

ROADMAP -- An Overview of the New SAT

The New SAT differs significantly from previous SATs. It attempts to be more like the ACT in terms of testing academic coursework; however, while the ACT remains a more straightforward and conventional test, the New SAT attempts to break new ground in both Math and Reading.

The Math section of the test adheres more closely to Common Core principles, where multi-step numeric processing is the order of the day. The Reading section attempts to evaluate complex analytical thinking with the emphasis on rhetoric, the study of discourse, requiring students to evaluate passages based on textual evidence and thematic structure.

READING -- Two Categories -- 800 points total

- * Writing (really Grammar)
- * Passages

Grammar -- This has been folded into Reading as a separate entity called the Writing section. Format is very similar to ACT Grammar and about the same level of difficulty.

Passages -- There are two types of passages -- high complexity and low complexity. As you might expect, the high complexity passages are extremely difficult, using obtuse literature (Ethan Frome, for example) and prolix congressional speeches (Barbara Jordan on Nixon's impeachment, for example). The low complexity passages are more accessible; they contain some charts and graphs but these are fairly easy to negotiate.

BOTTOM LINE -- Lots of unknowns here. The College Board has eliminated difficult vocabulary from the test (good), introduced "low complexity" reading passages with charts and graphs (OK) but has added new "high complexity" passages that students will struggle with. On the whole, a more difficult test than the previous SAT. Top students, however, will be able to manage it. Other students may want to switch to the ACT, where the Reading section, while still formidable, is more straightforward.

MATH -- Two Categories --- 800 points total

- * Calculator
- * No-Calculator

Content --

The new SAT splits math into three main areas:

- * basic algebra (simultaneous equations, inequalities, and some geometry)
- * advanced algebra (quadratic equations, imaginary numbers, exponents, advanced trig)
- * data analysis (ratios, proportions, percentages and graphical analysis)

BOTTOM LINE

Unlike the old SAT, where only algebra I and geometry were tested, the new SAT covers sections of algebra II/Trig. Students will be challenged trying to adjust to the common core approach, which stresses multiple step word problems and solid technical grasp of school-based math. Moreover, students who rely on calculators to solve problems may have trouble with the no-calculator section. ACT math, while no cake walk, is more straightforward; nonetheless, most students find the last 20 ACT math questions (out of 60) extremely difficult. Top students will be able to manage the new SAT; others may find ACT math more to their liking.

OPTIONAL ESSAY

Unlike the old SAT essay, where students were only required to express well-written opinions, the new essay presents students with a full passage extracted from historical articles and magazine pieces. Students are expected to analyze the passage for rhetoric and structure and construct a sophisticated essay.

FINAL THOUGHT: The main distinction, to my mind, between the SAT (both old and new) and the ACT remains this: The SAT is a chess match; the ACT is a track meet where speed is of the essence.