

You, Your Child and the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT)

Introduction

It is oftentimes difficult for parents to appreciate the significance of the Scholastic Achievement Exam as a necessary and important step in their child's college admissions process. This confusion arises because of the radical changes in the way the examination is perceived now in comparison to how it was perceived in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Many parents will recall taking the SAT, but few can recall their scores and even fewer recall studying for the exam; truthfully, a student's SAT score played a much less significant role in their admissions decision than it does today.

The reason that the SAT has become such an important test in the past 20 years is because of a large increase in the number of students enrolling in post-secondary degree programs. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that enrollment in post-secondary institutions increased 61 percent between 1970 and 1990, nine percent between 1989 and 1999, and 38 percent from 1999 to 2009. This robust increase in applicant pool has forced colleges rely on standardized examinations to make admissions cutoffs so as to make the number of evaluated applications more manageable. Consequently, the SAT has come to play a very important role in your child's college admission process.

What types of Material does the SAT cover and how is the exam scored?

The Scholastic Achievement Test aims to test the basic Mathematic and English Language Usage concepts that students are expected to have studied throughout their primary and secondary education. The SAT has three section types: Mathematics, Critical Reading, and Writing. The Mathematics section has a variety of problem types that cover topics from introductory Algebra and Geometry. The Critical Reading Section is composed of two question types: vocabulary-based and passage-based. Vocabulary based questions ask the student to complete a sentence using a vocabulary word from five possible answer choices. Passage-based questions serve to evaluate reading comprehension and ask students to read a passage and answer questions based on the passage. The writing section consists of a short essay and grammar-type questions that test a students ability to identify and correct errors in written English.

The exam is comprised of ten sections. The essay is always the first section, followed by 3-4 Mathematics, 3-4 Critical Reading, and 2 Writing Sections in some random combination. The last section is always a writing section. Although there are nine non-essay sections, only eight of them will contribute to your student's final score. The extra section—either a Critical Reading or Math Section—is used by the college board for statistical purposes. The scores from each section are combined for three scores out of 800 and a total score out of 2400. Students receive one point for each correct answer and -1/4 of a point for each incorrect answer. Their actual score on the exam is referred to as a "scaled score" and the scaled score translates into a score out of 800 based on a percentile-based and statistics driven scoring rubric.

What is a "high" score on the SAT and what does my child's SAT score mean?

College admissions boards use the SAT as a way to compare applicants without the effect of any differences in each student's secondary education. While a "4.0" might mean very different things at an elite public school versus an intercity high school, an SAT score provides an unbiased way to compare students. Although most admissions boards do not release their rubrics for evaluating students it is commonly assumed that schools have a "cut-off" score and that applicants who score below the cut-off are not considered. Admissions standards vary from college to college and there are schools where the weight of the student's SAT score plays a larger or smaller role in the evaluation of their application; however, students who are serious in their desire to attend elite universities should aim to get the highest score they can possibly achieve.

The national averages for scoring are well tracked: Critical Reading (497/800), Mathematics (514/800), Writing (489/800). It is important to note that an "average score" is not sufficient to be considered at any elite (top 30) institutions and will limit an application at second tier schools. The typical cut-off for elite schools is a score of 700 in each section for a total score of 2100. A strong score for attending a higher second tier university would be in the 1900-2100 range. In both of these cases it is not enough to assume that a particular score will guarantee admissions into a particular school; however, one can safely say that with an elite score, a rejection from a top school is certainly not the consequence of the students SAT score. Instead the student may have been a poor fit in the context of other admissions criteria.

There are many publications available that track the average, median, and 25-75 split (25th and 75th percentile) scores for all American Universities. Students should compare their score to these statistical benchmarks in order to evaluate their competitiveness at a particular college.

What can I do to help my child achieve a high score?

It isn't easy for High School Students to appreciate the importance of attending a good college. Certainly there are exceptions to this statement, but even with parents who stress the importance of academics it is very difficult for a seventeen or eighteen year old to understand that their college choice will have ramifications on their job and graduate school opportunities in the future. If economic conditions remain as they've been in recent years, it is even more important that your child attend a top college so that he or she can have greater employment opportunities after graduation. It is important for you as a parent to stress the importance of this exam to your child. If you have taught your child the value of academics then it should be no problem convincing them of the importance of the SAT.

In addition to providing positive encouragement and making your child aware of the consequences that a strong score will have on his or her future, it can be very helpful to arrange for your child to participate in a SAT Prep Course that will review material and teach exam strategies. The material covered on the SAT isn't particularly engaging; a prep course is a great way to help young students adhere to a consistent study regimen. For most students a preparation course can also provide a purpose to exam preparation. Students feel a sense of obligation when they are asked to complete an assignment for a future class, which will motivate them to do the work. Moreover, the fact that improving on a previous exam by only a few questions can have a significant increase in a student's final score adds a competitive element to exam preparation that can also help to motivate students. Students will see the largest improvements when they are consistently working through practice exams, exposing themselves to the types of questions they will encounter and evaluating their work for repeated mistakes and knowledge deficiencies.

The material covered on the SAT is designed to cover topics that are mandatory for students in 9th, 10th, and 11th grade. For students who attend strong public and private high schools, the majority of their studying will focus on building test-taking stamina, developing test-taking strategies, and re-learning familiar material. These students do not frequently need to be re-taught skills that they were expected to develop throughout their educational history. There are students who require significant remedial education for topics in Grammar, Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary, Algebra, and Geometry; however, these students typically come from weaker educational backgrounds.

