

Research Summary

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Scoring the Essay on the SAT® Writing Section

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here have been a number of questions about how the new essay will be scored and the importance of such aspects of writing as spelling, grammar, organization, and sentence structure. The essay on the writing section of the SAT® will be scored using a holistic approach. In holistic scoring, a piece of writing is considered as a total piece of work—the whole of which is greater than the sum of its parts. This approach is based on the assumption that an essay or writing sample can be graded best by evaluating the whole essay, not by scoring the essay on several different factors like grammar, spelling, organization, and structure and then summing these parts to produce a total score. No aspect of an essay is totally ignored—everything in the essay, including grammar, is considered in the evaluation. However, no single aspect, including grammar, will have a substantial impact on the total score. A reader doesn't judge the essay or sample on 6 or 10 separate factors and then mentally add these up to derive a score. Instead, the reader judges a work based on the total impression it creates in relationship to the scoring rubric and sample papers that illustrate work at each of the score levels.

The SAT II: Writing Subject Test has used holistic scoring since its introduction in 1994, as do the majority of other national writing assessments and most state assessments of direct writing. The rubric proposed for scoring the SAT essay is illustrated on page 3 and is quite similar to the rubric that has been used on the SAT II: Writing Test. Each essay will be scored by two readers who will score it on a scale of 1 to 6. The rubric illustrates the characteristics of what an essay scored as a 6 looks like: "A paper in this category demonstrates clear and consistent competence, though it may have occasional errors." The rubric for an essay scored as a 6 goes on to describe other qualities of such an essay. An essay may receive a score of 6 even if it has several spelling or grammatical errors. However, if frequent spelling and grammatical errors are found throughout this essay it will not be scored a 6. Such consistent and flagrant errors would likely have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the expression and clarity of the essay.

The description of essays scored 2 notes "frequent errors in grammar, diction, and sentence structure." However, that alone would not result in a score of 2. Other features of such essays include poor organization, thin development, and little or inappropriate detail to support ideas. An essay with frequent grammatical errors, but otherwise good organization, development, synthetic variety, and appropriate use of examples to support a main idea, could be scored a 5, 4, or 3, depending on the strength of these other features. An essay may be weak in one area but very strong in another. In holistic scoring the reader must balance the strengths and weaknesses of an essay to arrive at a final score.

A common question is how many spelling or grammatical errors can one have in an essay and still get a score of 6 or 5. There is no definitive answer to that question in holistic scoring because the reader is scoring the whole essay, not each separate part. A weak essay with frequent and severe grammatical and spelling mistakes will likely be scored somewhat lower than a weak essay with no such mistakes, but it is the sum of all features of both essays that will determine if they are scored 4 and 3, respectively, or 2 and 1, respectively. Unlike many tests where points are subtracted for each error, holistic scoring asks readers to take in the entire essay, the strengths as well as the weaknesses. Then readers are asked to use the rubric, refer to the sample papers (or training papers that instantiate the standard at each grade), and apply the standards arrived at through consensus.

The rubric serves as a general guideline to the readers, but the actual scoring standards are

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best defined by the sample papers that illustrate each score on the 1 to 6 scale. The definition of a score of 4 or 3 is as much derived by the readers who select a series of sample papers representing each grade level as the general rubric. Table leaders monitor the quality of reading and assist readers in maintaining standards. A sample of the questions and issues they may emphasize with readers helps to illustrate how holistic scoring differs from mechanistic scoring, where separate scores may be given for grammar, organization, and other aspects of writing and then combined:

- Read quickly to gain an impression of the whole essay and score it immediately, rather than attempting to analyze the essay and infer a student's intention or meaning.
- Read the entire essay; the writing sometimes improves dramatically.
- Read supportively; look for and reward what is done well rather than what is done badly or omitted.
- Take all elements of the essay into account—organization, clarity, sentence structure, spelling, diction, everything!
- Remember that use of literary examples does not make the essay inherently better than an essay that uses examples from personal experience, history, or science.
- Remember that each essay is essentially a first draft written under test conditions in 25 minutes, and that the authors are only 16 or 17 years old.

 Remember that the standards are set by consensus and that individual readers are expected to accept and to follow those standards.

Readers will be experienced high school and college teachers (current or very recent) who primarily teach English, composition, or language arts courses, or who may teach in another subject area that requires writing. Readers will undergo a rigorous training and certification procedure and will score live essays only if they pass these procedures and score a wide range of essays in a manner consistent with the standards. Each day, before returning to score papers, readers will have to successfully complete a scoring exercise and their scoring will be routinely monitored by table leaders throughout the day to ensure scoring is consistent across time (and does not become overly lenient or strict in relation to other readers). Essays that have been scored by expert readers will be interspersed with live essays and scored each day by each reader. The purpose of this, and other checks, is to ensure all readers are using the rubric and consistently applying the same standards across the entire scoring of the project.

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New SAT® Essay Scoring Rubric Will Be Similar to That Used for Current SAT II: Writing Test

Score of 6	Score of 3
A paper in this category demonstrates clear and consistent competence, though it may have occasional errors. Such a paper: effectively and insightfully addresses the writing task is well organized and fully developed, using clearly appropriate examples to support ideas displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating variety in sentence structure and range of vocabulary	A paper in this category demonstrates developing competence. Such a paper may contain one or more of the following weaknesses: inadequate organization or development inappropriate or insufficient details to support ideas an accumulation of errors in grammar, diction, or sentence structure
Score of 5	Score of 2
A paper in this category demonstrates reasonably consistent competence, though it will have occasional errors or lapses in quality. Such a paper: • effectively addresses the writing task • is generally well organized and well developed, using appropriate examples to support ideas • displays facility in the use of language, demonstrating some syntactic variety and range of vocabulary	A paper in this category demonstrates some incompetence. Such a paper is flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses: poor organization thin development little or inappropriate detail to support idea frequent errors in grammar, diction, and sentence structure
Score of 4	Score of 1
A paper in this category demonstrates adequate competence with occasional errors and lapses in quality. Such a paper: addresses the writing task is organized and adequately developed, using examples to support ideas displays adequate but inconsistent facility in the use of language, presenting some errors in grammar or diction presents minimal sentence variety	A paper in this category demonstrates incompetence. Such a paper is seriously flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses: very poor organization very thin development usage and syntactical errors so severe that meaning is somewhat obscured Essays that appear to be off topic or that pose unusual challenges in handwriting or other areas should be given to the Table Leader.

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