

# The Impact of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests

Report from the NCTE Task Force  
on  
SAT and ACT Writing Tests

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National Council of  
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The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), with 60,000 individual and institutional members worldwide, is dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts at all levels of education.

# The Impact of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests

## Introduction

The widespread anxiety that accompanied the first administration of the new SAT exam in March 2005 and the intensive press coverage of the event testify to the important role that the SAT has come to play in American education. This task force was charged with examining the most extensive change to that test in a decade and perhaps the most important change in the test's history: the addition of a 25-minute timed essay as a required component of the test. Our investigation into this change (and into the timed essay component of the ACT, which is optional) found that many of the concerns about the test that have been expressed in the popular press and in professional forums are warranted. These are serious concerns that speak to the potential of this test to compromise student writers and undermine longstanding efforts to improve writing instruction in the nation's schools. At the same time, the addition of a written component to the SAT and the attention this change has generated provide opportunities for NCTE to bring important questions about the nature of writing instruction to the fore of the ongoing public debates about literacy education in the U.S.

This report presents the findings of our investigation into the timed writing test of the new SAT. It reflects our sense that, in general, the test is unlikely to improve writing instruction in the nation's schools in ways that are consistent with the principles articulated in NCTE's *Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* (<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/write/118876.htm>); moreover, the potential detrimental impact of the test on writing instruction in secondary schools is cause for genuine concern. While we agree that the addition of a writing component to the SAT will "send the message that strong writing skills are essential to success in college and beyond," as one report from the College Board notes (Kobrin, n.d., p. 1), the messages this test sends about the nature of writing and the specific writing skills and knowledge to be valued are problematic at best and potentially damaging to the best efforts to implement effective writing pedagogies in the nation's schools.

## Findings

Our examination of the potential impact of the new SAT timed writing test (and the existing ACT optional timed writing test) included a review of available research on writing assessment, an examination of materials developed by the College Board (and similar materials from ACT), a consideration of current scholarship on writing instruction, and discussions with various professionals in language arts education. (It is important to note that although many of the concerns discussed in this report apply to both the SAT and ACT timed writing tests, the focus of our discussion is the SAT, because its timed writing test is a required component of the test. As a result, its impact is likely to be greater than the ACT's writing test as currently configured.)

Our investigation has highlighted four areas of concern related to the potential impact of the new timed writing component of the SAT:

- 1) Concerns about the validity and reliability of the test as an indication of writing ability.
- 2) Concerns about the impact of the test on curriculum and classroom instruction as well as on attitudes about writing and writing instruction.
- 3) Concerns about the unintended consequences of the uses of the writing tests.
- 4) Concerns about equity and diversity.

Each of these concerns will be discussed separately.

### **1. The validity and reliability of the new SAT timed essay-writing examination (and the existing ACT essay examination)**

Any writing test will raise questions about validity and reliability. The professional literature is replete with research on these questions as well as critiques of writing tests as valid and reliable means of assessing writing ability. But these longstanding concerns take on added significance in the context of a test of the scale and consequence of the SAT. Because of the scale of the test (taken by 1.4 million students in 2004), and because of its widespread use for college admissions decisions and sometimes for placement into college courses, questions about the test's validity and reliability are magnified. With that context in mind, we make the following points:

- a) *Although the College Board has advertised the timed writing component of the SAT as new, the specific format of the SAT timed essay is similar to short, timed, impromptu essay tests that have long been available; it is therefore subject to the same questions that have long been raised about such tests* (see b and d below). Most important, the SAT's timed essay, in its current form, will add little or nothing to what can usefully be determined about a student's writing ability through impromptu writing tests.
- b) *Available evidence suggests that scores from this test (or the equivalent one from ACT) will have limited value in decisions about student applicants seeking admission to college.* Studies conducted by the testing firms themselves show that a single, short, impromptu essay adds little or nothing to the predictive power of other measures, such as high school GPA or "verbal proficiency" scores. In a review of four studies conducted by the College Board on the effect of a timed writing component on the predictive validity of the SAT (what is termed "incremental validity"), the

