

Real World Literacy



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If you've ever asked, "When will I ever use this in the real world?" join us, Mondays and Wednesdays, for Real World Literacy, a new Skills for Everyday Living series. Series runs through April 4.

SAT Essay Assay

The SAT makes us nervous. And now that it has a writing test, we're even more anxious about it. But after a careful assay of high-scoring essays, you'll see that it's not worth the worry it so often inspires.

And the Winner is ...

Go to the official SAT site at www.collegeboard.com and read the sample essays. Note that essays receiving the highest scores are about 350 words long.

Does this mean they're scored on length alone? No. Essays are scored on simple criteria. Meeting those criteria can be done by following a formula that typically produces an essay of a certain length.

The Secret Formula

In addition to their brevity, successful SAT essays tend to follow a predictable structure:

Paragraph 1. The first paragraph starts with a one-sentence statement of your opinion and includes a few sentences about your position on the topic.

Paragraphs 2 and 3. The second and third paragraphs each contain one supporting point plus several details.

Paragraph 4. The last paragraph explains the general importance of the writer's opinion and ends by giving the reader something to think about.

Some high-scoring essays may have five or six paragraphs, especially when the paragraphs are very short.

The Secret Strategy

Developing the essay is a matter of explaining what you think, why you think it and how you know you're right. To get yourself ready to go, use the "What-Why-How" strategy:

WHAT do you think? The first sentence of your essay should state the one most important thing you want your reader to know about the topic.

WHY do you think it? Write down two good reasons why you think what you think. These will be the first sentences of your second and third paragraphs.

HOW do you know you're right? To fill out your body paragraphs with solid support, write down three or four details for each reason.

Following the "What-Why-How" structure will help you create exactly what the test makers are looking for: a logically organized, well-supported presentation of a clearly stated opinion.

Above and Beyond

Whatever you do at the end, don't repeat your beginning. Instead, go above and beyond.

First, take a "bird's eye view" of your thesis. If the theme of the essay was honesty and you took the position that honesty isn't always the best policy, start your final paragraph like this: "It seems that people everywhere are concerned about honesty."

Next, explain what you mean: "We always wonder whether politicians are honest. We worry that even our closest friends might not be telling us the truth at times."

Finally, give your reader something to think about. A great way to do this is to end with questions: "But hasn't everyone told a lie at some point in their life? Is it reasonable, or even practical, to expect complete honesty from everyone all the time?"

This formula approach should not be used when you write for real situations in the real world. But on a high-stakes test with little time to get your work done, using a formula that consistently produces good results may be just the thing to settle your stomach and skyrocket your score.

If using a formula helps you score high on an important test, why shouldn't you use it when you write in the real world? Because using a formula puts organization ahead of ideas and that's a prescription for poor communication. In the real world, we write to real people for real reasons. The needs of your readers, and the reason you are writing to them, should determine the ideas you present. Length, structure and paragraph style should result naturally from the information you deliver. On a test, however, you're not writing to meet the needs of real people; you're writing to meet the criteria on a scoring guide. And the only reason you're writing is to get a high score.

Mr. Peha Says

In the Newspaper ...

Activity #1: Newspaper writing—especially hard news, editorials, analysis, and reviews—has to be clearly presented and logically organized, just like an SAT essay, because space is at a premium, many readers don't read articles all the way through, and the publisher is trying to appeal to the general public. Find a few articles you like and pay close attention to how they are organized and, in particular, how good writers move from idea to idea without confusing their readers.

Activity #2: Here's a tip that will help you with both the verbal and writing sections of the SAT: use big words you find in the paper. Much of the vocabulary SAT people want you to know is taken from the world of professional journalism. Even better than that is the fact that journalists, because they often have to write very well under extremely tight deadlines, develop excellent repertoires of effective phrases and efficient sentence types—two things that can help take your essay from good to great.

Steve Peha and Margot Carmichael Lester run Teaching That Makes Sense, an education consulting company that makes teaching easier for teachers and learning more meaningful for kids. They're also the authors of two books on writing for tweens and teens: "Be A Writer: Your Guide to the Writing Life" and "Be A Better Writer: Power Tools for Young Writers" which you can learn about at www.betterwriter.com. For more information and free teaching materials, visit their web site at www.ttms.org or write to them at info@ttms.org.