

preparing for the SAT

Grade level: high school students

Format: discussion, lecture, and practice

Class time: 1½ hours

Materials

- packets
- notes
- flipchart and easel, or black/white board
- markers
- copies of the SAT practice test
- refreshments (optional)
- water (if you'll need it)
- handouts

Scoring guide for the essay (available at <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/sat-reasoning/scores/essay/guide>)

Essay practice questions with answer sheets (use the College Board SAT Preparation Booklet)

General SAT strategies

SAT writing prompts for practice

Brainstorm charts

SAT vs. ACT

Score comparison ACT vs. SAT

Writing the 25-minute essay

What does a five-paragraph essay look like?

Characteristics of effective writing

VSAC event schedule (available from VSAC Resource Center; call 800-642-3177)

Procedure

1. Welcome the attendees and introduce yourself.
2. Begin with the following strategies for the whole test:
 - Review with students all the information on the SAT tip sheet handout, including the most effective guessing strategies.
 - Explain how the test differs from regular school tests:
 - 1) Difficult questions are worth the same number of points as easy questions.
 - 2) If you answer only two-thirds of the questions correctly, you get a good score of between 500 and 600 (whereas on school tests, two-thirds will earn only 66%).
 - 3) The SAT measures your reasoning and test-taking skills, not your knowledge.
 - Emphasize the value of practicing (use books, VT Guidance Central, Learning Express) and diagnosing the areas you need to strengthen.

Strategies for the essay

- Review the following handouts with students:
 - Writing the 25-minute essay
 - What does a five-paragraph essay look like?

- The essay is scored on the ability to take a stand and thoroughly defend it in a logical, easy-to-read way (go beyond superficialities).
- Encourage students to practice, practice, practice in order to become used to writing under pressure. Provide the brainstorm charts to help them develop their ability to organize their thoughts.

Test details

- Time: You'll be testing from approximately 8:15 am to 12:30 pm.
 - Bring: admission ticket, two #2 pencils, photo ID, calculator
 - Sections: math, critical reading, writing
 - Score: 600–2400
4. Allow time for questions if students are concerned about topics not covered above.
 5. Provide practice time using materials from the College Board SAT book.

Additional notes for presentation

Rules

- Spend the least amount of time on difficult questions.
- Spend the most amount of time on medium questions.
- Guessing is good, but whether you go with your first hunch depends on the difficulty level of the question.
- Re-read questions before selecting your final answer
- Possible outcomes if you guess:
 - 1) gain 1 point
 - 2) lose $\frac{1}{4}$ of a point
 - 3) gain/lose nothing if you don't guess

Critical reading section

- Sentence completion exercises measure your knowledge of vocabulary and your ability to understand how parts of a sentence fit together.
- There is a portion on passage-based reading.
 - 1) Passages are between 100–850 words in length.
 - 2) Questions are in the order that their answers appear in passage.
 - 3) The test involves the following skills: Drawing conclusions, understanding vocabulary in context, literal comprehension, making comparisons

Writing section

- The essay portion needs to be persuasive. It will be judged on:
 - 1) how well you express yourself clearly, coherently, and logically
 - 2) the extent to which you can support your opinion
 - 3) *Before exam day, pick your favorite books and history examples because almost any example can fit almost any essay question.*
- The multiple choice portion will test your ability to identify sentence errors, to improve sentences, and to improve paragraphs.

Math section

- This section tests your reasoning, not your math skills.
- The test involves the following skills: number and operations, algebra and functions, geometry and measurement, data analysis, statistics, and probability.