Because the SAT tests previously developed skills and logical thinking, it is not enough to simply memorize facts; instead, it is necessary to work through a study regimen that builds and reinforces the skills necessary to successfully answer exam questions. It is difficult to design a study regimen without previous experience with the exam; the major benefit of private SAT instruction is that the instructor or prep course can utilize previous teaching experience to help guide your child through a comprehensive study regimen.

What types of tutoring options are available?

There are three categories of tutoring services available to students:

1. **Large Test Prep Companies** – Kaplan and Princeton Review are the major “test-prep” companies and both provide comprehensive exam preparation for the SAT. Students can hire a private tutor through either company or can enroll in a small (15-20 person) class where they will work through exercises with the help and guidance of teachers who have been trained by the company. Both companies guarantee large score increases and have locations in most major American cities.
 - a. **Pros:** Large “n” of students, developed study method, have their own materials and many resources for students, highly reputable.
 - b. **Cons:** Expensive (especially for private instruction), can be gimmicky in their strategies, group classes can be distracting for students who need one-on-one attention.
2. **Private Test Prep Companies** – There are a number of small, private test prep companies that offer smaller courses or private one-on-one instruction. Google search “private SAT tutoring”.
 - a. **Pros:** Typically teachers are Ivy League (or other elite) educated and are able to offer advice beyond SAT prep. Private companies have large libraries of resources from a variety of sources available for students so that students aren't just preparing for one interpretation of the exam (i.e.

in the case of Kaplan or Princeton Review the student will only use exam materials adapted by the company that reflect only their own interpretation of the exam)

- b. Cons: Private Tutoring Companies can be incredibly expensive. It is common for one-on-one sessions to cost \$150/hr.
3. Private Tutors
- a. Pros: Typically are very passionate about helping students and being private business owners, are focused on providing a great “product” as they rely on recommendations from clients for future business. Can be more personal and are not forced to adhere to corporate or company standards. Are more flexible in scheduling and their ability to meet with your child at your home.
 - b. Cons: You must rely on the recommendation or referral of a previous client and also personally evaluate the quality of the service the tutor provides.

The Negative Stigma of having a “Tutor”

Students and parents often have a misconception of what type of student might need “tutoring” in any particular topic; mainly, tutors are frequently perceived as the necessary solution for students who are struggling to meet expectations for a class. A tutor, for example, is necessary for a “C” student, but not for an “A” student. It’s helpful to think of a tutor as a non-traditional educator; in the case of the SAT, the tutor serves to guide a student through a regimen for preparing for the exam. Students shouldn’t feel ashamed of hiring a tutor to help them prepare for the SAT. The majority of students who attend Ivy League schools participated in some form of standardized exam preparation. If anything, the ability for a family to provide private instruction is a socioeconomic, class-biased advantage.

When should my child take the SAT and how long does it take to prepare?

Most students require two to six months of study to prepare for the SAT. The amount of time a student requires depends on a number of factors: personal motivation, amount of remedial subject learning required, student’s ability to develop test-taking skills, the amount of time a student can devote to study, etc...It is impossible to prescribe an exact amount of time. The majority of students can prepare for the exam in three months.

Students should plan to take the exam during the second semester of their Junior year. See the College Board’s website for exam dates—typically exams are offered in February, March, June, July, October, and November. It is important for your student to take an exam earlier in the year (during their Junior year of High School) so that there are future opportunities to re-take the exam if necessary. Students should re-take the exam no more than three times. Colleges and Universities have different ways of evaluating scores from students with multiple exam attempts.

Does every child need tutoring or a prep course?

Absolutely not! In fact, the majority of students are perfectly capable of working through a practice book (the official SAT guide produced by the College Board is the best available resource) and improving their score on their own. It is incredibly rare, however, for students to have the necessary motivation and drive for this type of effort. Even with very involved parents, solo-study may not be enough for the student to reach his or her maximum potential. There is value in the knowledge and services provided by test preparation companies and tutors. Moreover, test preparation companies and tutors give the exam preparation process a purpose which can serve as a source of motivation for students preparing for the exam. If, however, your child is highly motivated, they may be capable of successfully preparing for the exam without the help of outside services.

How involved should I be in my child’s studying?

There is no correct answer to this question. Studying for the SAT is an exercise in mind-numbing repetition. Practice exams vary only a small amount in difficulty and subject matter covered; successful SAT preparation comes from repeating and improving upon practice exams until the student’s score reaches a consistent maximum. An example of minimum involvement might be simply sending the child to a preparation course and expecting the child to complete the necessary work on his or her own. On the other hand, an overly involved parent might work through examples and homework with the child. These are of course extremes and the optimal level of involvement ultimately depends on what is most motivating and productive for the child.

At the very least, parents should be a source of positive encouragement—this exam is one of four major pieces to your child’s college application. It is a chance for your child to overcome a compromising GPA or a lack of extracurricular involvement. While it may not be easy to convey the significance of the exam in the “big picture” of your child’s life, it is important to educate your child about the importance of the SAT and the importance of preparing for the exam in a success-focused manner. Students who achieve the highest score increases from their diagnostic exams are those who can develop the ability to approach the exam with a positive and confident mindset, one that is rooted in the positive encouragement they receive from their parents.

About the Author

Jordan Pecherer is a graduate of the University of Michigan and has been tutoring the SAT for two years. In his time as a private tutor, Jordan has helped more than 40 students achieve significant score gains and through this work, has developed several insights on standardized test prep; one key insight is that parents are frequently under-informed as to how to provide the best opportunity for their children to succeed on the exam. The purpose of this document is first and foremost to serve as a source of information for parents whose children will one day take the Scholastic Achievement Exam (SAT).