

SAT Essay Writing Guide

Essay Structure

No matter the topic of your specific essay, the general structure of the SAT Essay will remain consistent. Ideally, you will write a five-paragraph essay that includes an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. If five paragraphs seem too ambitious for you, a four-paragraph essay will suffice (though it might not receive a score of "6").

The Prompt

On every SAT Essay, an issue will be presented in either a short paragraph or quotation. Your job is to develop a point of view about the issue. To better understand what a prompt actually looks like; let's take a look at an example prompt released by the College Board. This prompt will be used throughout the remainder of this essay lesson.

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and assignment below:

A sense of happiness and fulfillment, not personal gain, is the best motivation and reward for one's achievements. Expecting a reward of wealth or recognition for achieving a goal can lead to disappointment and frustration. If we want to be happy in what we do in life, we should not seek achievement for the sake of winning wealth and fame. The personal satisfaction of a job well done is its own reward.

Assignment:

Question:

Are people motivated to achieve by personal satisfaction rather than by money or fame? 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.

Answer:

Like all SAT Essay Prompts, the example above is complex. In the real world, people are most likely motivated by a combination of personal satisfaction, financial gain, status, and a host of other issues. If this were an essay in school, you could thoroughly discuss the subtleties and nuances of this topic with a well-researched and intricately written response. However, doing so in 25 minutes is virtually impossible. Instead of writing a weak and underdeveloped essay that tries to detect the shades of gray in the prompt, you are much better off writing a black and white response. In other words, on the SAT Essay, you must CHOOSE A SIDE in your opening paragraph and support it with confidence.

STEP 1: CHOOSE OR LOSE

To writing a compelling essay in 25 minutes, you must confidently support one side of the issue. Though your instinct might be to support, the side that you agree with, this should not be the determining factor. Instead, choose the side that you could more easily support with both argument and examples.

Choosing a side, or taking a confident stance on the essay prompt, is not as simple as stating, "I believe people are motivated by personal fulfillment," or "I think people are motivated by wealth and fame." To quickly and easily demonstrate both your writing skill and depth of understanding of the assignment, you might narrow the topic or briefly acknowledge the other side.

The Straight And Narrow

Although SAT prompts normally speak broadly about all individuals in all situations, narrowing the focus of your essay might help you to construct a more confident and well-reasoned response. For example, if you decide to write that people are motivated by wealth and recognition rather than personal fulfillment, you could explain specifically which people are motivated this way or what situations cause people to act this way. Perhaps you believe people are only motivated by money and fame in their professional lives but not in their personal lives, or you believe that once people achieve a taste of wealth or fame their motivations change. By narrowing the topic, you can make your job of writing a compelling response in 25 minutes that much easier.

The Other Side

Because the SAT Essay prompts are so broad, nothing is lost by acknowledging the "other side" of the issue while supporting your side. In fact, doing so can let the grader "see" how thoughtful you have been in constructing your response.

Hook 'Em

Imagine this scenario: you are an overworked English teacher who must grade hundreds if not thousands of SAT Essays. You have been reading essays all evening, and you want nothing more than to finish the last few and then go to sleep. By this time, most of the essays look and sound virtually identical. Then, you come across an essay that opens with an interesting quotation or a compelling fact. You immediately perk up, thinking to yourself, "Finally, something that seems interesting to read."

This type of opening is called a "hook." Just as an actual hook is used to reel in a fish, an essay "hook" is used to reel in a reader. Hooks are not a necessary part of your introduction, and you shouldn't waste much time thinking of one. However, if an interesting and appropriate quote, fact, or anecdote comes to mind, by all means include it.

The Opening

Thus, the opening of the essay will accomplish the following objectives:

1. "Hook" the reader (optional)
2. "Narrow" the prompt
3. Choose a side

Below is a sample opening for our SAT Essay prompt

"Money makes the world go round."(HOOK) Sadly, this famous quotation frequently rings all-too-true. Though many people, in their personal lives, seem driven by benevolent qualities such as personal satisfaction, altruism, and even love, (ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER SIDE) these same individuals often allow greed and recognition to dominate their professional existence. (NARROW THE PROMPT AND CHOOSE A SIDE)

STEP 2: SET AN EXAMPLE - Walk The Concrete Beat

Once you've taken a stance, you must come up with examples that support your position. These examples can come from personal experience, but it is MUCH BETTER to choose examples from sources such as current events, history, literature, or science.

Any example that you choose must pass the two-part "example test" before you include it in your essay:

1. The example must be directly relevant to your position. In our case, if the example did not directly support that people are driven by greed and recognition, it should not be included in your response.
2. You must be able to fully develop the example by explaining details such as names, relevant facts, time period, sources, etc.

Your SAT Essay should discuss at least two (and at most three) examples in detail. Though each example will be the focus of its own body paragraph in your essay, the examples should be introduced in your opening paragraph. Let's examine how you might introduce your examples by continuing with our sample essay.

