

Helping Higher Education Understand the SAT Essay

Over 1.2 million students in the class of 2017 completed the SAT Essay, designed to closely reflect the analytical writing required of students throughout college and career.

What Does the SAT Essay Measure?

The SAT[®] Essay assesses whether students can comprehend an appropriately challenging source text and craft an effective written analysis, supported by critical reasoning and evidence drawn from the source text. This is a departure from many standardized direct-writing assessments designed to elicit subjective opinions. The SAT Essay reports three scores: reading, analysis, and writing.

Quick Facts

- Students have **50 minutes** to complete the optional Essay (twice as long as they did before March 2016 and 10 minutes more than on the ACT).
- The SAT Essay has a **common prompt**. The task is consistent for all SAT administrations. It's the source text on which test takers base their response changes.
- All passages are taken from **high-quality, previously published sources**. The passage is approximately 650-750 words in length and has a level of complexity appropriate for high school students.
- The SAT Essay emphasizes and assesses **command of evidence**. It requires test takers to make purposeful, substantive use of textual evidence in a way that can be evaluated objectively.
- Essays are **scored on three dimensions**: reading, analysis, and writing. Each is scored on a scale 2–8, the combination of two independent, trained raters' scores on a 1–4 scale.
- Scores for the SAT Essay are reported separately from other scores and do not factor into the total SAT score.

Key Features of the SAT Essay

- Use of a common prompt
- Emphasis on analysis of argument
- Use of clear, transparent scoring criteria

Common Prompt

Although the source text differs for each SAT form, the following prompt is consistent across administrations, as shown here:

As you read the passage below, consider how [author] uses:

- *evidence, such as facts or examples, to support claims.*
- *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.*

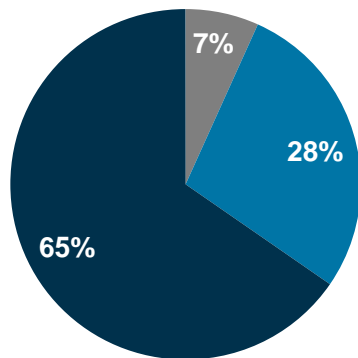
Write an essay in which you explain how [author] builds an argument to persuade the audience that [insert claim]. In your essay, analyze how [author] uses one or more of the features listed in the box above (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of the argument. Be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

Source Text

The passages present arguments that examine ideas, debates, and trends in the arts, sciences, and civic, cultural, and political life. Passages have wide interest, relevance, and accessibility to a general readership. They convey nuanced views on complex subjects and are selected for their use of evidence, logical reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements. Prior knowledge of the passages' topics is not expected or required.

2017 SAT Cohort Results

The vast majority of test takers in the class of 2017 took the new SAT with Essay.



- Did not take the new SAT (124,183)
- Took the new SAT without Essay (512,841)
- Took the new SAT with Essay (1,202,640)

Score Distribution—Class of 2017

The Essay score distribution is updated annually each fall in the *SAT Suite of Assessments Annual Report*. This information lets colleges evaluate student performance within each essay dimension.

Analysis scores tend to be lower than scores in Reading and Writing. This outcome reflects the complex nature of the analysis component of the SAT Essay. This analysis calls on students to think critically about the ways that an author has strengthened the logic and persuasiveness of an argument.

| Score | Reading | | Analysis | | Writing | |
|-------|---------|----|----------|----|---------|----|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| 8 | 16,637 | 1 | 7,818 | 1 | 15,741 | 1 |
| 7 | 79,201 | 7 | 37,315 | 3 | 72,773 | 6 |
| 6 | 353,272 | 29 | 136,461 | 11 | 357,723 | 30 |
| 5 | 316,490 | 26 | 218,208 | 18 | 302,300 | 25 |
| 4 | 293,143 | 24 | 289,331 | 24 | 293,397 | 24 |
| 3 | 93,524 | 8 | 216,261 | 18 | 101,592 | 8 |
| 2 | 50,373 | 4 | 297,246 | 25 | 59,114 | 5 |

| | | | |
|-------------|---|---|---|
| Mean | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Total Essay Score

The three essay scores give test takers and K–12 educators useful, targeted information to inform skill development. At the request of higher education institutions, we’re providing a percentile rank table based on the sum of the three scores. This allows colleges to evaluate overall student performance in the context of other test takers and provides a more holistic view of test takers’ writing ability.

Currently, the Total Essay Score doesn’t appear on student score reports, nor is it reported to designated higher education or K–12 institutions. The table below reflects test takers’ most recent SAT Essay.