largest improvement in predictive validity ranged from .03 to .08; one study showed improvement of zero to .02 (Kobrin, n.d., p. 3). The report concludes, "Based on studies of the predictive validity of the SAT II: Writing Test, the new SAT I writing section may be expected to add modestly to the predictive validity of the SAT I" (Kobrin, n.d., p. 4). Given these figures, even the term "modest" seems overstated. In short, given the other potential consequences of the addition of a timed writing test to the SAT that we discuss in this report, this very small increase in incremental validity is an extremely weak justification for adding the new writing test.

- c) *The predictive validity of a short, impromptu, holistically scored essay is severely limited when it comes to predicting first-year course grades, first-year writing performance, or retention.* By itself, such a score correlates with any of these target variables at about .30, accounting for less than 10 percent of the way students vary on that variable (McKendy, 1992). The correlation coefficients associated with the SAT II Writing Test as a predictor of college performance cited in Kobrin (n.d.) are questionable when applied to the new SAT writing test. The studies cited in Kobrin looked at less representative student populations than will take the new SAT and examined only the predictive validity of the writing test itself rather than the addition of a written essay to other predictors of college performance. (The College Board conducted a study of the predictive validity of the new SAT writing test in 2004, which it has yet to release publicly. Our review of a draft of this study indicates that it does not support the College Board's claim that the addition of the writing test improves the predictive validity of the SAT. However, because the College Board has not yet made this study public, we cannot cite it in this report.) In short, there is no evidence that the new SAT writing test will be useful in predicting students' first-year course grades, first-year writing performance, or retention.
- d) *The kind of writing skill required to do well on short, timed essay tests has little instructional validity.* Given only 25 minutes to write the SAT essay (30 minutes for the ACT essay), students will likely produce a kind of writing that is necessarily formulaic and superficial—writing that is very different from the lengthier, in-depth, and complex writing expected by most college instructors, who tend to discourage rapid, unrevised writing, especially because it encourages rote organization and superficial thinking. One recent study (Yancey, et al., 2005) shows how radically the expectations of college composition teachers depart from the writing encouraged by the SAT and ACT exams. (This gap between the SAT essay score and college course may be further widened by the way the essay is scored, because Pearson Educational Measurement, who has been hired

- by the College Board to rate the essays, does not require their raters to have taught in college; the College Board reports that 58% of its current reader pool teaches at the postsecondary level and 42% at the secondary level.)
- e) *The College Board has developed the SAT essay test very quickly, raising further questions about its validity.* Apparently the College Board has run tests of concurrent validity (correlations with previous SAT exams) and internal validity (correlations with other parts of the same examination), though these have nothing necessarily to do with instructional or predictive validity (see [http://www.collegeboard.com/highered/ra/sat/sat\\_research.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/highered/ra/sat/sat_research.html)). A high correlation between the new timed writing test and indirect verbal testing would do little more than reinforce the poor validity of the impromptu essay, because historically indirect verbal scores on standardized tests have the same negligible predictability of around .30.
- f) *The SAT writing test was developed for the relatively narrow purpose of college admissions decisions and is not appropriate for other purposes.* The College Board states that college admissions officers can use the new essay essentially to verify the authenticity of applicants' personal statements. Such a use of the test is extremely questionable, especially if the applicant is a second-language/second-dialect speaker. The writing of many students often declines in performance under impromptu, timed composing conditions. The College Board also reports on its Web site that 32% of college admissions directors it polled reported plans to use the new SAT writing test for placement purposes. Given that the SAT writing test was neither designed nor validated for these different purposes, these possible uses of the test are cause for concern.