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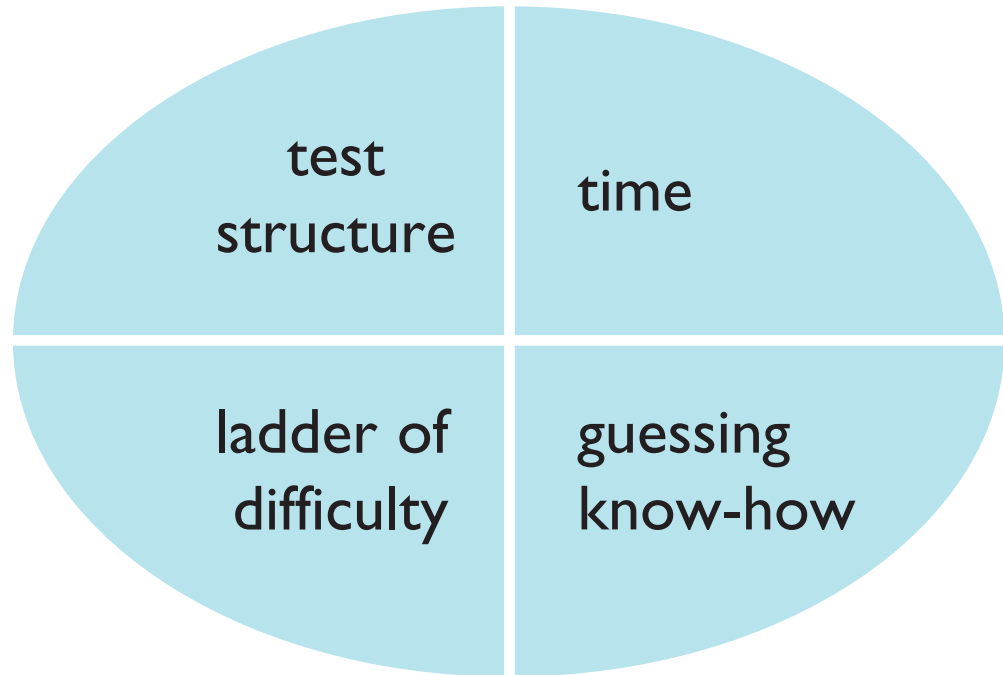
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general SAT test strategies

VSAAC



- Remember that the SAT is unlike regular school tests:
 1. Difficult questions are worth the same points as easy questions.
 2. If you answer only 66% of the questions correctly, you get a good score.
 3. The SAT measures your reasoning and test-taking skills, not your knowledge.
- Know the directions and question types ahead of time. You'll save time by not having to read the directions during the test.
- Understand the guessing penalty and how to manage it.
 1. You lose a fraction of a point with each wrong answer, but you should guess if you can eliminate a few answers.
 2. Wrong answers and correct guesses tend to cancel each other out, or work for you.
- Eliminate wrong answers through process of elimination. Depending on the difficulty of the question, you may be able to eliminate answers that are obviously wrong — see “ladder of increasing difficulty” below.
- Know how to budget your time. Answer the easy questions first and skip/return to the harder questions.
- Be aware of the ladder of increasing difficulty within each section.
 1. Concentrate on questions in the easy third (first third) and the medium third (middle third) of each section. Skip questions at the end of each section (difficult third).
 2. For trickier questions near the end, be suspicious of answers that are too easy.
 3. For easier questions near the beginning, don't be suspicious of easy answers.
 4. *Exceptions:* The ladder of difficulty does not apply to the sections on reading comprehension, usage, sentence correction, and paragraph correction.

Identifying sentence errors/usage

- Quickly read through the sentence, “listening” for the error.
- Know the most common grammar mistakes:
 1. subject/verb agreement
 2. pronoun agreement
 3. adjective/adverb confusion
- Look for errors in idiom — words or phrases that are particular to our language because of what they mean when they are used together. Examples:
 1. We listen to someone, not listen at someone.
 2. A song is written by a composer, not from a composer.
 3. We go to the top of the hill, not at the top on the hill.
- Remember that some sentences have no error (answer choice E).

Essay writing

- See the handout “writing the 25-minute essay.”
- Practice, practice, practice.

Improving sentences

- Read the entire sentence before looking at the choices.
- Read the sentence slowly so that your brain does not automatically correct and thus miss the error.
- Remember that answer choice A is always the same as the original sentence.
- Compare each choice to the original to help clarify the difference.
- Know the common problem areas in sentences:
 1. noun/verb agreement
 2. parallelism
 3. placement of modifiers (adjectives and adverbs)

Improving paragraphs

- Quickly read each paragraph before answering questions; even questions focusing on individual sentences ask you to look at the sentence in context.
- Know the different types of questions:
 1. questions on general organization
 2. questions that involve revising sentences
 3. questions that involve combining sentences
- Try all the suggestions before picking the “best” answer.
- Make sure that your answer makes sense in the context of the entire passage and the surrounding sentences.
- Look for wordiness, redundancy, and vague pronouns.

Sentence completion

- Make connections between the ideas in the sentence. Once you understand the connections, you can pick the best choice to complete the connection.
- Know the commonly used connections:
 1. contrast (although, but, by contrast, despite, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, yet)
 2. similarity (as...as, in the same way, like, likewise, resembles, same, for example, such as)
 3. restatement (in fact, in other words, namely, that is, in short)
 4. cause and effect (as a result, causes, consequently, due to, leads to, produces, therefore, thus)
- In each sentence, look for clues that signal connections (see words in parentheses above).
- Come up with your own answer before you look at the possible choices; then scan for an answer that's similar to yours.
- Work by process of elimination.

