

The SAT Essay: Building a Repertoire of Examples

The SAT essay is intended to measure your writing *skills*, not your *knowledge* of any specific subject. Therefore, the essay prompts given on the SAT must be fairly open-ended, so that anyone with a high-school education and life experiences common to all teenagers can respond to them. Most of them deal with basic philosophical, psychological, moral, or social issues.

In my experience as a teacher, I've seen that the biggest challenge students face in writing the SAT essay is coming up with rich and relevant examples to discuss within the twenty-five minutes you're given for the essay section. Quite often, students end up using examples that are inappropriate or superficial, or they don't know enough about the examples they've chosen to write about them in detail. **The way to combat this problem is to create your own repertoire of examples that you are well prepared to write detailed paragraphs about.** Then, when you read the prompt you're given on the day of the test, you can simply choose the examples from your repertoire that are most relevant to that particular topic. (Of course, this method isn't foolproof; it may happen that you are unfortunate enough to get a topic that your prepared examples aren't really appropriate for. If that's the case, don't try to force your examples to fit the topic. The process of coming up with these examples and writing several practice essays will also help you learn how to come up with new examples on the fly.)

As you create your list, think of people and events from history, literature, current events, and your own experiences and observations. Choose things that you either already know a lot about or are willing to do some research on in order to have a wealth of details available to incorporate into your essay. A CD-ROM or DVD-ROM encyclopedia is probably the most appropriate source for the amount of information and level of detail you want to remember about each. If you don't have one, Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org>) is a rich source of basic information about everything you can imagine—and contrary to what you might have heard, the information on Wikipedia is generally reliable. Choose examples that are as different from one another as possible so that your repertoire will have the range and flexibility to be applicable to any topic you might be asked to write about.

Take notes on the important points and details that you want to remember about each example, or copy and paste information from an electronic source into your list. Avoid statistics, which may be difficult to remember precisely; instead, focus on details that relate to philosophical, psychological, moral, and social issues. Practice applying your examples to different topics, and make sure you have plenty to say about each one in reference to a specific topic. Then study your list and memorize all of the information you have so that you can write about your examples freely and easily on the day of the test.

History

Examples from history carry great weight because they are events that actually happened, and they are likely to resonate with anyone who has any knowledge of the topic you're writing about. Focus on both historical *events* and historical *figures* that are well known and have many different aspects that you might discuss—*people and events that brought about revolutionary change in society are always good choices*. But remember, the bigger the event, the more information you might have to memorize, so you would have to know an awful lot about an example like “World War II” to put something that broad on your list. Narrowing such a broad topic down to a manageable size, such as the Holocaust, the use of the atomic bomb against Japan, will generally be more effective. *Also remember to avoid presenting inaccurate information in your essay or trying to pass something off as a fact that you're actually not sure about.*

Some suggestions:

- **wars and related events:** the causes of the American Revolution, the causes of the French Revolution, the Trail of Tears, the causes or the aftermath of the Civil War, the Holocaust, America's use of the atomic bomb against Japan, the Marshall Plan, McCarthyism, the Cuban Missile

Crisis, the Vietnam War (which could be divided into many subtopics like the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the My Lai Massacre, and the Kent State Massacre)

- **major technological developments:** the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the invention of the airplane, the advent of radio or television, space travel, the birth of the Internet
- **major social and economic events:** the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, the American civil rights movement, India's independence from Britain, the end of apartheid in South Africa, corporate scandals at the beginning of the 21st century (Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, etc.)
- **important thinkers:** Lao Tzu (Lao Zi), Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx
- **revolutionaries and activists:** Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Martin Luther, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Helen Keller, Mohandas Gandhi, Clarence Darrow, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela
- **other influential politicians:** Benjamin Franklin, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt
- **inventors and scientists:** Gregor Mendel, the Curies, Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, George Washington Carver, Albert Einstein, Stephen Jay Gould, Stephen Hawking
- **writers, artists, musicians, entertainers:** Ludwig van Beethoven, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, Louis Armstrong, Django Reinhardt, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Lenny Bruce, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, John Belushi, Richard Pryor, Chris Farley
- **tyrants:** King Louis XVI, Stalin, Hitler, Mao Zedong

Literature

Although examples from literature usually aren't strictly factual, they reflect universal truths about society and human nature. Therefore, they can be very powerful if you are able to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the works and characters you discuss. Writing about your favorite books or stories (or authors) will allow you to write with great enthusiasm, but be sure to choose a broad range of examples, such as a science fiction novel, a Victorian-era novel, a short story, a work that reflects minorities' experiences in the United States, and a work of "world literature" (a work translated from another language). As with historical examples, choosing well-known books and characters to discuss will make them more likely to resonate with the people scoring your essay—just make sure you get your facts straight. Sparknotes (<http://www.sparknotes.com/>) is a good source of basic information to help you review things you've read. Although teachers understandably don't want you to rely on Sparknotes as a substitute for actually something yourself and doing your own thinking about it, such sites can be useful.