Percentile Rank—Class of 2017

| Total Essay Score | SAT User |
|-------------------|----------|
| 24 | 99+ |
| 23 | 99 |
| 22 | 99 |
| 21 | 98 |
| 20 | 96 |
| 19 | 93 |
| 18 | 88 |
| 17 | 80 |
| 16 | 71 |
| 15 | 62 |
| 14 | 52 |
| 13 | 43 |
| 12 | 34 |
| 11 | 25 |
| 10 | 17 |
| 9 | 11 |
| 8 | 7 |
| 7 | 4 |
| 6 | 1 |

Looking Ahead

Over 1.4 million students in the class of 2018 (69%) took the new SAT with Essay through December 2017.

Scoring Dimensions

The SAT Essay measures three dimensions: reading, analysis, and writing. In broad terms, responses are evaluated for demonstrated comprehension of the source text, quality of analysis of that source text, and quality of writing.

- **Reading:** Test takers who perform well on this dimension demonstrate effective comprehension of the source text; show understanding of its central idea(s) and important details; and make appropriate use of textual evidence.
- **Analysis:** To perform well, test takers must discern which features of the passage are most relevant for analysis (e.g., the author's use of evidence, reasoning, or stylistic and/or persuasive elements) and then offer an effective explanation of how those features help build the author's argument.
- **Writing:** A successful response offers a central claim; is cohesive, having an effective introduction and conclusion and a clear progression of ideas; varies sentence structure and uses precise language; and shows good control of the conventions of Standard Written English.

Essay Dimension vs. Total Score

As the following example shows, having three separate scores provide test takers, K–12 educators, and higher education professionals with targeted information about achievement.

- A test taker who earned an 8 in Reading, a 2 in Analysis, and an 8 in Writing, would be made aware of their advanced reading comprehension and writing skills but would know that they needed to concentrate on strengthening analytical skills.

A single, holistic Essay score reflects a student's skill at a high level that is useful to colleges. However, this total score may obscure important differences in student performance.

- If the three scores in the above example are summed (18), achievement appears identical to that of all other students scoring 18—some of whom will exhibit a very different performance profile and need different learning support or no additional support at all (e.g., demonstrating proficiency across the board as reflected in scores of 6 in Reading, Analysis, and Writing).

Essay Dimensions and Score Ranges

| What the score reflects | Scale |
|---|-------|
| Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comprehension of source text• Understanding of central ideas• Correctness of interpretation of text• Use of textual evidence | 2–8 |
| Analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Insightfulness of analysis of source text• Evaluation of the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and persuasion• Relevance and sufficiency of support for claims• Consistency of focus on relevant features of the text | 2–8 |
| Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cohesiveness; command of the language• Effectiveness of progression of ideas throughout the essay• Variety of sentence structures; preciseness of word choice; style and tone• Command of conventions of standard written English; free from errors | 2–8 |
| Total Essay Score <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading + Analysis + Writing | 6–24 |

How Is the SAT Essay Scored?

Responses to the optional SAT Essay are scored using a carefully designed process. We train every rater to hold every student to the same standards.

Two different people read the essay and award 1–4 points for each dimension based on the scoring guide found on the next page.

- If the two raters' scores on a given dimension are the same or within one point of each other, those scores are added together to yield a dimension score from 2–8.

If the two raters' scores on one or more dimensions are more than one point apart (e.g., scores of 1 and 3), the essay response for the dimension(s) in question is independently scored by a third, senior-level rater that is then doubled, again yielding a score from 2–8.

