

The Best Time for Teens to Take the SAT

by Tom Clements,

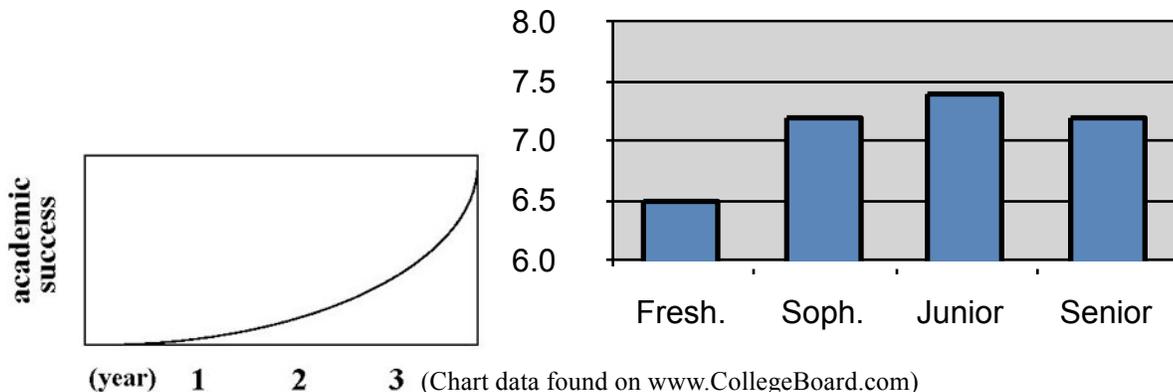
author of *How to Write a Killer SAT Essay... in 25 Minutes or Less!*

One of the biggest mistakes a parent of a high school student can make is having their teen sign up for the SATs too early. While parents want to get a “jump start” on the test and college applications, and students simply want to “get it over with”, both scenarios miss the mark, resulting in test dates that occur long before a student's brain is actually ready.

As a professional tutor, veteran writer and educator, I advise parents to have their daughters and sons take the SAT test at the end - not the beginning - of junior year. There are a couple of very important reasons for this.

First of all, junior year is a year of exponential academic growth. High school students spend their first two years adjusting to the stress of academic life, learning not only the study skills they need to stay on top of math, science, English, and history courses, but also learning to deal with peer pressure, social networking (on- *and* off-line), activities, sports, and, most importantly, time management. For the vast majority of students, it's only junior year when things -- academic and otherwise -- start to gel and the learning curve begins to spike.

High School Years and Average SAT Essay Scores, 2011



To take the best advantage of this exponential spike in learning, it's important for kids to take the SAT toward the end of their junior year, when math, reading, and writing skills are optimized. This is the time of peak performance.

And it's not just academics that receive a junior year boost; it's also psychological attributes like focus and maturity, the two qualities essential to success on a standardized

test like the SAT. The SAT is a marathon, roughly four hours long, and test takers need not only focus to deal with the ten different sections of the test but also the maturity to pace themselves and not give in to distractions, frustrations, and ennui.

One of my students, for example, found himself in an SAT room seated next to a girl with tiny bells on her shoes, which, every time she wiggled her feet (which was often!), sent tiny sonic shivers through the room. My student had to find both the strength to focus and ignore the distraction *and* the maturity not to strangle the girl! Maturity, moreover, leads to greater self-confidence, an essential attribute of successful test-takers.

Another student told me of the time her proctor for the SAT exam spent most of his time in the front of the room *talking on his cell phone* while the rest of the kids were trying to concentrate on the test. No one wanted to criticize the proctor, or even politely ask that he wait until the test was over, for fear of being ostracized and thrown even more off balance for the remainder of the test. No one wanted to lose focus on the crucial task at hand.

Our generation, of course, never had to deal with anything remotely similar to a four-hour, nerve-racking standardized test on which college admissions now largely depend. It's a different world out there today, folks!

Which brings me to my second point... Because there is so much riding on this test, it's mandatory for students to take the SAT twice, once in March of their junior year and again a few months later in May. I've used a simple sports playoff metaphor with my students and their parents to explain the dynamics of this approach.

Which teams invariably do best in the playoffs? Those coming in for their first go-round or veteran teams, who've "been there, done that"?

The answer, of course, is that veteran teams perform better. *Way better.* Consequently, I position the March test as a "pre-season" game, where students can learn to deal with time constraints, distractions (remember the bells?), proctor problems, and the fear factor, which weighs heavily on most teens the first time they take the test. (By the way, the PSATs don't have an essay, so there is no test-writing practice until their first SAT.)

Then, in May, when they take the test for the second time, the students come back into the room as "game-day veterans", much more confident about handling the circus atmosphere of the testing arena and more aware of what variables they have to contend with. Scores typically go up over 100 points for my students taking the test again in May.

It's these score increases that bring me to my final point. As an SAT tutor, I schedule my classes to run from January to May so that students can take full advantage of the points I've made so far:

- Exponential spikes in junior year learning
- Greater self-confidence that comes with maturity
- The ability to better focus on the task at hand.

When searching for the right SAT training course for you or your child, look for programs that leverage these attributes, enabling students to better assimilate and implement the strategies and techniques taught. The result: significantly higher scores than would have been obtained had they taken the test in the fall of their junior year.

The race, in other words, is not always won by those who start the earliest. In the surreal and stressful world of SAT testing, students need to slow down and smell the roses, both academic and psychological, to maximize their potential and obtain top SAT scores.

Tom Clements, a father of four daughters who attended Ivy League undergraduate and graduate schools with his help, has spent over 20 years of his life tutoring for the SATS, as well as calculus, physics, and chemistry. A former Silicon Valley freelance writer for tech magazines, corporate trainer for international bankers, and ESL teacher of students of all ages, Clements holds a Masters of International Business degree from St. Mary's College and a BA in English Literature. His new book, How to Write a KILLER SAT Essay is available for purchase at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).