

- is extremely clear
- is consistent, smooth, and easy to read



- has few errors
- is not repetitive in content or language
- is sufficiently detailed (using evidence from the text) to fully support the writer's thesis
- demonstrates that you understand the text and the author's claim(s)

In other words, you need to excel in **every one of these aspects** to get a perfect score.

## Few Tips for the SAT essay

### 1: Give a Clear Thesis

Your essay needs to make a clear argument that the reader can easily identify. All you have to do to create your "precise central claim" is to identify the main idea of the passage and list the methods the author uses to support it.

### 2: Include Both an Introduction and a Conclusion

Including an introduction paragraph in your essay is absolutely essential to getting a Writing score above a 4/8. The introduction paragraph introduces the reader to what you'll be talking about and allows you to set up the structure for the rest of the essay. Plus, an introduction can be a pretty good indicator of the quality for the rest of the essay – a poorly constructed introduction is often a warning that the essay that follows will be equally discombobulated. It's best to have both an introduction and a conclusion, but if you're running short on time and can only have one, definitely pick the introduction.

A good introduction includes your thesis statement. For the SAT essay, as I discussed in the previous point, your thesis (or your "precise central claim") should be a statement about what devices the author uses to build her/his argument.

Introductions can be tricky to write, because whatever you write in that paragraph can then make you feel like you're locked into writing just about that. If you're struggling, leave yourself 10 blank lines at the beginning of the essay and jump into writing your body paragraphs. Just make sure you remember to go back and write in your introduction before time's up!

### 3: Use Effective Language and Word Choice

For most of us, this is an area that takes a long time to develop, so unless your language skills are really rough or you're prepping a year ahead of time (or both), you'll probably get more out of focusing on the other components of the essay. Don't be repetitive and don't make grammar mistakes. In addition, you should avoid using first person statements like "I" or "My" in the essay, along with any other informality. You're writing the equivalent of a school paper, not an opinion piece.

### 4: Only Use Information from the Passage

All the relevant information is in the passage, so avoid getting drawn into the topic and using your outside knowledge – you want to be sure to show that you've read the passage.

In real life, there are many ways to support a thesis, depending on the topic. But on the SAT, there's one kind of correct support: specific details drawn from the passage you're asked to analyze.

#### 5: Focus Your Essay on Relevant Details

You don't have to mention every single detail that makes the argument effective. In fact, your essay will be more coherent and more likely to score higher in Analysis if you focus your discussion on just a few points. It's more important to show that you're able to pick out the most important parts of the argument and explain their function than it is to be able to identify every single persuasive device the author used. Think about it as if you were asked to write a 50-minute essay describing the human face and what each part does. A clear essay would just focus on major features - eyes, nose, and mouth. A less effective essay might also try to discuss cheekbones, eyebrows, eyelashes, skin pores, chin clefts, and dimples as well. While all of these things are part of the face, it would be hard to get into detail about each of the parts in just 50 minutes.

#### 6: Read the Prompt Before the Passage

Why? Because the prompt includes the description of the author's claim. Knowing what the author's claim is going into the article can help keep you focused on the argument, rather than getting caught up in reading the passage (especially if the topic is one you're interested in).

#### 7: Your Facts Must Be Accurate...But Your Interpretation Doesn't Have to Be

A big part of the Analysis score for the SAT essay is not just identifying the devices the author uses to build her argument, but explaining the effect that the use of these devices has on the reader. You don't have to be completely, 100% accurate about the effect the passage has on the reader, because there is no one right answer. As long as you are convincing in your explanation and cite specific examples, you'll be good.

Here's an example of an interpretation about what effect a persuasive device has on the reader (backed by evidence from the passage):

*Lindsay appeals to the emotions of her readers by describing the forlorn, many-eyed creatures that stare reproachfully at her from old school notebook margins. The sympathy the readers feel for these forgotten doodles is expertly transferred to Lindsay herself when she draws the connection between the drawn monsters and her own life: "Often, I feel like one of these monsters – hidden away in my studio, brushes yearning to create what no one else cares to see."*

Now, you don't necessarily know for sure if "sympathy for the doodles" is what the author was going for in her passage. The SAT essay graders probably don't know either (unless one of them wrote the

passage). But as long as you can make a solid case for your interpretation, using facts and quotes from the passage to back it up, you'll be good.

#### 8: You Should Write More Than One Page

This has always been true for the SAT essay, but for the first time ever, the College Board actually came out in The Official SAT Study Guide and explicitly said that length really does matter. Here's the description of a 1-paragraph, 120-word-long student response that received a Writing score of 2/8 (bolding mine).

*"Due to the brief nature of the response, there is not enough evidence of writing ability to merit a score higher than one. Overall, this response demonstrates inadequate writing."* (source: *The Official SAT Study Guide (March 2016 & Beyond)*, p. 206)

You'll have one page for (ungraded) scrap paper that you can use to plan out your essay, and four pages of writing paper for the essay – plan on writing at least two pages for your essay.

#### 9: Be Objective When Reading the Passage

Being able to stay detached while reading the passage you'll be writing the essay about can be tricky. This task might be especially difficult for students who were used to the old SAT essay (which pretty much made it mandatory for you to choose one side or the other). You'll have to practice reading persuasive essays and gaining objectivity (so that you are able to write about how the argument is constructed, not whether it's good or bad).

A good way to practice this is to read news articles on topics you care deeply about by people who hold the opposite view that you do. For instance, as a composer and violist/violinist, I might read articles about how children should not be encouraged to play musical instruments, since it holds no practical value later on in life (a view I disagree with vehemently). I would then work on my objectivity by jotting down the central ideas, most important details, and how these details relate to the central ideas of the article.

Being able to understand the central ideas in the passage and details without being sidetracked by rage (or other emotions) is key to writing an effective SAT essay.

#### 10 : Support Your Points With Concrete Evidence From the Passage

The best way to get a high Reading score for your essay is to quote from the passage appropriately to support your points. This shows not only that you've read the passage (without your having to summarize the passage at all), but also that you understand what the author is saying and the way the author constructed her argument.

As an alternative to using direct quotations from the passage, it's also okay to paraphrase some of what you discuss. If you are explaining the author's argument in your own words, however, you need to be extra careful to make sure that the facts you're stating are accurate - in contrast to scoring on the old SAT essay, scoring on the new SAT essay takes into account factual inaccuracies and penalizes you for them.

### 11: Keep Your Essay Organized

The main point to take away from this is that you should follow the standard structure for an SAT essay (introduction-body-body-conclusion). Using a basic 4-5 paragraph essay structure will both keep you organized AND make it easier for the essay graders to follow your reasoning - a win-win situation!

Furthermore, you should connect each paragraph to each other through effective transitions.

### 12: Make Time to Read, Analyze, Plan, Write, and Revise

Make sure you allocate appropriate amounts of time for each of the steps you'll need to take to write the essay – 50 minutes may seem like a long time, but it goes by awfully quick with all the things you need to do. Reading the passage, analyzing the argument, planning your essay, writing your essay, and revising are all important components for writing.

### 13: Practice

The more you practice the analysis and the writing, the better you'll get at the task of writing an SAT essay (as you work up to it a little at a time).

It's especially important to practice the analysis and writing components of the essay if you are a slow reader (since reading speed can be difficult to change). Being able to analyze and write quickly can help balance out the extra time you take to read and comprehend the material (plus, the time you put into working on analysis and writing will yield greater rewards than time spent trying to increase your reading speed).

But don't forget: while it's okay to break up the practice at first, you also really do need to get practice buckling down and doing the whole task in one sitting.