Some suggestions:

- **Greek classics:** *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*
- **English classics:** *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*
- **Shakespeare's plays:** *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *MacBeth*
- **the Bronte sisters' novels:** *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*
- *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne)
- **Dickens' novels** (very rich sources of both interesting characters and important ideas): *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*
- **Dostoevsky's novels:** *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*
- *Little Women* (Louisa May Alcott)
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain)
- *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald)
- *A Farewell to Arms* (Ernest Hemingway)
- *Invisible Man* (Ralph Ellison)
- *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley)
- *1984* (George Orwell)
- *Lord of the Flies* (William Golding)
- *The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger)
- *Catch-22* (Joseph Heller)

- *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury)
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee)
- **Toni Morrison’s novels:** *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Sula*
- *The Things They Carried* (Tim O’Brien)
- *The Education of Little Tree* (Forrest Carter)
- **Neal Stephenson’s novels:** *Snow Crash*, *The Diamond Age*, *Cryptonomicon*, *The Baroque Cycle*

A good way to quickly develop a repertoire of examples from literature is to read short but significant works (short novels, novellas, or even short stories) that contain important ideas about human nature and society:

- *Candide* (Voltaire)
- parts of *Walden* and other essays by Thoreau
- “Billy Budd, Sailor” (Herman Melville)
- *A Christmas Carol* (Charles Dickens)
- *The Metamorphosis* (Franz Kafka)
- *The Awakening* (Kate Chopin)
- *The Old Man and the Sea*, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (Ernest Hemingway)
- *The Pearl*, *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck)
- *The Stranger* (Albert Camus)
- *Animal Farm* (George Orwell)
- *Night* (Elie Wiesel)

Personal experiences and observations

The advantage of using examples in this category is that you probably know more about your own life than you do about any academic subject, so you can usually write about these examples in great detail and with real feeling. The biggest disadvantage is that they don’t give you a chance to show off your knowledge, and they might not have the same weight and richness as examples from literature, history, or current events. As you come up with these examples, focus on experiences that affected you profoundly in some way—people or experiences that inspired you, taught you something important about life, or changed your perspective.* Make sure they’re truly significant experiences that you can draw a larger lesson from; a shopping trip to the mall or the great NBA game that you saw last night would probably not be good things to write about.

Some teachers or SAT programs may tell you to avoid using examples from personal experience because studies have shown that essays in which the author uses “I” and “me” generally don’t score as high as essays that avoid the first person. *I think this is bad advice.* What these studies really suggest is that students who make the effort to avoid using the first person have more essay-writing experience than those who don’t (because the first person IS inappropriate for some forms of writing, such as literary analysis essays), that their ideas tend to be more sophisticated because they have enough knowledge of things like literature and history that they don’t *have* to use examples from personal experience, and/or that they’re confident enough about their ideas to avoid expressions such as “I think.” It makes sense that essays by such authors would get higher scores; this doesn’t mean that using the first person is a problem in itself. As long as your example helps you effectively develop your central idea, it will help your score. **In fact, the College Board’s own materials emphasize that it is o.k. to use the first person and to write about personal experiences, and a number of the most highly-rated sample SAT essays distributed by the College Board do these things.**

The bottom line is that you should use whatever examples you can make the most effective and well-developed argument with—whether they’re from personal experience, literature, history, current events, or some other category.

* The process of coming up with examples from personal experience is also helpful in preparing to write your college application essays, so remember to save this information.

Some suggestions:

- a trip out of the country that exposed you to another culture
- a volunteer experience in which you met people who inspired or influenced you
- a work experience that taught you about the importance of hard work, discipline, teamwork, etc.
- an experience that required you to overcome your fear or to demonstrate resourcefulness or creativity
- a person you have encountered who inspired you with his or her heroism, self-sacrifice, wisdom, etc.
- your parents, siblings, friends, classmates, etc.: the lessons you've learned from interacting with or observing them

Society and current events

Events or trends in society, or people who are influencing the world in a profound way now, can also be great examples. Think about the kinds of things you read about in magazines, newspapers, or Internet news sources. A Google news search (<http://news.google.com>) will provide you with a wealth of information from thousands of sources on recent events.

One thing in particular to keep track of is new technologies and their effect on human society (see Topic 2 below). However, when you're writing about such an abstract subject, be sure to offer concrete, specific examples within that subject—for example, your observations about the effects of your brother's addiction to World of Warcraft or specific examples of television shows that demonstrate the content of contemporary entertainment. Note: *If you choose to write about something political, be very careful not to risk offending your audience by being too extreme in your rhetoric.* Although the scorers' political opinions aren't *supposed* to affect the score they give you, it's better not to take that risk.