"Money makes the world go round."(HOOK) Sadly, this famous quotation frequently rings all-too-true. Though many people, in their personal lives, seem driven by benevolent qualities such as personal satisfaction, altruism, and even love, (ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER SIDE) these same individuals often allow greed and recognition to dominate their professional existence. (NARROW THE PROMPT AND CHOOSE A SIDE)

Current events, as well as history and literature, are full of individuals whose primary desires are personal gain. Ken Lay, the former Chief Executive Officer of Enron, is one person who exemplifies this desire for material gain. (EXAMPLE ONE) Christopher Columbus is a second example of a person motivated by a maniacal need for riches and recognition. (EXAMPLE TWO) Finally, a fictional example of a person driven by a craving for wealth is the doctor in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Pearl*. (EXAMPLE THREE OPTIONAL)

By introducing your examples in your opening paragraph, you have accomplished two important objectives. Most importantly, you have created a blueprint for the remainder of your essay. Each of the examples in your opening paragraph will be developed into one body paragraph of your essay. Secondly, you have let the grader know exactly how you plan to support your thesis statement throughout your essay.

STEP 3: IS ANY BODY HOME?

The body paragraphs of your essay should all follow the same general structure. First, each body paragraph should be from four to six sentences long. Second, each body paragraph should contain a topic sentence that explains what the paragraph is about and how it relates back to your thesis sentence in your introduction (when you originally chose a side). Third, the remaining sentences in each body paragraph should use facts and details to fully explain to the reader the relevance of this particular example. Not only will these details improve your essay immensely, but they will also let the reader know how truly educated and well informed you are!

Let's compare two possible body paragraphs about Ken Lay.

EXAMPLE 1:

Question:

Ken Lay, the former Chief Executive Officer of Enron, is one individual who was definitely driven by his desire for wealth. (TOPIC SENTENCE) At Enron, he did many bad things and hurt the lives of many workers. People like Ken Lay should not take advantage of other people simply because they can. It would be better if people were honest. Then, all people could be treated fairly and nobody would be taken advantage of.

EXAMPLE 2:

Question:

Ken Lay, the former Chief Executive Officer of Enron, is one individual who was definitely driven by his desire for wealth. (TOPIC SENTENCE) In order to boost the Enron stock price and, in turn, make millions of dollars for himself, Lay allegedly lied about the company's profits and concealed its debts. Once these fraudulent activities were made public, Enron's stock became virtually worthless and the company had to file for bankruptcy protection. Unfortunately, Enron employees were the chief casualty of the scandal. As a result of Ken Lay's greed, most Enron employees lost their jobs, while others lost almost all of their savings.

Which of these two paragraphs would you give a higher grade? Obviously, example two is the better paragraph. It uses specific details to truly demonstrate why Ken Lay is such a compelling example for your essay.

Details, Details

While reading example 2, you might have been thinking that you don't know enough about any subject to write in that much detail. Well there's no better time to start learning these details than now! Because the SAT Essay prompts are so broad, you can often modify examples to fit a particular topic. For example, if you knew everything about the war in Iraq, you could have discussed in our essay how members of the Iraqi government were stealing millions of dollars from a United Nations "Oil for Food" program rather than actually providing food for Iraqi citizens.

Right now, you should start learning every detail you can about two important issues. One could be from current events, such as the war on terror or the movement to forgive the debts of African countries. The other could be from history, such as The Great Depression or World War II. Once you have learned everything you can about your issues, practice using examples from each in sample SAT Essays. This exercise will greatly help you create detailed, concrete examples on your actual SAT.

STEP 4: IN CONCLUSION

Your conclusion is the final information read by a grader before he or she grades your essay. Therefore, you must finish strong! Your SAT essay should always contain a separate paragraph for its conclusion. The concluding paragraph should accomplish two objectives.

1. Statement of Summation: The conclusion should confidently restate your position on the issue. Moreover, it should tie your examples back to your position to demonstrate how you have "proven" your side of the issue to be the correct one.

2. The drive for wealth and recognition is a significant component of human nature. (STATEMENT OF SUMMATION) As the examples of Ken Lay, Christopher Columbus, and the doctor from The Pearl demonstrate, financial gain as a motivator often trumps personal satisfaction. (TIE STATEMENT TO EXAMPLES) We can only hope that, as people continue to evolve, love, happiness, and a sense of personal fulfillment will replace individual riches as humanity's ultimate goal. (KICKER)

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Below is a copy of our complete essay. Read through the essay to familiarize yourself with each of its parts. After you read the essay, your will learn how to budget your time and organize your thoughts as you create an SAT Essay that is just as good (if not better!).

