

SAT Essay Tips

The first part of the SAT is a 25-minute essay. The general purpose of the essay is for you to demonstrate your ability to express your thoughts in writing; specifically, you are to show that you are able to make a clear and convincing argument about whatever topic they give you.

Your essay will be scored on a scale of 1 to 6 (6 being the highest) by two graders. These scores will then be added together and will appear on your score report as a combined score of 2-12. Your essay score will also be factored in as 1/3 of the overall Writing section score of 200-800.

Here are the instructions as they will appear on the test:

The essay gives you an opportunity to show how effectively you can develop and express ideas. You should, therefore, take care to develop your point of view, present your ideas logically and clearly, and use language precisely.

Your essay must be written on the lines provided on your answer sheet—you will receive no other paper on which to write. You will have enough space if you write on every line, avoid wide margins, and keep your handwriting to a reasonable size. Remember that people who are not familiar with your handwriting will read what you write. Try to write or print so that what you are writing is legible to those readers.

You have twenty-five minutes to write an essay on the topic assigned below. **DO NOT WRITE ON ANOTHER TOPIC. AN OFF-TOPIC ESSAY WILL RECEIVE A SCORE OF ZERO.**

These instructions will be followed by instructions specific to your topic.

Guidelines for Writing the Essay

- *Be sure to follow the instructions and write about the topic given.*

This may sound obvious, but it's amazing how often students shoot themselves in the foot by not following the instructions carefully. If you don't follow the instructions, no matter how well you write, you can't possibly get a high score.

- *Be aware of how much time you have left, and be efficient.*

You only have 25 minutes from the time you read the instructions to the time you have to stop writing, so make sure that you are aware of how much time you have left. The key is to make sure that you get your thesis and your most important arguments on the paper before time is up. Even an unfinished essay can receive a good score if the author has demonstrated an ability to make a convincing argument.

- *Think before you write.*

If you start writing before you have a good idea about what you want to say, you'll end up writing a disorganized, unconvincing essay. Take a few minutes before you begin writing to organize your thoughts. Write a brief outline if that will help. In addition, as you write, think before you start each new sentence.

- *Prepare a "repertoire of examples" in advance to increase the speed of your response and the quality of your examples.*

See my "Building a Repertoire of Examples" handout for advice on how to do this.

- *Quality is more important than quantity, but...*

It's better to write a shorter but more effective and convincing essay than to write a 400-word essay without a clear point or sense of organization. **However, it is important to develop your ideas thoroughly with details and specific examples; the essays that receive the highest scores are usually the most detailed and best-developed essays.**

- *Remember that your goal is to make a persuasive argument.*

SAT essay prompts ask you to take a "yes or no" stand on an issue and try to persuade your reader to see the wisdom of your position on the issue, so keep that goal in mind as you write.

- *State your thesis clearly, and make sure that your argument supports it.*

Your "thesis" is the main point that you want to make, the idea of which you want to convince the reader. If your essay doesn't contain a clear thesis statement (usually at the end of the introduction), your essay is likely to be confusing. And obviously, if your argument doesn't directly support your thesis, your essay will not be effective.

- *Support your argument with **evidence**: reasons and examples.*

Again, the point of this essay is to make an argument, and making an argument always involves evidence—reasons and examples that support your argument. Although you have to look at the big picture and be abstract at times, without concrete evidence your argument won't be effective.

- *Concentrate on the body of the essay.*

Don't spend a lot of time writing a brilliant introduction and then fail to leave yourself time to support your thesis with evidence. Get into the topic fairly quickly, and move on to the evidence you have to support your position. Although an effective conclusion (especially one that doesn't only repeat what you've already said) strengthens an essay, even an essay without a separate concluding paragraph can receive a high score if it's well organized and convincing.

- *Let what you have to say dictate the structure of your essay, but try to keep it simple and clear.*

The structure of your essay (the number of paragraphs, the focus of each paragraph) may vary depending on the prompt and your response to it. Organize your ideas into paragraphs in a way that's natural and appropriate for your response. It is usually easiest to base the structure of the essay on the concrete examples you plan to discuss, so that each paragraph is focused on one specific example. In any case, stick to a fairly simple structure, and include a topic sentence in each body paragraph.

- *Be specific and accurate in your presentation of facts.*

Broad generalizations and inaccurate information make an essay weak, so don't use an example that you're not sure about or that you only have very general things to say about (e.g., don't talk about the French Revolution if all you know is that there was a revolution and people died).

- *Make every word count.*

Avoid repetition and unnecessarily long sentences and expressions. It's better to state things simply, but efficiently and clearly, than to spend time trying to sound impressive. The essay scorers will only be impressed by what is substantial in your essay; they won't be fooled by a long-winded writer who actually doesn't have much to say.

- *It's perfectly acceptable to write from the first person point of view.*

Although in writing some essays it's preferable to avoid "I" and write from a completely objective point of view, for this essay it is not only acceptable but sometimes required by the topic. Even for an essay topic that's not specifically about something personal, using examples from your own experience can be very effective. You probably know yourself and your own life better than you know history or literature, and personal experiences are usually more emotionally resonant.

- *Follow the rules of Standard English.*

Avoid ungrammatical expressions. Try to apply what you have learned from practicing the SAT Writing multiple-choice questions to your own writing. Grammar errors will obviously count against you.

- *Avoid slang.*

Many young writers are so used to using slang expressions that they use them unconsciously and often, but slang is inappropriate for an essay. Find clearer, more specific, and more grammatically correct ways of expressing your ideas; for example, instead of saying "*The Great Gatsby* is hella tight," say "*The Great Gatsby* is disturbing, provocative, and emotionally intense."

- *Don't write beyond your abilities; a conversational and natural (but intelligent) tone is best.*

In an effort to sound intellectual and well educated, some writers will try to use expressions they don't really understand and will try to write in a very formal style that they haven't really mastered. Although a large vocabulary is obviously an important aid to effective writing, it's not necessary to sound like a PhD to get a high score, and writing beyond your abilities will hurt your score. Write in a natural way, as if you're having an intelligent conversation.

- *Proofread your essay before you turn it in.*

It's almost inevitable that, in rushing to write an entire essay in 25 minutes, you will make some stupid mistakes. It should be easy to spot most of these mistakes and correct them if you can read over your essay one time before you turn it in. Sound each sentence aloud in your mind; it's often easier to "hear" mistakes than to see them. Many people make mistakes in their writing that they would never make when speaking. Although a few minor errors generally won't hurt your score, obviously it's good to catch everything you can.

- *Write legibly.*

Handwriting is not supposed to be a factor in your score, but an essay that is difficult to read can be frustrating, and a frustrated scorer isn't likely to be very forgiving. The scorers have hundreds of essays to score every day, so they're not going to be able to spend a lot of time deciphering your writing, and they might miss or misunderstand some of your important statements and ideas.