Some suggestions:

- the widespread use of advanced communications technology (cell phones and the Internet)
- contemporary entertainment (television, movies, video games)
- the war in Iraq (Abu Ghraib, weapons of mass destruction, conflicts between religious and ethnic groups)
- the Israeli/Palestinian conflict
- **philanthropists and activists:** Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, Bono, Aung San Suu Kyi (Burmese democracy activist), Greenpeace
- global warming/global climate change
- alternative energy sources vs. fossil fuels
- genocide in Darfur (a region of Sudan)
- proliferation of nuclear weapons (Iran and North Korea)
- **epidemics:** drug-resistant strains of various diseases, AIDS, malaria, the threat of bird and swine flu
- the growing economic power of India and China (and the loss of jobs in the U.S.)
- U.S.-China relations
- China-Taiwan relations
- the economic crisis beginning in 2008 and the reform of the banking and finance industry
- the 2008 U.S. presidential election and the Obama presidency
- the debate over health care legislation

Since some of the essay prompts deal in one way or another with the state of the world today (such as Topic 2 below), I strongly suggest that you keep up with current events. Reading a magazine such as *Time* (<http://www.time.com/time/>) or the *Atlantic* (<http://www.theatlantic.com/>) or a premier newspaper such as the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com>) is the best way to do this, because in addition to reporting, such periodicals contain people's reactions to and reflections on

events, people, and issues. The evening news, for example, doesn't offer the same depth of thought and analysis.

Building and Applying Your Repertoire

An easy way to come up with a wide range of good examples is to pay attention to the SAT critical reading passages that you read as you prepare for the SAT. They will often contain interesting information about historical events (such as the passage about the invention of the airplane on p. 405 of *The Official SAT Study Guide*, 1st Ed.), historical figures (such as the passage about Frederick Douglass on p. 617), or controversial issues (such as the passage about the effect of television on viewers on p. 484).

Once you've built up a rich and varied repertoire of examples, you will be able to come up with a response to the prompt more quickly. **Basing the structure of your essay on concrete examples and then filling in the more abstract generalizations that they represent is much easier than trying to discuss big, abstract ideas in detail.** The essay scorers want to see thorough development of paragraphs and specific details, and these things spring very naturally from concrete examples, whereas trying to wrestle with abstractions is a slow and difficult process that is easy to get bogged down in—and before you know it, your time will be up, and you will likely be left with short, undeveloped paragraphs full of redundancies. Even if they contain interesting ideas, those kinds of paragraphs carry little weight and don't give you a chance to show off the full range of your writing ability. I've seen it happen over and over again with students who refuse to base their paragraphs on specific examples.

In creating your list, keep in mind the sample SAT prompts you have access to, along with any other SAT topics you might have written about so far. Try to make sure that every example in your repertoire works with at least one of them. If you can come up with examples rich and flexible enough to work with more than one prompt, you should be in great shape.

A list of official essay prompts from the most recently administered SAT can be found here:

<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/sat-reasoning/prep/essay-prompts>

Here are two examples of how you could apply this approach (including some of the specific examples I've listed in this handout) to two actual essay prompts from past SATs:

Sample Essay Prompt 1: What motivates people to change?

If I wanted to argue that guilt makes people change (one of many ways you could respond to the prompt), I might discuss the following examples:

① *example from literature*: The character Pip in *Great Expectations* feels bad about his treatment of and attitude toward a number of people in his life who have shown him kindness, and as a result eventually he learns to become a kinder, more grateful person.

② *example from personal experience*: Like Pip, I have had guilty feelings about how my actions haven't always shown the gratitude toward my parents that I should have shown; with all they have given me and done for me, I should have been a more responsible person earlier in my life. Over time, these feelings have helped me change my life and become a better person.

These examples, discussed in detail, would already constitute a solid basis for a good essay. If you wanted to use an example from history, you could discuss the effect of the Holocaust on German society: guilt over the actions of many German citizens during World War II caused Germany (or at least West Germany) to engage in a profound process of reflection and repudiation of racism.

Sample Essay Prompt 2: Do changes that make our lives easier not necessarily make them better?

If I wanted to argue that changes that make our lives easier often don't make them better, I might discuss these examples:

① *example from history*: The use of coal and oil as cheap sources of energy has helped provide electricity and convenient transportation for people all over the world, but it has also had an enormous cost in terms of its environmental effects. Air pollution has affected the health of billions of people in the last two centuries, and global climate change threatens to cause a wide range of devastating problems.

② *example from current events*: Communications and entertainment technology influences us to spend our time in ways that is not desirable; we play video games instead of exercising, and we spend hours "socializing" on our Facebook accounts (and, in many cases, anonymously attacking people on the Internet) instead of interacting with people face to face in a deeper and more dynamic way. I would cite my observations of some of my students and friends (and sometimes myself, too) as evidence of this problem.

③ *example from literature*: Neal Stephenson's novel *The Diamond Age* takes the technology-related problems of the present a step further; it imagines a world in which technology has ensured that people have all of their basic needs met but has also created a starkly divided and stratified society in which many people lead alienated and empty lives.

These three examples would work well in conjunction with one another because they are closely related and show a progression through time of the negative consequences of technological advances.

Remember that it's not necessary to discuss three examples or to follow the generic five-paragraph essay format (with three body paragraphs). The College Board's official materials contain a number of sample essays that are highly rated even though they present only one example; because they discuss that example in great detail, they have a depth and sophistication that makes up for any lack of breadth. Essays that present three appropriate examples but don't discuss them in any detail will probably suffer from that shallowness; you have to *show* that your examples support your argument. *The bottom line is that you should prepare yourself to present appropriate examples that you can discuss in detail to make an effective argument.*