Critical reading

- Questions are arranged in chronological order as they occur in the passage, so the answers will appear within the passage in chronological order too (no ladder of increasing difficulty).
- Focus on main ideas when reading (main ideas are usually expressed in the first or last sentences of paragraphs).
- Know the typical structure of passages:
 1. several theories/approaches to a single topic
 2. one theory illustrated with several examples
 3. one theory supported by several arguments
 4. pro-and-con arguments on both sides of an issue
 5. comparison/contrast between two events, ideas, people
 6. cause and effect showing how one event led to another
- Mark up the passage as you read. Mark the main ideas of the entire passage and the main ideas within each paragraph.
- Before reading the passage, read the question stems (but NOT the answers).
- When you're answering the questions, look back to the passage for reference.
- Don't pick the first choice that sounds good.
- Don't pick an answer just because it sounds familiar.
- For two/dual passage, answer the questions that deal with the first passage only, then the questions that deal with the second passage only, then tackle the questions that deal with both passages.
- Save this section for last; complete the other verbal sections first.

Math multiple choice

- When in doubt, try multiple strategies.
 1. Look at the answers and plug them in to see if they work (start with the middle answer).
 2. Substitute numbers for variables.
- Remember the ladder of increasing difficulty; questions are arranged from easy to difficult.
- Make sure you understand exactly what the question is asking.
- Round off and “guesstimate” freely.
- Word problems — build an equation that will yield the answer you want.
- Break down the problem into parts and translate each part into a numerical expression.
- With geometry problems, look at the diagram for clues.
- If there is no diagram, sketch one.
- Avoid lengthy calculations and working with big numbers.
- Use your calculator sparingly.
- Know the question types:
 1. numbers and operations
 2. algebra and functions
 3. geometry and measurement
 4. data analysis, statistics, and probability

Math grid-ins

- There is no guessing penalty in this section, so guess if you can do so intelligently.
- Practice filling in the grid so you don't make mistakes during the test.
- Use the division sign (/) to enter fractions.
- Make decimal values as precise as the grid allows.
- Fill in any correct answer; don't debate whether one correct answer is better than another.
- Avoid negative answers or other answers that are impossible to grid.
- Never try to grid a mixed number.



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SAT writing prompts for practice

Read and think carefully about the issues presented in the following excerpts and the assignments below. Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on one of these issues. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

The discovery that someone we admire has done something wrong is always disappointing and disillusioning. Yet even when people we consider heroes have been tarnished by their faults, they are no less valuable than people who appear perfect. When we learn that an admired person, even one who is seemingly perfect, has behaved in less than admirable ways, we discover a complex truth: great ideas and great deeds come from imperfect people like ourselves.

Assignment: Do we benefit from learning about the flaws of people we admire and respect?

Source: www.collegeboard.com

Some people say you should be content with what you have and accept who you are. But it is possible that too much self-acceptance can turn into self-satisfied lack of ambition. People should always strive to improve themselves and to have more in their lives — friends, things, opportunities. After all, where would we be if great people, both in history and in our own time, did not try to have more and to improve themselves?

Assignment: Is it best for people to accept who they are and what they have, or should people always strive to better themselves?

Source: www.collegeboard.com

So-called common sense determines what people should wear, whom they should respect, which rules they should follow, and what kind of lives they should lead. Common sense is considered obvious and natural, too sensible to question. But people's common sense decisions may turn out to be wrong, even if they are thought to be correct according to the judgment of vast majorities of people.

Adapted from Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy*

Assignment: Can common sense be trusted and accepted, or should it be questioned?

Source: www.collegeboard.com

Winning does not require people to be against someone else; people can reach their goals through cooperation just as well as they can through competition. Winning is not always the result of selfish individualism. People achieve happiness by cooperating with others to increase the happiness of all, rather than by winning at others' expense. Ours is not a world in which the price of one person's happiness is someone else's unhappiness.

Adapted from Gilbert Brim, *Ambition*

Assignment: When some people win, must others lose, or are there situations in which everyone wins? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

Source: *www.collegeboard.com*

Knowledge is power. In agriculture, medicine, and industry, for example, knowledge has liberated us from hunger, disease, and tedious labor. Today, however, our knowledge has become so powerful that it is beyond our control. We know how to do many things, but we do not know where, when, or even whether this know-how should be used.

