

# Meet the New SAT

Here's what to expect from both the current version and the overhaul, coming in 2016

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If you're reading this book as a senior, you're preparing to sit - or have already sat - for the familiar 2400-point SAT, complete with its fancy vocabulary words and mandatory essay. But members of the class of 2017 will soon begin prepping for a completely overhauled test. Last year, College Board President David Coleman announced major revisions to the fall 2015 PSAT and the spring 2016 SAT, saying the SAT had "become disconnected from the work of high schools."

The changes, which include going back to the old 1600-point composite score based on 800-point math and "evidence-based" reading and writing sections and making the essay optional, are intended to better reflect the material students are, or should be, learning in high school. They also are aimed at improving the SAT's reliability as an indicator of how prepared applicants are to tackle college work. The current test is designed more to get at innate abilities; hence the "scholastic aptitude" of the SAT's original name.

The new test "aligns with the

Common Core curriculum standards," says Kasey Urquidez, dean of undergraduate admissions at the University of Arizona, who believes that the changes will be beneficial. Defenders of the current test think the change could weaken what they see as an effective tool to identify smart, capable students at academically weaker schools.

One big innovation is the way vocabulary will be handled; rather than test students' knowledge of obscure words out of context (like "cruciverbalist," "mellifluous" or "prestidigitation"), the focus will be on so-called high-utility words that appear in many disciplines, and they'll be used in a passage.

For example, after reading a selection about population density that uses the word "intense," test-takers might be asked which word has the closest meaning: "emotional," "concentrated," "brilliant" or "determined." Many college officials think this shift will let students from all backgrounds show what they really know, not just what they've memorized in prepping. But others remain a fan of the way the current test gets students to tap their critical thinking skills and knowledge of Greek and Latin roots.

## The new SAT will also require students to draw conclusions

by taking account of evidence, to revise and edit text, to analyze data and interpret graphs, and to solve the types of math problems most commonly seen in college courses

and the workplace. It's no coincidence, observers say, that the new test will more closely resemble the ACT, which has been growing ever more popular. (The format of the ACT isn't changing, but the company is making the optional essay a more analytical exercise and is breaking out new scores measuring job skills and proficiency in science, technology, engineering and math.) The redesigned SAT will last three hours, with an extra 50 minutes allotted for an optional essay in which students will analyze a passage and how the author builds an argument. Another popular change is the elimination of the guessing penalty, the practice of subtracting points for wrong answers.

Everyone can take advantage of one much-heralded development already in effect: the College Board's partnership with the nonprofit Khan Academy to provide free online test prep materials. The idea is to start by taking a practice SAT, then master the material by watching in-depth explanatory videos and answering as many practice questions as you want. Starting with the 2015 PSAT, a personalized dashboard will allow students to track their progress.

Whichever test you take, devoting time to practice should increase your comfort level. But some experts advise against sitting for the real thing several times in an attempt to raise your score; some colleges may ask to see all your results - and they certainly want to see you engaged in more activities than test prep. Try to keep the testing in perspective, urges Stuart Schmill, dean of admissions at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "There is some predictive value in SAT scores, but they are not determinative," he says. "And factors like persistence, resilience and organizational skills, which aren't measured on tests, also predict future academic success."

In fact, many fine colleges have concluded that they don't need test scores to make admissions decisions (story, Page 145). The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (fairtest.org) maintains a database of those that de-emphasize the tests or are "test-optional," meaning applicants choose whether to submit scores or not. ●