

What's changing on the SAT and ACT?

Everything counselors need to know about the changes to standardized tests

By Victoria Wood

Anyone who has worked in education knows that change is the only constant. Whether these changes are improvements remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: the SAT and the ACT will always be updated to reflect the current developments in education.

It is no surprise that both the College Board and the ACT have announced changes to their assessments following the adoption of the Common Core by many states. Students and parents are bound to come to you with questions, so we've created a summary of the basic changes below to help you navigate through such conferences.

CHANGES TO THE SAT

General changes

- ▶ The redesigned PSAT will be administered in the fall of 2015; the redesigned SAT will follow in March of 2016.
- ▶ The test is reverting back to the 1600 scale by combining Reading and Writing scores.
- ▶ An expanded score report will include five separate scores that will more clearly identify strengths and weaknesses.
- ▶ There will no longer be a penalty for guessing.

- ▶ Students will have a choice of taking the test on paper or on the computer.
- ▶ The essay is now optional.
- ▶ The test will be shortened to three hours in length without the essay.
- ▶ Multiple choice questions will have four possible answers instead of five.

Changes to the SAT Reading section

- ▶ The section has been renamed Evidence-Based Reading.
- ▶ Sentence completion questions, in which students select a vocabulary word to complete a sentence, have been removed. Short passages have also been removed.
- ▶ The section now consists of five long passage sets with 11 questions each. One of these passage sets will include a paired passage and another will consist of a passage from one of America's founding documents or a document from the "Great Global Conversation" (such as a congressional speech).
- ▶ Some of the passages will include a table, chart or graph in which students have to interpret the data.
- ▶ The current passage-based reading questions will all be retained, but they are also adding "Command of Evidence" ques-

tions, in which students have to identify the portion of a passage that provided the answer to a previous question.

Changes to the SAT Writing section

- ▶ The question format is changing from stand-alone sentences with grammatical errors to passages with 11 different errors or questions per passage. This format is nearly identical to the current ACT English test format, although some of the passages have a post-secondary reading level.
- ▶ The content tested on the current SAT will continue to be assessed, but punctuation will also be tested on the redesigned SAT. Some of the passages will include a table, chart or graph and a corresponding question in which students have to choose a grammatically-correct sentence that correctly interprets the data.
- ▶ The essay is now optional.
- ▶ The score for the Writing section will be combined with Evidence-Based Reading to create an overall verbal score on an 800 scale.

Changes to the SAT Math section

- ▶ There will be two sections, one of which allows calculator usage,

and another that does not.

► Student-Produced Response questions, sometimes called Grid-Ins, will be retained and will increase from 10 questions to 12. One of these questions will be an “Extended Thinking” question worth 4 points.

► The College Board claims that this test “will require a stronger command of fewer, more important topics,” but they are adding trigonometry and some advanced math concepts that are not currently tested, while also retaining all currently-tested concepts.

► The content focus is changing: Algebra will now make up 35% of the test while Geometry, which currently takes up over 25% of the test, will be relegated to less than 10% of the SAT. There will be four areas of focus: Heart of Algebra, Problem Solving and Data Analysis, Passport to Advanced Math, and Additional Topics in Math.

► While the current SAT has an occasional question set in which there are two or more questions about a particular data set, the redesigned test hints at more of these “item sets.”

CHANGES TO THE ACT

► The new ACT will debut in the spring of 2015.

► Students will have a choice of taking the test on paper or on the computer.

► An expanded score report will include a Career Readiness Indicator, Text Complexity Progress Indicator and essay subscores.

► The essay will be changing slightly to provide more direction to students. Details surrounding this update have been very vague.

► In the math test, there will be an additional question about probability and statistics.

► For the reading test, there will now be a paired passage.

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Does the new SAT resemble the ACT?

It can be said that the redesigned SAT is starting to resemble the ACT, the test that has been siphoning off current SAT customers. The Evidence-Based Reading section strongly resembles the ACT reading test now, just as the SAT writing section is reminiscent of ACT English. The only difference is the charts, tables and graphs that are being added to the SAT Reading and Writing sections, but these closely mimic the science test on the ACT.

The SAT Math section now has advanced math — just like its competitor — but it’s likely not doing itself any favors by creating a no-calculator section. While it is no secret that a calculator is never required to solve questions on either test, the average high school student shudders at the thought of performing any math operation without having their calculator handy.

In a marketing war where the ACT has branded itself as the easier test — though most test prep experts will tell you there is no truth to that label — the redesigned SAT almost certainly needs to appear easier than the ACT to win

back its market share. The word on the street, however, is that even more students will be migrating to the ACT to avoid a calculator-less section of math.

An argument can still be made that the redesigned SAT is a better assessment of critical reasoning and college readiness, and thus the College Board is less worried about its test appearing more difficult, and more concerned with the assessment itself.

It’s also worth noting that David Coleman, one of the chief architects of the Common Core State Standards, is now the president of the College Board. So it seems reasonable to presume that he foresees multiple states adopting the redesigned SAT as an exit test, since it aligns so perfectly with the standards he authored. As such, it won’t matter what students believe about the test — they would be forced to take it even if they prefer the alternative. However, with the Common Core under such scrutiny and many states starting to opt out of the program, the future of the SAT remains uncertain.

— Victoria Wood