Assignment: Can knowledge be a burden rather than a benefit?

Source: *The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board*

A mistakenly cynical view of human behavior holds that people are primarily driven by selfish motives: the desire for wealth, for power, or for fame. Yet history gives us many examples of individuals who have sacrificed their own welfare for a cause or a principle that they regarded as more important than their own lives. Conscience — that powerful inner voice that tells us what is right and what is wrong — can be a more compelling force than money, power, or fame.

Assignment: Is conscience a more powerful motivator than money, fame, or power?

Source: *The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board*

Many people believe that our government should do more to solve our problems. After all, how can one individual create more jobs or make roads safer or improve our schools or help to provide any of the other benefits that we have come to enjoy? And yet expecting that the government — rather than individuals — should always come up with the solutions to society's ills may have made us less self-reliant, undermining our independence and self-sufficiency.

Assignment: Should people take more responsibility for solving problems that affect their communities or the nation in general?

Source: *The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board*

Technology promises to make our lives easier, freeing up time for leisure pursuits. But the rapid pace of technological innovation and the split-second processing capabilities of computers that can work virtually nonstop have made all of us feel rushed. We have adopted the relentless pace of the very machines that were supposed to simplify our lives, with the result that, whether at work or play, people do not feel like their lives have changed for the better.

Adapted from Karen Finucan, *Life in the Fast Lane*

Assignment: Do changes that make our lives easier not necessarily make them better?

Source: *The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board*

A better understanding of other people contributes to the development of moral virtues. We shall be both kinder and fairer in our treatment of others if we understand them better. Understanding ourselves and understanding others are connected, since as human beings we all have things in common.

Adapted from Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*

Assignment: Do we need other people in order to understand ourselves?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board

The old saying “be careful what you wish for” may be an appropriate warning. The drive to achieve a particular goal can dangerously narrow one’s perspective and encourage the fantasy that success in one endeavor will solve all of life’s difficulties. In fact, success can sometimes have unexpected consequences. Those who propel themselves toward the achievement of one goal often find that their lives are worse once “success” is achieved than they were before.

Assignment: Can success be disastrous?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board

There is, of course, no legitimate branch of science that enables us to predict the future accurately. Yet the degree of change in the world is so overwhelming and so promising that the future, I believe, is far brighter than anyone has contemplated since the end of the Second World War.

Adapted from Allan E. Goodman, *A Brief History of the Future: The United States in a Changing World Order*

Assignment: Is the world changing for the better?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board

Some people believe that there is only one foolproof plan, perfect solution, or correct interpretation. But nothing is ever that simple. For better or worse, for every so-called final answer there is another way of seeing things. There is always a “however.”

Assignment: Is there always another explanation or another point of view?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board

Honesty is important, of course, but deception can actually make it easier for people to get along. In a recent study, for example, one out of every four of the lies told by participants was told solely for the benefit of another person. In fact, most lies are harmless social untruths in which people pretend to like someone or something more than they actually do (“Your muffins are the best!”).

Adapted from Allison Kornet, *The Truth About Lying*

Assignment: Is deception ever justified?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board

Traditionally the term “heroism” has been applied to those who have braved physical danger to defend a cause or to protect others. But one of the most feared dangers people face is that of disapproval by their family, peers, or community. Sometimes acting courageously requires someone to speak out at the risk of such rejection. We should consider those who do so true heroes.

Assignment: Should heroes be defined as people who say what they think when we ourselves lack the courage to say it?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board

“Tough challenges reveal our strengths and weaknesses.” This statement is certainly true; adversity helps us discover who we are. Hardships can often lead us to examine who we are and to question what is important in life. In fact, people who have experienced seriously adverse events frequently report that they were positively changed by their negative experiences.

Assignment: Do you think that ease does not challenge us and that we need adversity to help us discover who we are?

