

We Are Teaching High School Students to Write Terribly

The many problems of the SAT's essay section.

By [Matthew J.X. Malady](#) | Slate.com



To do well on the essay portion of the SAT, the best approach is to just make stuff up.

Photo courtesy Caleb Roenigk/Flickr

This past Saturday, several hundred thousand prospective college students filed into schools across the United States and more than 170 other countries to take the SAT—\$51 registration fees paid, No. 2 pencils sharpened, [acceptable calculators](#) at the ready. And as part of the three-hour-and-45-minute ritual, each person taking the 87-year-old test spent 25 minutes drafting a prompt-based essay for the exam's writing section.

This essay, which was added to the SAT in 2005, counts for approximately 30 percent of a test-taker's score on the writing section, or nearly one-ninth of one's total score. That may not seem like much, but with competition for spots at top colleges and universities more fierce than ever, performance on a portion of the test worth around 11 percent of the total could be the difference between Stanford and the second tier. So it's not surprising that students seek strategies and tips that will help them succeed on the writing exercise. Les Perelman, the recently retired former director of MIT's Writing Across the Curriculum program, has got a doozy.

To do well on the essay, he says, the best approach is to just make stuff up.

“It doesn’t matter if [what you write] is true or not,” says Perelman, who helped create MIT’s writing placement test and has consulted at other top universities on the subject of writing assessments. “In fact, trying to be true will hold you back.” So, for instance, in relaying personal experiences, students who take time attempting to recall an appropriately relatable circumstance from their lives are at a disadvantage, he says. “The best advice is, don’t try to spend time remembering an event,” Perelman adds, “Just make one up. And I’ve heard about students making up all sorts of events, including deaths of parents who really didn’t die.”

This approach works, and is advisable, he suggests, because of how the SAT essay is structured and graded. Here’s a typical essay prompt taken from the [College Board website](#). It follows a short, three-sentence passage noting that people hold different views on the subject to be discussed:

Assignment: Do memories hinder or help people in their effort to learn from the past and succeed in the present? 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.

After spending a few moments reading a prompt similar to that one, test takers have 25 minutes in which to draft a submission that will be scored on a 1-to-6 scale. (No scratch paper is provided for outlining or essay planning.) Most students choose to write what is referred to as “the standard [five-paragraph essay](#)”: introductory and concluding paragraphs bookending three paragraphs of support in between. Each essay is later independently graded by two [readers](#) in a manner that harkens to the famous [I Love Lucy scene](#) wherein Lucy and Ethel attempt to wrap chocolate candies traveling on an unrelenting conveyor belt.

Anne Ruggles Gere, a professor at the University of Michigan, serves as director of the Sweetland Center for Writing, which oversees first-year writing at the university. She speaks with SAT essay-graders often. “What they tell me is that they go through a very regimented scoring process, and the goal of that process is to produce so many units of work in a very short period of time,” she says. “So if they take more than about three minutes to read and score these essays, they are eliminated from the job of scoring.” According to Perelman, especially speedy graders are rewarded for their efforts. “They expect readers to read a minimum of 20 essays an hour,” he says. “But readers get a bonus if they read 30 essays an hour, which is two minutes per essay.”

Gere and Perelman aren’t the only ones who know about the demands placed upon SAT essay graders. Many students do, too. Those with a firm grasp of what time-pressured essay-readers care about—and, to be sure, what things they don’t care about—can increase their chances at a high score by resorting to all sorts of approaches that are, shall we say, less than ideal. For starters, facts don’t just take a back seat when it comes to describing personal experiences on the SAT essay; they don’t matter in general.

“There’s really no concern about factual accuracy,” says Gere. “In fact, the makers of the SAT have indicated that in scoring it really doesn’t matter if you say that the War of 1812 occurred in 1817. The complete lack of attention to any kind of accuracy of information conveys a very strange notion of what good writing might be.”

That’s one way of putting it. Perelman, who has trained SAT takers on approaches for achieving the highest possible essay score, has another.

“What they are actually testing,” he says, “is the ability to bullshit on demand. There is no other writing situation in the world where people have to write on a topic that they’ve never thought about, on demand, in 25 minutes. Lots of times we have to write on demand very quickly, but it’s about things we’ve thought about. What they are really measuring is the ability to spew forth as many words as possible in as short a time as possible. It seems like it is training students to become politicians.”

Graders don't have time to look up facts, or to check if an especially uncommon word actually exists, or perhaps even to do anything more than skim an essay before making a grading determination. Score-savvy essay writers can figure out what might catch the eye of a skimmer.

"I tell students to always use quotations, because the exam readers love quotations," Perelman says. "One of the other parts of the formula is use big words. Never use *many*, always use *myriad* or *plethora*. Never say *bad*, always use *egregious*."

Of course, according to the [College Board website](#) that millions of students have used to prepare for the exam, "there are no shortcuts to success on the SAT essay." And the country's largest test prep company, Kaplan, does not teach such approaches. (Disclosure: Kaplan is owned by the soon-to-be-renamed Washington Post Company, which also owns *Slate*.)

