

SAT Essay Prompts

Directions: *Consider carefully the following excerpt and the assignment below it. Then, plan and write an essay that explains your ideas as persuasively as possible. Keep in mind that the support you provide—both reasons and examples—will help make your view convincing to the reader.*

Prompt 1

Some people believe that there is only one foolproof plan, perfect solution, or correct interpretation. But nothing is ever that simple. For better or worse, for every so-called final answer there is another way of seeing things. There is always a “however.”

Assignment: Is there always another explanation or another point of view? 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.

Prompt 2

1. When I played pro football, I never set out to hurt anybody deliberately...unless it was, you know important, like a league game or something.

—Dick Butkus

2. Pro basketball has turned into Wrestlemania, which is why I like college basketball and high school basketball. Actually, it’s why I like baseball.

—Frank Layden

Assignment: Have professional sports influenced the values of American society? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, science and technology, the arts, current events, or your own experience or observations.

Prompt 3

1. Don’t flatter yourself that friendship authorizes you to say disagreeable things to your intimates. The nearer you come into relation with a person, the more necessary do tact and courtesy become. Except in cases of necessity, which are rare, leave your friend to learn unpleasant things from his enemies; they are ready enough to tell them.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

2. A good friend can tell you what is the matter with you in a minute. He may not seem such a good friend after telling.

—Arthur Brisbane

Assignment: Should friends be honest with each other, even if a truthful comment could be hurtful? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, science and technology, the arts, current events, or your own experience or observation.

Prompt 4

1. Life without memory is no life at all, just as an intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.

—Luis Buñuel

2. Many a man fails to become a thinker for the sole reason that his memory is too good.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Assignment: Is memory as central as Buñuel believes, or does it merely hold us back? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, science and technology, the arts, current events, or your own experience or observation.

Prompt 5

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination are omnipotent. The slogan, "Press on!" has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.

—Calvin Coolidge

Assignment: Do you agree that persistence is the major factor in success, and that talent, genius, and education play, at best, secondary roles? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, science and technology, the arts, current events, or your own experience or observation.

Prompt 6

1. Honesty is an important value in every relationship. Whether interacting with a friend, a roommate, a spouse, a parent, or another loved one, individuals expect others to be honest and feel betrayed when they are deceived.

—Jennifer Gescheidler

2. Deception can actually make it easier for people to get along. In a recent study, for example, one out of every four of the lies told by participants was told solely for the benefit of another person. In fact, most lies are harmless social untruths in which people pretend to like someone or something more than they actually do (“Your muffins are the best!”)

—Allison Kornet

Assignment: Is deception ever justified? 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.

Prompt 7

Technology promises to make our lives easier, freeing up time for leisure pursuits. But the rapid pace of technological innovation and the split second processing capabilities of computers that can work virtually nonstop have made all of us feel rushed. We have adopted the relentless pace of the very machines that were supposed to simplify our lives, with the result that, whether at work or play, people do not feel like their lives have changed for the better.

—Karen Finucan

Assignment: Do changes that make our lives easier not necessarily make them better? 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.

Prompt 8

A mistakenly cynical view of human behavior holds that people are primarily driven by selfish motives: the desire for wealth, for power, or for fame. Yet, history gives us many examples of individuals who have sacrificed their own welfare for a cause or a principle that they regarded as more important than their own lives. Conscience—that powerful inner voice that tells us what is right and what is wrong—can be a more compelling force than money, power, or fame.

Assignment: Is conscience a more powerful motivator than money, fame, or power? 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.

Prompt 9

The old saying, “be careful what you wish for,” may be an appropriate warning. The drive to achieve a particular goal can dangerously narrow one’s perspective and encourage the fantasy that success in one endeavor will solve all of life’s difficulties. In fact, success can sometimes have unexpected consequences. Those who propel themselves toward the achievement of one goal often find that their lives are worse once “success” is achieved than they were before.

Assignment: Can success be disastrous? 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.

Prompt 10

A better understanding of other people contributes to the development of moral virtues. We shall be both kinder and fairer in our treatment of others if we understand them better. Understanding ourselves and understanding others are connected, since as human beings we all have things in common.
—Anne Sheppard

Assignment: Do we need other people in order to understand ourselves? 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.

Prompt 11

There is, of course, no legitimate branch of science that enables us to predict the future accurately. Yet the degree of change in the world is so overwhelming and so promising that the future, I believe, is far brighter than anyone has contemplated since the end of the Second World War.
—Allan Goodman

Assignment: Is the world changing for the better? 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.

Prompt 12

“Tough challenges reveal our strengths and weaknesses.” This statement is certainly true; adversity helps us discover who we are. Hardships can often lead us to examine who we are and to question what is important in life. In fact, people who have experienced seriously adverse events frequently report that they were positively changed by their negative experiences.

Assignment: Do you think that ease does not challenge us and that we need adversity to help us discover who we are? 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, experiences, or observations.

Prompt 13

Traditionally the term “heroism” has been applied to those who have braved physical danger to defend a cause or to protect others. But one of the most feared dangers people face is that of disapproval by their family, peers, or community. Sometimes acting courageously requires someone to speak out at the risk of such rejection. We should consider those who do so true heroes.

Assignment: Should heroes be defined as people who say what they think when we ourselves lack the courage to say it? 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.

Prompt 14

The principle is this: each failure leads us closer to deeper knowledge, to greater creativity in understanding old data, to new lines of inquiry. Thomas Edison experienced 10,000 failures before he succeeded in perfecting the lightbulb. When a friend of his remarked that 10,000 failures was a lot, Edison replied, “I didn't fail 10,000 times, I successfully eliminated 10,000 materials and combinations that didn't work.”