Source: The Official SAT Study Guide, The College Board



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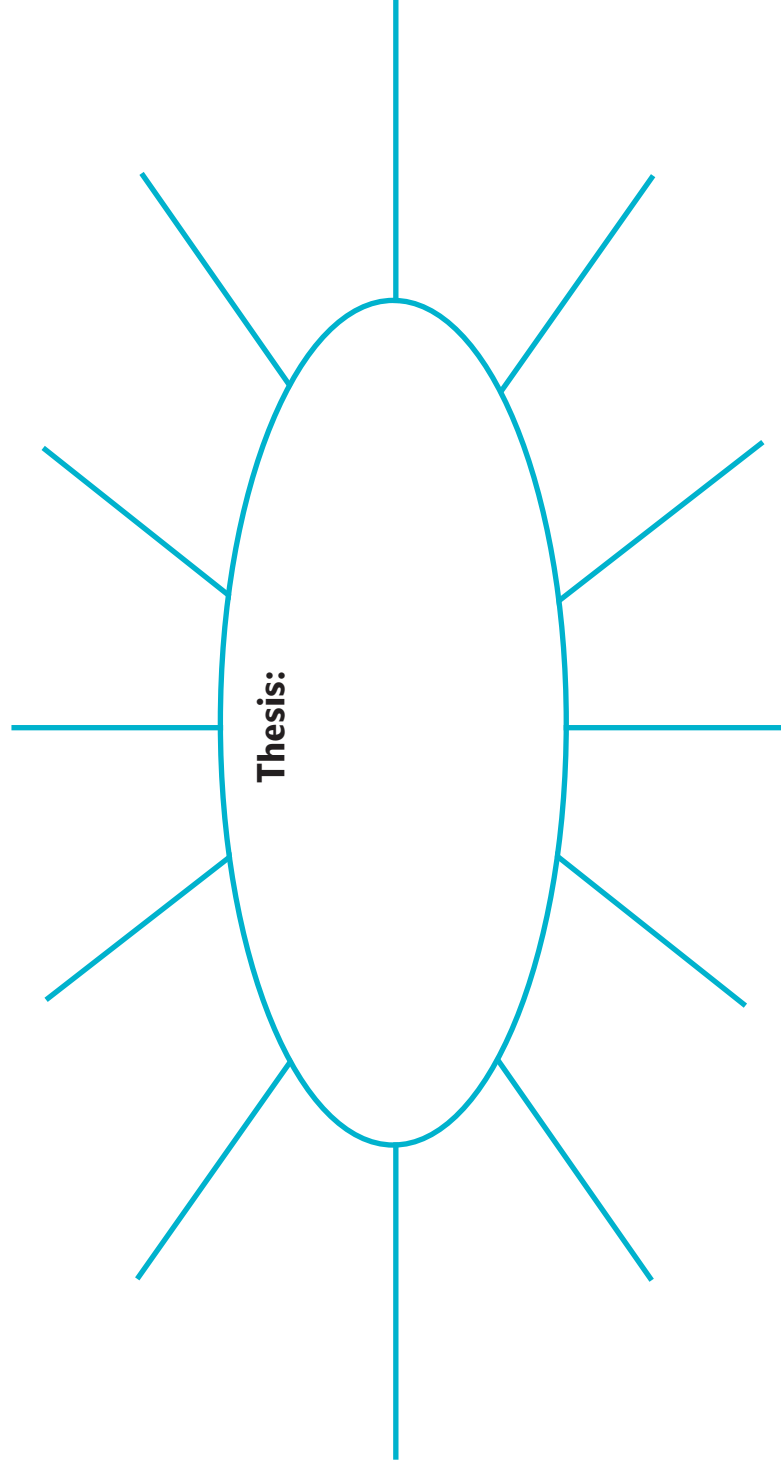
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web brainstorm



1. Jot your ideas down.
2. Draw connections between ideas (organize).
3. Add quick explanations/connect them to thesis.
4. Finalize thesis.



column organizer



1. List each main argument, with one example for each column (organize).
2. Provide supporting explanations.
3. Add quick connections to thesis.
4. Finalize thesis.

Thesis:

argument/example #1:

explanation/connection:

argument/example #2:

explanation/connection:

argument/example #3:

