

## Changes In SAT and ACT Make Writing Skills a Priority



By Dr. Raymond J. Huntington

Last fall, parents and students across the country learned that, beginning in 2005, the new SAT will put more emphasis on writing skills than ever before. However, many may not be aware that the ACT – which is also taken by students in all 50 states – will add a 30-minute writing test as an optional component beginning in 2005 as well.

While many students may be most concerned about how these changes will impact test scores and admission to college, all should recognize that writing is an important skill in the classroom and beyond. Students who write well almost always outperform their peers on assignments that require written interpretation and analysis. Writing skills also have a tremendous impact on the way we present ourselves. From letters to prospective employers, to office correspondence, to communications with friends and family, the ability to use written language effectively has a remarkable impact on our professional and personal success.

Unfortunately, there is ample evidence that many students don't spend enough time building their writing skills during the school day. According to a report produced by the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, most fourth-grade students spend less than three hours a week writing, which is approximately 15 percent of the time they spend watching television. A press release summarizing the key findings of the report also notes that by the first year of college, less than 50 percent of the freshman class is able to "produce papers relatively free of language errors, or to analyze arguments or synthesize information."

Now, with changes to both tests, many college and university admissions officers will have a better way to gauge which students are prepared for college writing assignments. Changes to the SAT will include multiple

choice questions that require students to identify errors, edit sentences and paragraphs, and a section that requires students to write the first draft of an essay under deadline pressure.

The new Writing Test on the ACT will be based on the writing skills that should be taught through the high school curriculum. The exam will measure the skills that are important for college-level writing, including the ability to develop and articulate ideas that are supported by sound reasoning. It's up to individual colleges and universities to decide whether to require the ACT Writing Test for admissions and course placement, so students who are eyeing particular schools should find out in advance if they'll need to take the test.

While changes in both tests will surely encourage more schools to increase and improve writing instruction, students can boost their skills outside the classroom through activities such as the following:

### *Write for practical reasons.*

Students need meaningful writing tasks that are designed to meet objectives, and writing letters is a good way to learn how to write persuasively. In a letter to return a purchase, for example, simply explaining why you're dissatisfied and why you expect to have your money refunded teaches you how to articulate an objective, reinforce that objective with facts, and reach a desired resolution. This activity also reinforces the value clear writing skills have in everyday life.

### *Write to express feelings.*

Keeping a diary or journal can be a very effective way to encourage self-expression and strengthen writing skills. Writing about personal feelings, successes and disappointments can also help students resolve conflicts. When people write about things that concern them, they're more apt to strive for "just the right words" to describe how they're feeling.

### *Learn to argue on paper.*

This tactic will be especially interesting to parents. The next time your child expresses a point of view or petitions you for a special favor or privilege, pull out a pen and see how well the case can be made on paper. A five-paragraph essay can be a good model, with the first paragraph stating the child's desire or point of view, the next three paragraphs (or sentences) providing supporting evidence for that point of view, and the last paragraph summarizing the key point and supporting evidence. Many teachers find the five-paragraph essay to be a good tool for helping students organize their thoughts, so these skills can have a direct impact on writing proficiency and performance.

### *Summarize reading assignments.*

As students reach middle and secondary school, homework assignments tend to require more reading and analyzing. After reading a chapter or an important section of an assignment, students should do a "notes page" summarizing the key facts and restating, in their own words, the most important points to remember. This process enhances retention and further strengthens writing skills as well.

Students who really want to improve their writing skills should keep in mind that this is one task where you really do "learn by doing." Given the impact of the SAT and ACT on college admissions and the general concern about this issue, parents should be crucial partners in the process. ❖

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