Ultimately, given that so much is riding on these tests and given that their use is likely to grow for purposes beyond college admission (see below under #3), one of the most important questions we need to ask is whether the timed written component of the SAT can measure what the College Board claims it can measure and whether it can do so reliably. We believe that the writing test will be neither a valid measure of students' overall writing ability nor a reliable predictor of students' college performance. (We note here that the very constructs of validity and reliability continue to be debated by experts in the field of assessment. For example, see Huot, 1990 and 1996; Moss, 1994. Therefore, even if the SAT timed writing test can meet common standards for validity and reliability, questions about those measures continue to be raised with respect to writing ability.)

## 2. Impact of the New Writing Tests on Curriculum and Classroom Instruction

The College Board has expressed appropriate concern about the writing performance of high school graduates, and it promotes the new timed writing component of the SAT as a way to encourage high schools to emphasize writing in test preparation. While we share the concern about the writing ability of the nation's high school students, we have grave concerns about the potential effects of this kind of large-scale writing test on writing instruction in secondary schools. The nature of this test and the conditions under which it is administered may indeed encourage greater emphasis on writing in test preparation in high school classrooms, but such emphasis is likely to diverge from, and even undermine, what we know to be effective writing instruction, as described in the recent NCTE report, "[What Research Says about Writing Instruction](#)." Specifically, we have the following concerns about the possible impact of this timed writing test on writing instruction:

- a) *The kind of writing required for success on the timed essay component of the SAT is likely to encourage writing instruction that emphasizes formulaic writing with specific but limited textual features.* The sample prompts provided by the College Board include writing tasks that are generally decontextualized and artificial, with no reference to the crucial rhetorical matters of audience and purpose. Students are provided with topics about which they may have little or no knowledge (or interest), yet they are instructed to "support your reasoning with examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations." Teachers wishing to help students prepare for such writing tasks will necessarily provide students with strategies focused on the specific textual features identified by the College Board's promotional materials as important. Careful, in-depth inquiry into a topic, attention to stylistic or structural features that may be suitable for specific audiences or rhetorical situations, creativity and innovation—all these important components of effective writing are likely to be implicitly or explicitly discouraged by teachers who will understandably be concerned about helping students manage the required writing tasks in the short allotted time. The following advice offered by one test-prep business might serve as an illustration of the impact of the SAT timed writing test on teachers' approaches to preparing students for the test: "For the essay, outline your idea first. Use precise language and grab the graders' attention with your opening sentence. If you have terrible handwriting, print. Make spacious indents before new paragraphs. Use examples from literary sources and add a few distinctive vocabulary words" (Churnin and Johnson, 2005). None of this advice is necessarily bad by itself; what concerns us is that such advice encourages development of a very narrow kind of writing ability and ignores some of the most important elements of effective writing.

- b) *Although it is possible that the new SAT will promote more writing instruction, we believe that preparation for the test is likely to take precious time away from high quality writing instruction.* Research indicates that instruction in response to high-stakes assessment tends to become formulaic and non-critical (Hillocks, 2002; Ketter and Pool, 2001; McNeil, 2000). Instead of practicing types of writing that take many forms, depending on audience, purpose, and context, students will likely practice one-draft persuasive writing responses using a pattern determined by the rubric. Already we are seeing such anticipatory responses to the timed writing exam, such as a recent description of timed writing practice in NCTE's publication *Classroom Notes Plus*.
- c) *Research suggests that writing instruction focused on following patterns, writing one draft, and adhering to specific criteria for the text—just the kind of instruction likely to be used to prepare students for the new SAT—prepares students poorly for college-level writing tasks and for workplace writing tasks.* Available research indicates that students are already doing "a high proportion of expository and persuasive writing," little personal writing, and little guided revision (Scherff and Piazza, 2005). If one justification for the addition of the timed writing test to the SAT is to encourage students to be better prepared for college-level writing tasks, we find it highly unlikely that the new SAT will accomplish that purpose. More likely, students will receive less instruction in some of the most important components of effective writing as a result of teachers' perceived need to devote more time to preparation for the new SAT, which emphasizes a narrow kind of writing ability.