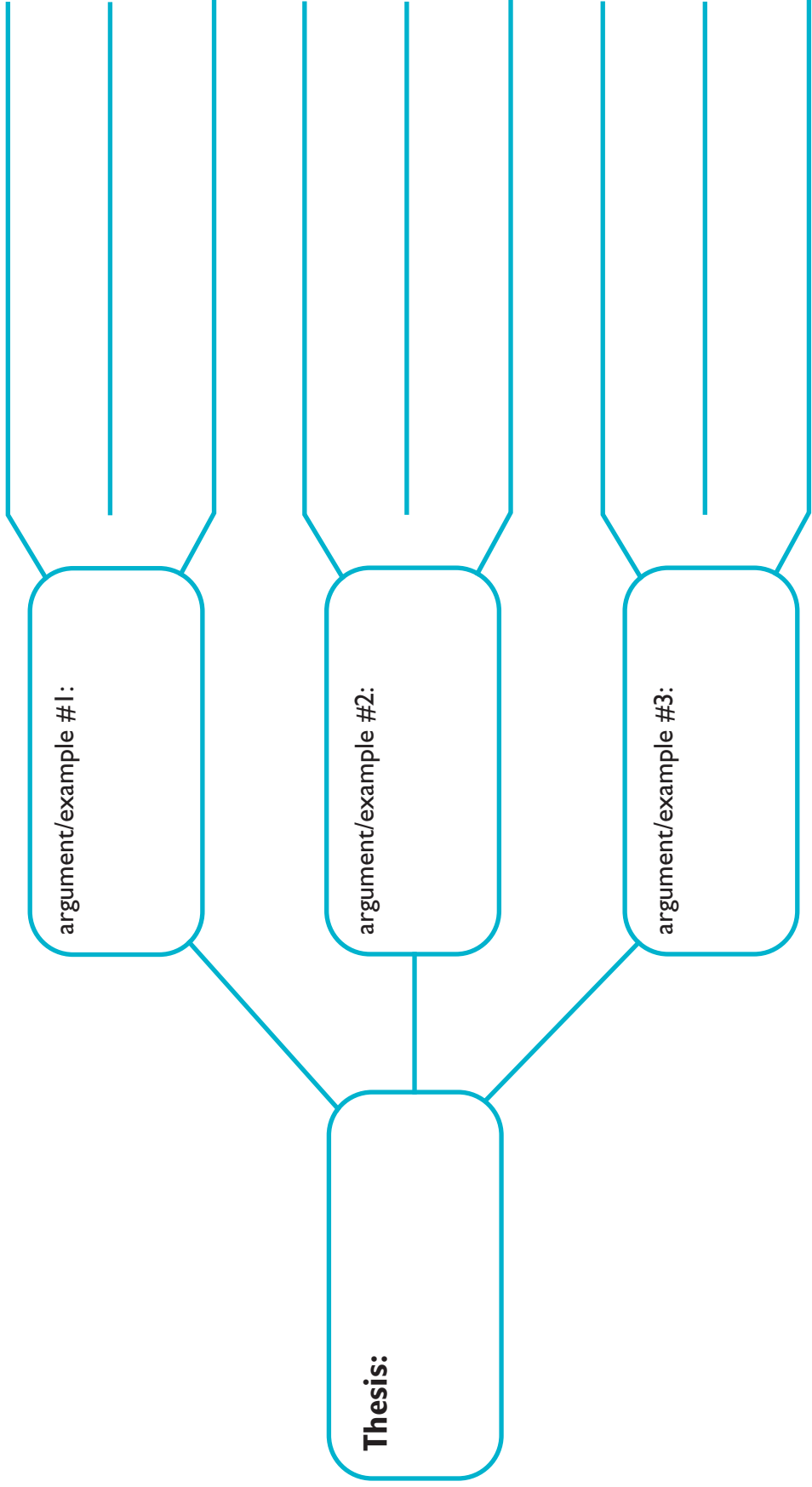
explanation/connection:

chart organizer



1. List each main argument, with one example for each box (organize).
2. Provide supporting explanations.
3. Add quick connections to thesis.
4. Finalize thesis.

explanation/connection:



SAT vs ACT

VSAC

	SAT	vs.	ACT
When students typically take it	Spring of junior year and/or fall of senior year		Junior year and/or fall of senior year
Type of test	Designed to assess a student's ability to handle college-level material; important to know and practice test strategies and reasoning skills in order to score well		Designed to test knowledge and mastery of high school subject material; important to use knowledge and reasoning skills to score well
When it is administered	Seven times per year		Six times per year
Test structure	Ten sections: three critical reading, three math, three writing, and one experimental (masked to look like a regular section)		Four sections: English, math, reading, and science reasoning; experimental section is added to tests on certain dates only and is clearly experimental; optional fifth section on writing
Test content	Math: up to ninth grade geometry and Algebra II No science section Reading: sentence completions; short and long critical reading passages; reading comprehension with a stress on vocabulary; questions testing grammar, usage, and word choice		Math: up to trigonometry Science section Reading: four passages — one each on prose fiction, social science, natural science, and humanities; English section stresses grammar
Penalty for wrong answers	Yes		No
Scoring	200–800 per section, combined for a single total score Highest possible combined score: 2400		1–36 for each subject, averaged for a composite score Highest possible composite score: 36
Scores sent to schools	If a student requests that a score report be sent to specific colleges, the report will include scores received on every test taken.		A score-choice option allows students to choose which schools will receive their scores and which scores the schools will see.
Other uses	Scholarship purposes		Scholarship purposes Certain statewide testing programs
When to register	At least five weeks before the test date		At least five weeks before the test date
Test dates and more information	The College Board www.collegeboard.com		ACT, Inc. www.act.org

