

## SAT's Reality TV Essay Stumps Some

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Every year, the SAT reduces more than a few teenage test-takers to tears.

But few questions on the so-called Big Test appear to have provoked more anxious chatter — at least in this era of texting and online comment streams and discussion threads — than an essay prompt in some versions of the SAT administered last Saturday in which students were asked to opine on reality television.

“This is one of those moments when I wish I actually watched TV,” one test-taker wrote on Saturday on the Web site College Confidential, under the user name “littlepenguin.”

“I ended up talking about Jacob Riis and how any form of media cannot capture reality objectively,” he wrote, invoking the 19th-century social reformer. “I kinda want to cry right now.”

Less than a minute later, a fellow test-taker identified as “krndandaman” responded: “I don’t watch tv at all so it was hard for me. I have no interest in reality tv shows...”

The commenter ended the post with the symbol for a frowning face.

By Wednesday, comments on the now-infamous prompt — which included the question, “How authentic can these shows be when producers design challenges for the participants and then editors alter filmed scenes?” — had stretched across nearly 40 pages on College Confidential. Media coverage added to the scrutiny.

Angela Garcia, executive director of the SAT program, said she did not think it was unfair to ask that question of students who had neither the time nor inclination to watch Mike Sorrentino on “Jersey Shore,” or Kim Kardashian on “Kourtney & Kim Take New York.”

“The primary goal of the essay prompt is to give students an opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills,” she said.

This particular prompt, Ms. Garcia said, was intended to be relevant and to engage students, and had gone through extensive pre-testing with students and teachers. “It’s really about pop culture as a reference point that they would certainly have an opinion on,” she added.

Peter Kauffmann, vice president of communications for the College Board, said that “everything you need to write the essay is in the essay prompt.”

For example, the questions are preceded by an explanatory statement — “These shows depict ordinary people competing in everything from singing and dancing to losing

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weight, or just living their everyday lives” — as well as an assertion: “Most people believe that the reality these shows portray is authentic, but they are being misled.”

For some test-takers, including those who shared their thoughts on College Confidential and other forums, the prompt provided a welcome respite.

“I talked about American Idol (how it can push people to strive towards better singing skills) and The Biggest Loser (how it influences people to become healthier,)” one commenter, “bandgeek156,” wrote on College Confidential. “Wasn’t that hard from what I thought.”