Given what we already know about the impact of large-scale and/or high-stakes tests on classroom instruction, and given the specific nature of the new SAT timed writing test, we see no reason to conclude that the SAT Writing Test will improve writing instruction at the secondary level. Indeed, it is likely to exacerbate conditions that encourage writing instruction of limited use to students. It is important to note here that the consequences of such an impact on secondary writing instruction may be different but no less detrimental to the millions of high school graduates who do not pursue postsecondary education. If writing instruction in the secondary school English curriculum is shaped by the SAT timed writing test in the ways we have described here, and if the emerging trend to configure the conventional secondary school curriculum around college-bound students continues, then students who do not go to college may find themselves even more poorly prepared for literacy tasks in the workplace after they leave high school.

These likely impacts of the test on classroom instruction relate to a less visible but no less powerful impact on prevailing attitudes toward writing and writing instruction. In other words, the kind of writing valued by the SAT reflects a set of



assumptions about writing—and about "good" writing—that we find problematic and which diverge from what the best current scholarship tells us about the nature of writing:

- a) The sample essays on the College Board Web site provide models of essays that define "good" writing as essentially "correct" writing that is focused on conventional truisms and platitudes about life. The questions on the multiple-choice section of the writing test emphasize editing skills and the ability to recognize "correct" standard writing style.
- b) The matters of audience and purpose are tangential to the main focus of the writing expected on the SAT. The focus of writing on that test is the production of a text that conforms to narrow criteria regarding form; such a focus ignores or eliminates the crucial uses of writing for inquiry, communication, and social interaction.
- c) The explanations for the scores on the sample essays on the College Board Web site focus on a few relatively narrow features of a text, especially the need for a thesis sentence, "support" for statements (which is not defined), the need for specificity, and rigidly organized paragraphs that "develop" the thesis. Although these features of writing are important, they do not by themselves constitute an effective text. In general, the explanations for the scores on the sample essays on the College Board Web site reflect a view of writing that emphasizes "observable" and "measurable" traits, which constitute only a small part of what makes a piece of writing effective.

Because such assumptions about writing can be "invisible" and therefore unexamined, they can powerfully influence attitudes about writing instruction among teachers, students, parents, and administrators. In this sense, the potential for the SAT timed writing test to reinforce problematic attitudes about writing is a serious matter.

### **3. Unintended Consequences of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests**

The addition of a timed writing test to the SAT happens at a time when calls for greater "rigor" in the high school curriculum are increasing. Accompanying such calls for a rigorous curriculum is a related push for more testing. Faced with this accelerating trend, some states are beginning to turn to the ACT or SAT to test student learning. Michigan, for example, is now in the process of shifting from a state-developed test to a new test, the Michigan Merit Exam, that will use either ACT or SAT (which test to be used has not yet been determined) as its basis with additional questions developed to match the Michigan Curriculum Frameworks. According to Ed Roeber, Executive Director for Assessment for the Michigan Department of Education, and to a report on the Michigan Department of Education Web site entitled "Benefits to Stakeholders," the major motivations for this shift to

using ACT/SAT are (among others) (1) to reduce the number of tests students have to take (to satisfy NCLB and college requirements); (2) to serve as a cost-saving benefit to the state and to families; and (3) to encourage more students to go to college. Several other states, including Colorado, Oklahoma, and Illinois, have been using ACT tests as part or all of their state-required examinations, and more states are considering them. (Roeber reports that he has received requests for information about Michigan's plans from Kentucky, Missouri, and Vermont.) These developments are part of a national trend to restructure the high school curriculum around the goal of preparing more students for college. According to a recent report in *Education Week*, many states seem to be moving in the direction of Kansas, which is seeking to align curriculum "with the college-preparatory core recommended by the ACT admissions-test program" (Olson, 2005).