score comparison: ACT vs. SAT

Source: www.act.org/aap/concordance/estimate.html

ACT composite score	Estimated SAT CR+M+W	Estimated SAT CR+M+W (score range)	ACT composite score
36	2390	2380–2400	36
35	2330	2290–2370	35
34	2250	2220–2280	34
33	2180	2140–2210	33
32	2120	2080–2130	32
31	2060	2020–2070	31
30	2000	1980–2010	30
29	1940	1920–1970	29
28	1880	1860–1910	28
27	1820	1800–1850	27
26	1770	1740–1790	26
25	1710	1680–1730	25
24	1650	1620–1670	24
23	1590	1560–1610	23
22	1530	1510–1550	22
21	1470	1450–1500	21
20	1410	1390–1440	20
19	1350	1330–1380	19
18	1290	1270–1320	18
17	1230	1210–1260	17
16	1170	1140–1200	16
15	1100	1060–1130	15
14	1020	990–1050	14
13	950	910–980	13
12	870	820–900	12
11	780	750–810	11



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CR = critical reading

M = math

W = writing

writing the 25-minute essay

COACH yourself.

- C** — **Carefully read** Make sure you understand the question.
- O** — **Opinion** Form an opinion (your thesis) on the question.
- A** — **Arguments/examples** Decide what arguments/examples you'll use to support your opinion. Also, decide how to address any counter-arguments to your examples.
- C** — **Connections** Carefully explain the connections between your arguments/examples and your opinion in more than a superficial way.
- H** — **Hierarchy** (also known as **helping** the reader) Arrange your arguments in a logical order so your essay is organized and easy to follow.

Write a five-paragraph essay, using the preparation process above.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

The more you practice writing timed essays, the easier it will be to write an organized, competent essay in 25 minutes on test day.

Practice with several different types of essay prompts so you can develop a list of potential examples to use on test day.

Use your time wisely.

1. Prep work (5–10 minutes): Don't start writing your essay until you've brainstormed your ideas, organized them, and written your thesis statement.
2. Essay writing (15–20 minutes)
3. Editing (1–5 minutes) if you have time.



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What does the five-paragraph essay look like?

Opening paragraph

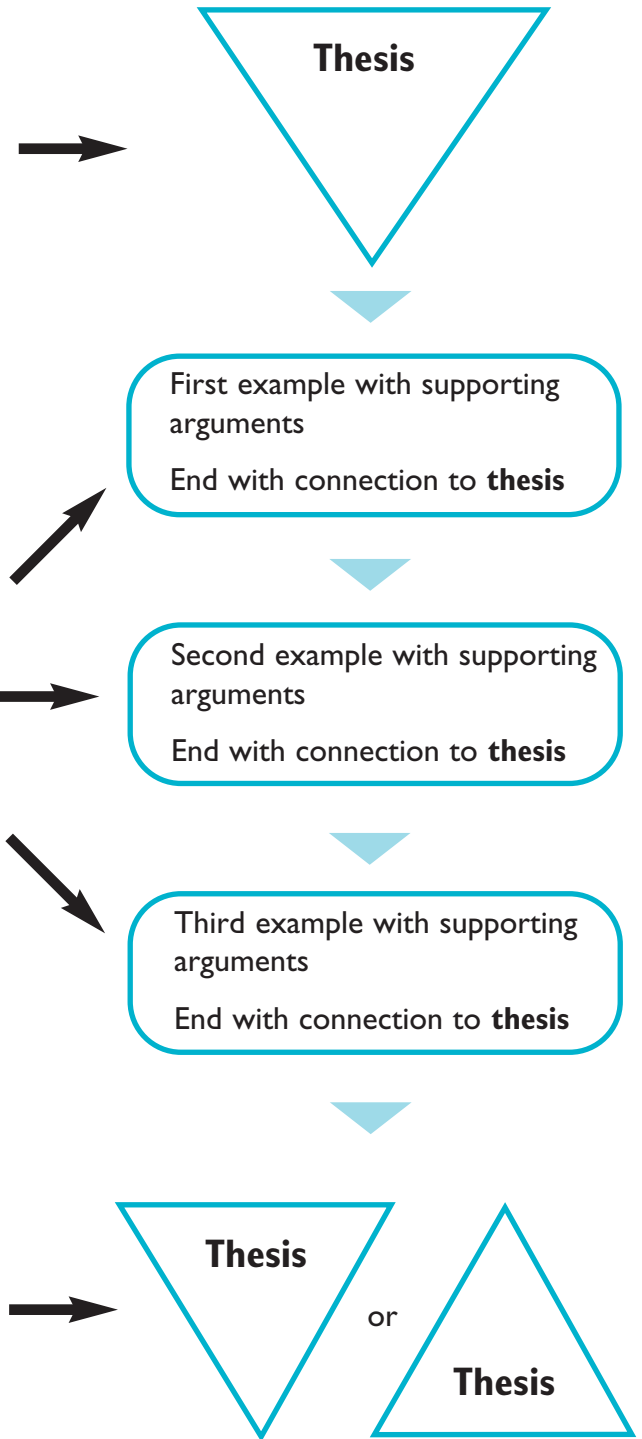
- 3–5 sentences
- Starts broad and then gradually narrows to the thesis. In other words:
 1. Begin with a general statement about the subject (you can restate the question in your own words, showing your understanding of the topic).
 2. Then start discussing your position.
 3. End the opening paragraph with your thesis statement.