—Myles Brand, *“Taking the Measure of Your Success”*

Assignment: What is your view on the idea that it takes failure to achieve success? 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.

Prompt 15

Novelty is too often mistaken for progress.

Assignment: The statement above suggests that what is new and different is often confused with advancement. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this view? Write an essay in which you present the reasons for your position. To support your reasons, use an example (or examples) from literature, the arts, science and technology, current events, or your own experience or observation.

Prompt 16

Appreciation of music, paintings, books, and movies doesn't make us into better people. In fact, it may actually worsen us, diminishing our ability to respond to actual situations and making it more difficult to identify with the real world. As one scholar said, "the voice in the poem may come to sound louder, more urgent, more real than the voice in the street outside."

—adapted from George Steiner, "To Civilize Our Gentlemen" (1965),
in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (1970).

Assignment: What is your view of the idea that enjoying music, painting, and other forms of art does not improve people but instead makes them less able to relate to real life? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, the arts, science and technology, current events, or your own experience or observation.

Prompt 17

The well-known proverb "ignorance is bliss" suggests that people with knowledge of the world's complexities and its limitations are often unhappy, while their less-knowledgeable counterparts remain contented. But how accurate is this folk wisdom? A recent study showed that well-informed people were more likely to report feelings of well-being. In fact, more knowledge leads people to feel better about themselves and more satisfied with their lives.

—adapted from Lee Sigelman, "Is Ignorance Bliss? A Reconsideration of the Folk Wisdom" (1994).

Assignment: What is your view of the idea that more knowledge makes people happier? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, the arts, science and technology, current events, or your own experience or observation.

Prompt 18

Many persons believe that to move up the ladder of success and achievement, they must forget the past, repress it, and relinquish it. But others have just the opposite view. They see old memories as a chance to reckon with the past and integrate past and present.

—adapted from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*

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.

Prompt 19

I cannot comprehend those who emphasize or recognize only what is useful. I am concerned that learning for learning's sake is no longer considered desirable, that everything we do and think must be directed toward the solution of a practical problem. More and more we seem to try to teach how to make a good living and not how to live a good life.

—adapted from Philip D. Jordan, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge"

Assignment: Do people put too much emphasis on learning practical skills? 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.

Prompt 20

Most of our schools are not facing up to their responsibilities. We must begin to ask ourselves whether educators should help students address the critical moral choices and social issues of our time. Schools have responsibilities beyond training people for jobs and getting students into college.

—adapted from Svi Shapiro

Assignment: Should schools help students understand moral choices and social issues? 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.

Prompt 21

The media not only transmit information and culture, they also decide what information is important. In that way, they help to shape culture and values.

—adapted from Alison Bernstein, "Artists Thrive on Freedom and Freedom Thrives on the Arts"

Assignment: Do newspapers, magazines, television, radio, movies, the Internet, and other media determine what is important to most people? 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.

Prompt 22

That which we obtain too easily, we esteem too lightly. It is dearness only which gives everything its value.

—Thomas Paine

Assignment: Do we value only what we struggle for? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 23

If we are afraid to reveal our lack of knowledge we will not be able to learn. In order to make progress we must admit where we are now. Such an admission of ignorance is not easy. As Thoreau says, "How can we remember our ignorance which our growth requires, when we are using our knowledge all the time?"

Assignment: Does the present system of education encourage us to admit our lack of knowledge, or is there too much pressure to demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 24

Many societies believe that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human right. But it is also true that attainment of happiness remains elusive. Perhaps Bertrand Russell had it right when he said, "To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness."

Assignment: What gives us more pleasure and satisfaction: the pursuit of our desires or the attainment of them? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 25

The price of greatness is responsibility.

—Winston Churchill

Assignment: Do we expect too much from our public figures? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 26

A man should never be ashamed to own he has been in the wrong, which is but saying, in other words, that he is wiser today than he was yesterday.

—Alexander Pope

Assignment: Do we learn more from finding out that we have made mistakes or from our successful actions? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 27

There is usually a kernel of truth in the words playwright Oscar Wilde puts in the mouth of his most outrageous characters—they wouldn't be funny otherwise. One such gem that is worth pondering is: *The only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never of any use to oneself.*

Assignment: Is it true that when we most need advice we are least willing to listen to it? Or is good advice always welcome? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 28

“Independence? That’s middle class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.” George Bernard Shaw expected to provoke controversy with these words from his play *Pygmalion*, but some would agree with him that these days there is too much emphasis on independence. While it is certainly true that excessive dependence on others is not a sign of maturity, total independence of others is neither attainable nor desirable: we need to be mature, and unselfish enough to recognize our *interdependence*.

Assignment: Do we put too much emphasis on self-reliance and independence, and are we afraid of admitting that we need other people in our lives? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 29

A little inaccuracy saves a world of explanation.

—C. E. Ayers

Assignment: Is it always essential to tell the truth, or are there circumstances in which it is better to lie? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue. Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)

Prompt 30

1. While secrecy can be destructive, some of it is indispensable in human lives. Some control over secrecy and openness is needed in order to protect identity. Such control may be needed to guard privacy, intimacy, and friendship.

—adapted from Sissela Bok, “The Need for Secrecy”

2. Secrecy and a free, democratic government, President Harry Truman once said, don’t mix. An open exchange of information is vital to the kind of informed citizenry essential to healthy democracy.

—editorial, “Overzealous Secrecy Threatens Democracy”

Assignment: Do people need to keep secrets or is secrecy harmful? Plan your response, and then write an essay to explain your views on this issue.

Be sure to support your position with specific points and examples. (You may use personal examples or examples from your reading, observations, or, knowledge of subjects such as history, literature, science.)