SAT Essay Scoring Guide

| Reader Score | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-----------------|--|--|--|--|
| Dimension Score | 2 | 4 | 6 | 8 |
| Reading | Demonstrates little or no comprehension of the source text. | Demonstrates some comprehension of the source text. | Demonstrates effective comprehension of the source text. | Demonstrates thorough comprehension of the source text. |
| | Fails to show an understanding of the text's central idea(s), and may include only details without reference to central idea(s). | Shows an understanding of the text's central idea(s) but not of important details. | Shows an understanding of the text's central idea(s) and important details. | Shows an understanding of the text's central idea(s) and of most important details and how they interrelate, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the text. |
| | May contain numerous errors of fact and/or interpretation with regard to the text. | May contain errors of fact and/or interpretation with regard to the text. | Is free of substantive errors of fact and interpretation with regard to the text. | Is free of errors of fact or interpretation with regard to the text. |
| | Makes little or no use of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, or both), demonstrating little or no understanding of the source text. | Makes limited and/or haphazard use of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, or both), demonstrating some understanding of the source text. | Makes appropriate use of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, or both), demonstrating an understanding of the source text. | Makes skillful use of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, or both), demonstrating a complete understanding of the source text. |
| Analysis | Offers little or no discernible analysis (e.g., is largely or exclusively summary) or ineffective analysis of the source text and demonstrates little or no understanding of the analytical task. | Offers limited analysis of the source text and demonstrates only partial understanding of the analytical task. | Offers an effective analysis of the source text and demonstrates an understanding of the analytical task. | Offers an insightful analysis of the source text and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the analytical task. |
| | Identifies without explanation some aspects of the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements, and/or feature(s) of the student's choosing. Or numerous aspects of the response's analysis are unwarranted based on the text. | Identifies and attempts to describe the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements, and/or feature(s) of the student's own choosing, but merely asserts rather than explains their importance, or one or more aspects of the response's analysis are unwarranted based on the text. | Competently evaluates the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements, and/or feature(s) of the student's own choosing. | Offers a thorough, well-considered evaluation of the author's use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive elements, and/or feature(s) of the student's own choosing. |
| | Contains little or no support for claim(s) or point(s) made, or support is largely irrelevant. | Contains little or no support for claim(s) or point(s) made. | Contains relevant and sufficient support for claim(s) or point(s) made. | Contains relevant, sufficient, and strategically chosen support for claim(s) or point(s) made. |
| | May not focus on features of the text that are relevant to addressing the task. | May lack a clear focus on those features of the text that are most relevant to addressing the task. | Focuses primarily on those features of the text that are most relevant to addressing the task. | Focuses consistently on those features of the text that are most relevant to addressing the task. |
| Writing | Demonstrates little or no cohesion and inadequate skill in the use and control of language. | Demonstrates little or no cohesion and limited skill in the use and control of language. | Is mostly cohesive and demonstrates effective use and control of language. | Is cohesive and demonstrates a highly effective use and command of language. |
| | May lack a clear central claim or controlling idea. | May lack a clear central claim or controlling idea or may deviate from the claim or idea over the course of the response. | Includes a central claim or implicit controlling idea. | Includes a precise central claim. |
| | Lacks a recognizable introduction and conclusion. The response does not have a discernible progression of ideas. | May include ineffective introduction and/or conclusion. The response may demonstrate some progression of ideas within paragraphs but not throughout the response. | Includes an effective introduction and conclusion. The response demonstrates a clear progression of ideas both within paragraphs and throughout the essay. | Includes a skillful introduction and conclusion. The response demonstrates a deliberate and highly effective progression of ideas both within paragraphs and throughout the essay. |
| | Lacks variety in sentence structures; sentence structures may be repetitive. The response demonstrates general and vague word choice; word choice may be poor or inaccurate. The response may lack a formal style and objective tone. | Has limited variety in sentence structures; sentence structures may be repetitive. Demonstrates general or vague word choice; word choice may be repetitive. The response may deviate noticeably from a formal style and objective tone. | Has variety in sentence structures. The response demonstrates some precise word choice. The response maintains a formal style and objective tone. | Has a wide variety in sentence structures. The response demonstrates a consistent use of precise word choice. The response maintains a formal style and objective tone. |
| | Shows a weak control of the conventions of standard written English and may contain numerous errors that undermine the quality of writing. | Shows a limited control of the conventions of standard written English and contains errors that detract from the quality of writing and may impede understanding. | Shows a good control of the conventions of standard written English and is free of significant errors that detract from the quality of writing. | Shows a strong command of the conventions of standard written English and is free or virtually free of errors. |

Validity Evidence and Research

The SAT Essay closely aligns with the analytical writing required of students in postsecondary settings. It assesses whether students can comprehend an appropriately challenging source text and craft an effective written analysis, supported by critical reasoning and evidence drawn from the source text. Based on input and evaluation from content experts throughout the redesign process, the SAT Essay has been judged to have strong content validity both in the sense of *face validity* (i.e., the extent to which a test or the questions on a test appear to measure a particular construct) and *curricular validity* (i.e., the extent to which the content of the test matches the objectives of a specific curriculum).

The [pilot predictive validity study](#) provided higher education with early information about the relationship between the redesigned SAT and college grades. However, the SAT Essay wasn't included in this study. The first validity study of the new SAT based on operational test results and first-year course grades from the class of 2017 will be released in 2019.

Institutions can conduct free admission and placement validity studies using the updated Admitted Class Evaluation Service™ (ACES™) system launching in February 2018. ACES lets institutions examine how SAT scores, including SAT Essay scores, result in improved course placement decisions. ACES uses various metrics of sound placement decision making, such as placement consistency, accuracy, and general relationships between the test scores and college course grades. By uploading students' introductory writing course grades, institutions can analyze relationships between SAT Essay scores and performance in that course. Email aces@info.collegeboard.org or visit www.collegeboard.org/aces.

Institutions should learn how to use the three SAT Essay scores (individually and combined) to maximally inform college readiness and placement decisions. In addition, Essay information can be used to inform academic advising and strengthen students' writing skills on campus if particular weaknesses or strengths are evident. Faculty can use that practical information to guide instruction and supports.

For More Information

Additional information about the SAT Suite of Assessments can be found in the detailed [Test Specifications for the Redesigned SAT](#) and the [SAT Suite of Assessments Technical Manual](#) (available in early 2018).