This growing interest in using tests in ways for which they were not initially intended raises several concerns with respect to the new timed writing component of the SAT:

- a) *The use of the SAT or ACT writing tests for state-mandated testing of high school students may adversely affect curriculum and instruction.* The design and goals of the SAT/ACT may extend beyond their original intent, especially if more states adopt the SAT or ACT writing tests as part of their testing system in response to NCLB requirements. If this trend continues, it seems likely that the goals of the SAT/ACT writing tests will shape or even supercede the curriculum goals of states, which in many cases reflect much broader and complex conceptions of writing than the SAT or ACT writing tests (as we note above in #2). We also wonder who is helping to develop those goals and what their knowledge of writing pedagogy might be.

In addition, we are concerned that some arguments in favor of the use of these timed writing tests for the purposes of statewide assessment of high school are misleading. For example, case studies by ACT of the uses of its tests in Colorado, Oklahoma, and Illinois indicate improvements in such measures as the numbers of students taking the tests, test scores, college attendance, and in minority performance in all these areas (ACT, 2005). These gains seem laudable. However, these improvements do not necessarily correlate to improvement in overall writing ability. With respect to writing ability, the ACT's figures indicate at best that students who do well on the test can perform the writing tasks required on the test. Although some of the skills associated with high scores on these writing tasks are important, they constitute only a limited part of the complex array of language, rhetorical, and procedural skills necessary for effective writing.

- b) *The SAT/ACT professional development packages may undermine ongoing teacher professional development efforts by NCTE, the National Writing Project, and other recognized professional organizations, especially in terms of how they support the kinds of teaching of writing advocated by these organizations.* Although they have not made their materials public, it seems likely that professional development offered by the College Board or ACT is likely to emphasize the kind of writing required on the tests, which diverges from the focus of many professional development initiatives by NCTE and similar organizations in ways we have noted above.
- c) *It seems likely that the new SAT writing test and the ACT writing test will be used as placement tests for students admitted to college, a purpose for which these tests have neither been designed nor sufficiently validated.* The College Board itself advocates the use of the SAT writing test for placement, stating in one recent report, "The SAT I writing section will also have great value for placement decisions and for its instructional implications" (Kobrin, n.d., p. 4); its own surveys also indicate that many college programs are likely to use the test in just this way. The use of these tests for placement may encourage first-year writing programs to align their instruction with the kind of writing emphasized by the tests. Despite the example of colleges like St. Lawrence University that have recently dropped ACT/SAT tests as a requirement for admission, many colleges who require the tests for admission may see the ACT/SAT writing scores as more cost-effective than their own procedures for placement into writing courses.

It therefore seems clear that the SAT and ACT, which were designed and promoted for many years as tests to be used to predict college performance, are being adopted for other purposes, some of which, as we note here, are problematic. Moreover, despite its traditional insistence that the SAT is to be used as a predictor of college performance, the College Board cannot control how the SAT is used, nor can it anticipate unintended uses, such as those we have described here.

#### **4. Equity and Diversity**

Our investigation has also identified several serious issues regarding equity and diversity related to the new timed writing test on the SAT. Specifically, based on available research and our collective experience, we believe that the new timed writing tests have the potential to affect various segments of the national student population disproportionately and to place at a disadvantage students who may already be at risk in various ways:

- a) *Some research indicates that teachers in schools with limited resources serving students of lower socioeconomic status have taken a formulaic, lock-step approach to skill development and concept building when faced with high-stakes tests.* It seems likely that teachers of such students will respond defensively to the high-stakes nature of this test by resorting to drills and templates intended to prepare their students to earn high scores. This is not meant as a criticism of teachers who understandably take an efficient and ethical approach to a test that may unfairly disadvantage their students. But as a consequence, these students may experience less effective overall writing instruction, having fewer opportunities to write for authentic purposes to authentic audiences about topics they have some knowledge about.
- b) *Students from diverse backgrounds may bring to the new writing tests very different cultural assumptions about writing that may compromise their ability to score well on an impromptu, timed essay that emphasizes a specific conception of "good" writing,* as we noted above. Research shows that such students already tend to believe that they are poor writers at school, in part because the criticisms they receive about their writing focus on standards of form and correctness that may not coincide with their own cultural and linguistic experiences (Ball, 1992). These standards for "good" writing may differ significantly from the cultural preferences for writing that many students bring to school.
- c) *The lack of choice in the timed writing prompts may compromise some students and not others.* Some research indicates that student choice can affect writing quality. In one large-scale study of a statewide writing assessment, researchers found that gender and race, when combined with choice, had an impact on student scores, particularly in the areas of writing conventions and sentence formation (which are emphasized in the SAT writing test); females and Black students tended to write better when given a choice of writing topics (Gabrielson, et al., 1995).
- d) *Because background knowledge can affect writing quality, students from diverse backgrounds may be disadvantaged by the SAT timed writing test.* Students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds may bring different kinds of experiential knowledge to the test situation and may lack the specific knowledge necessary for earning high scores on the SAT timed writing test, which asks students to write about specific topics without supplying information about those topics. For example, the explanations for higher scores on the sample essays on the College Board Web site emphasize the need for supporting evidence. Providing such evidence generally calls for a student not only to draw on the information provided

in the test document, but also to draw on background knowledge about the topic, which students from certain cultural backgrounds may not have.

- e) *The holistic scoring procedure for the timed writing test may introduce bias that can place students from some backgrounds at a disadvantage.* The College Board had described a relatively conventional procedure for rating the essays whereby each essay will be read by two raters, who will use a rubric designed for this purpose. However, even with guidelines for rating the essays, individual raters can lack sensitivity to and knowledge about the characteristic features of students' vernacular languages. Since linguistically diverse students are less likely to adhere to mainstream norms of grammar, sentence structure, organizational patterns, style, etc., than speakers of mainstream American English, they stand a greater chance of becoming "victims of biases created by these tests" (Hoover and Politzer, 1981, p. 201).
- f) *The concerns expressed here may be exacerbated for second-language and second-dialect learners, who may lack the implicit language knowledge to enable them to negotiate impromptu writing tasks quickly and effectively.*
- g) *The increased cost of the new SAT may cause hardship for students of limited economic means.* Although the College Board claims that scholarships or fee waivers are available for students who cannot afford the cost of the test, we find it hard to believe that all such students will be identified and assisted by this program. It is likely that some students may exempt themselves from the test because of the costs. In addition, students of limited economic means will likely not have access to test preparation resources available to more privileged students.

The College Board itself has recently studied the impact of different writing prompts on the new test, concluding, "Results of the impact analyses revealed no significant prompt type effects for ethnic, gender, or language groups, although there were significant differences in mean scores for ethnic and gender groups for all prompts" (Breland, et al., 2004, p. 1). In the study, African American and Hispanic students scored significantly lower than their White and Asian American counterparts on all tested prompts, suggesting, as we have noted above, continued inequities in these tests related to racial and/or ethnic background. (It should be noted that all tested writing prompts in this study conformed to the general format and nature of the kind of sample writing prompts provided by the College Board on its Web site. In other words, the kind of writing encouraged by these tested prompts was essentially the same for all the prompts; therefore, the concerns we have raised about the limitations of these short, impromptu writing tests apply to all the

prompts used in the study. Given the similarity of the tested prompts, it is not surprising that differences in performance among students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds were consistent across the different writing prompts. Nevertheless, in its overview of its own research, the College Board claims that "the results of this study indicated that the essay prompt type that will be used on the new SAT did not disadvantage any particular group of students" (Kobrin & Schmidt, 2005, p. 2). Technically, that's correct, but it's also misleading, since students of different groups performed differently on all tested prompts.)

In short, our review indicates that the timed writing tests may worsen the gap in educational preparedness between the nation's "haves" and "have nots."

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