Kaplan's director of SAT and ACT programs, Colin Gruenwald, tutors students, helps write the company's curriculum, and trains Kaplan teachers. He says throwing around "big words" in an attempt to influence essay readers is an unnecessarily risky endeavor. He insists that the scoring model is a holistic one that focuses on the overall impression of one's writing skills. "The point is to demonstrate that you have command of the language, that you are able, in a pressure environment, to sit down and formulate coherent and persuasive thoughts," he says. Students need to include certain components, he notes. "But that's not a trick. That's not a gimmick. That's just good education."

Whether verifiably true facts, or an argument that supports a position one actually believes in, are among those necessary components is unclear. What if, for instance, a student comes across an essay prompt that she has a strong opinion about, but can think of better arguments for the opposing position? "The positive side to writing what you believe is that you are more likely to be enthusiastic and passionate," Gruenwald says. "The ideas may come more smoothly. You may be able to make a very compelling argument. But if you find that there is the side you agree with, but then there is the side that you can come up with a list of really good points for, take the side that you can come up with the list of really good points for. That's just good demonstration. Because what you are trying to do is demonstrate that you have the writing competency to succeed at the college level. That's not really dependent upon your opinion of the subject." And, he admits, "It's not even related to your grasp of the facts, necessarily."

For university educators like Perelman and Gere, such realities become part of a trickle-down-type problem. Because of the great importance students, parents, and college admissions officers place on the SAT—as well as the large sums of money that many families spend on outside test prep—high school writing instructors are placed in a bind. "Teachers are under a huge amount of pressure from parents to teach to the test and to get their kids high scores," Perelman says. They sometimes have to make a choice, he adds, between teaching writing methods that are rewarded by SAT essay-readers—thereby sending worse writers out into the world—or training pupils to write well generally, at the risk of parent complaints about their kids not being sufficiently prepared for the SAT. "And sometimes when they get that pushback, that means they don't get a promotion, or get a lower raise. So it actually costs them to be principled. You're putting in negative incentives to be good teachers."

Gere says the end result of that dynamic shows up when students arrive at college. "I think it's a very large problem, one that I'm concerned about, and one that we deal with a lot here," she adds. "What happens is in first-year writing, the typical pattern is that students come in pretty well equipped to write the five-paragraph essay, and much of first-year writing is a process of undoing that."

College professors, according to Gere, expect their students to be able to demonstrate evidence-based argument in their writing. This involves reading and synthesizing materials that offer multiple perspectives, and writing something that shows students are able to navigate through conflicting positions to come up with a nuanced argument. For those trained in the five-paragraph, non-fact-based writing style that is rewarded on the SAT, shifting gears can be extremely challenging. "The SAT does [students] no favors,"

Gere says, “because it gives them a diminished view of what writing is by treating it as something that can be done once, quickly, and that it doesn’t require any basis in fact.”

The result: lots of B.S.

“In our placement tests, you see this all the time, where people continue the B.S., because they just assume that’s what works,” says Perelman. “I think [the SAT essay] creates damage, that it’s harmful.”

College Board President David Coleman just might agree. In September, [Coleman seemed to concede that something is amiss with the essay](#). He raised the possibility of an essay revamp as part of a 2015 SAT overhaul that would focus the writing exercise more on students’ ability to critically analyze a piece of text and craft an essay that draws on the information provided.

That sort of change may seem like a good place to start. (Would it be too much to ask for some scratch paper, too?) But Gere says we should watch what we wish for with respect to changes to the essay format. She notes that as rushed and crazy-seeming as the SAT essay-scoring process is, the fact that real-live humans are reading and grading the essays is a positive. Computerized scoring is now used to grade writing submitted as part of the GMAT and TOEFL exams, among others. And that method of essay-scoring has [come under fire](#) from the [National Council of Teachers of English](#) and others for an array of alleged deficiencies—including an overemphasis on word lengths and other measurables, inaccurate error recognition, and a failure to reward creativity.

An SAT essay based on a longer passage with more detail and a constrained set of acceptable response options would likely result in written works that are much more amenable to machine scoring than the current essays. The forthcoming attempt to “fix” the SAT essay may be less about using a model that better lends itself to more valid assessments of students’ writing skills, or turning out better writers, and more about saving money and time by eventually replacing human essay graders with machines.

“It seems to me pretty clear that’s where the SAT is headed,” Gere says. “So it goes from bad to worse, actually.”

And although other standardized tests—such as the LSAT and certain Advanced Placement exams—include essay components that differ from the SAT in terms of what skills are being tested and how writing submissions are scored, those alternative methods are not without their critics. So there would appear to be no standardized-test-essay panacea.

Kaplan’s Gruenwald notes that there have been rumblings about making the SAT essay optional. And some, he says, have suggested doing away with it altogether. Perelman would have no problem with that option. He notes that there’s one thing he tells every student working to achieve a high score on the SAT essay. “Use this [approach] on the exam,” he says, “but never write like this again.”