Three supporting paragraphs

- 5–8 sentences each
- Discuss one example in each supporting paragraph.
- Make sure to explain how each example supports your argument.
- Go beyond superficial statements.
- End each supporting paragraph with a statement directly explaining how this example supports your thesis.

Closing paragraph

- 3–5 sentences
- Your closing paragraph can either start with a restatement of your thesis and then broaden, or begin with a broad summary and end with a restatement of your thesis.
- Summarize your arguments.
- Feel free to include one last thought-provoking comment to show that you understand the topic.



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characteristics of effective writing

from *The College Board*

VSAC

Characteristics of effective writing	Examples of ineffective writing	Corrected sentences
Consistency		
Sequence of tenses	After he broke his arm, he is home for two weeks.	After he broke his arm, he was home for two weeks.
Shift of pronoun	If you're tense, one should try to relax.	If you're tense, you should try to relax.
Parallelism	The master carpenter showed us how to countersink the nails, how to varnish the wood, and getting a smooth surface was also demonstrated.	The master carpenter showed us how to countersink the nails, varnish the wood, and get a smooth surface.
Noun-number agreement	Ann and Sarah want to be a pilot.	Ann and Sarah want to be pilots.
Subject-verb agreement	There is eight people on shore.	There are eight people on shore.
Logical expression of ideas		
Coordination and subordination	Nancy has a rash, and she is probably allergic to something.	Nancy has a rash; she is probably allergic to something.
Logical comparison	Harry grew more vegetables than his neighbor's garden.	Harry grew more vegetables than his neighbor.
Modification and word order	Barking loudly, the tree had the dog's leash wrapped around it.	Barking loudly, the dog had wrapped his leash around the tree.
Clarity and precision		
Ambiguous and vague pronouns	In the newspaper they say that few people voted.	The newspaper reported that few people voted.
Usage	He circumvented the globe on his trip.	He circumnavigated the globe on his trip.
Wordiness	There are many problems in the contemporary world in which we live.	There are many problems in our world today.
Missing subject	If your car is parked here while not eating in the restaurant, it will be towed away.	If you park here and do not eat in the restaurant, your car will be towed away.
Weak passive verbs	When you bake a cake, the oven should be preheated.	When you bake a cake, you should preheat the oven.

Characteristics of effective writing

Examples of ineffective writing

Corrected sentences

Appropriate use of conventions

Adjective and adverb confusion

His friends agree that he drives reckless.

His friends agree that he drives recklessly.

Pronoun case

He sat between you and I at the stadium.

He sat between you and me at the stadium.

Idiom

Natalie had a different opinion toward her.

Natalie had a different opinion of her.

Comparison of modifiers

Of the sixteen executives, Meg makes more money.

Of the sixteen executives, Meg makes the most money.

Sentence fragment

Whether or not the answer seems correct.

The answer seems to be correct.

Comma splice or fused sentence

Shawna enjoys crossword puzzles, she works on one every day.

Shawna enjoys crossword puzzles, and she works on one every day.

Source: *The Official SAT Study Guide: For the New SAT*, The College Board



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