"Money makes the world go round."(HOOK) Sadly, this famous quotation frequently rings all-too-true. Though many people, in their personal lives, seem driven by benevolent qualities such as personal satisfaction, altruism, and even love, (ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER SIDE) these same individuals often allow greed and recognition to dominate their professional existence. (NARROW THE PROMPT AND CHOOSE A SIDE)

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Ken Lay, the former Chief Executive Officer of Enron, is one individual who was definitely driven by his desire for wealth. (EXAMPLE ONE TOPIC SENTENCE) In order to boost the Enron stock price and, in turn, make millions of dollars for himself, Lay allegedly lied about the company's profits and concealed its debts. Once these fraudulent activities were made public, Enron's stock became virtually worthless and the company had to file for bankruptcy protection. Unfortunately, Enron employees were the chief casualty of the scandal. As a result of Ken Lay's greed, most Enron employees lost their jobs, while others lost almost all of their savings. (DETAILS TO SUPPORT EXAMPLE 1)

Christopher Columbus is a second person whose unyielding craving for riches and recognition dominated his life. (EXAMPLE TWO TOPIC SENTENCE) In 1492, after adopting the title "admiral of the ocean seas," Columbus set sail for China and India in search of silver and gold. Upon his arrival in the "New World," Columbus treated the native populations not as humans to be respected but as slaves to further his wealth and power. In his defense, Columbus was acting similarly to many other explorers of his time. However, this does not alter the fact that he was a man for whom wealth and power were paramount. (DETAILS TO SUPPORT EXAMPLE 2)

The doctor in John Steinbeck's novel The Pearl is a final example of a person driven by monetary gain. (EXAMPLE THREE TOPIC SENTENCE) In The Pearl, a small child named Coyotito is bitten by a scorpion. However, the doctor refuses to treat Coyotito because Kino, Coyotito's father, has no money. Later, however, after Kino finds a beautiful pearl, the doctor is more than happy to treat Coyotito, thinking that Kino will pay for the medical services with the pearl. (DETAILS TO SUPPORT EXAMPLE 3)

The drive for wealth and recognition is a significant component of human nature. (STATEMENT OF SUMMATION) As the examples of Ken Lay, Christopher Columbus, and the doctor from The Pearl demonstrate, financial gain as a motivator often trumps personal satisfaction. (TIE STATEMENT TO EXAMPLES) We can only hope that, as people continue to evolve, love, happiness, and a sense of personal fulfillment will replace individual riches as humanity's ultimate goal. (KICKER)

THE TEMPLATE

The STRUCTURE of the essay you just read is the template you will use for your SAT essay, no matter the topic. To help you memorize the template, let's look at it in a table.

Introduction

1. Hook (Optional)
2. Thesis Statement - Choose a Side
3. Mention the examples that will support Thesis

Body Paragraph One

1. Example One Topic Sentence
2. Details to support Example One

Body Paragraph Two

1. Example Two Topic Sentence
2. Details to support Example Two

Body Paragraph Three (Optional)

1. Example Three Topic Sentence
2. Details to support Example Three

Conclusion

1. Statement of Summation (Restate Thesis)
2. Tie Statement of Summation to Examples
3. Broaden Thesis with a Kicker

ESSAY TIMING PLAN

Now that you know exactly what to include in your SAT Essay, let's discuss how you can complete the job in only 25 minutes. By dividing the essay into smaller goals and giving each goal a specific time frame, you will be able to accomplish all of the steps necessary to craft an excellent response.

Step One: Deconstruct the Assignment and Choose a Side

Time for Step One: 1 Minute

You must read the assignment very carefully in order to write a relevant response. Make sure you understand exactly what you are supporting before deciding to choose a side.

Step Two: Brainstorm Examples

Time for Step Two: 3 Minutes

Come up with two or three relevant, concrete examples to support your thesis statement. Consider current events, history, literature, science and personal experience

Step Three: Sketch an Outline

Time for Outline Step Three: 4 Minutes

This sketch should simply be a list of key points for your essay and the order in which they will be presented. An example Sketch from our example essay above might look like this:

Thesis: People are motivated by wealth and recognition

Example 1: Ken Lay

- a. Enron
- b. Lied
- c. Many workers hurt

Example 2: Christopher Columbus

- a. Desire for gold and land
- b. Natives enslaved

Example 3: Doctor from The Pearl

- a. would not treat Coyotito
- b. Only treated Coyotito after Kino found pearl

Conclusion: Summation: Drive for financial gain part of human nature

Kicker: Maybe one day it will be replaced by something better

Step 4: Write Essay

Time for Step Four: 15 Minutes

The majority of your time will be spent writing your essay. Using your outline as a guide, create a well-constructed four (or five) paragraph essay. Be sure to indent paragraphs and write legibly. Also, make sure that the transitions from one paragraph to the next are smooth.

Step 5: Proofread, revise, and edit

Time for Step Five: 3 Minutes

While writing a first draft of an essay it is common to skip words, misspell words, forget proper punctuation and use word incorrectly. The purpose of this step is to fix these common mistakes with careful read of your completed essay.

ODDS AND ENDS

Unlike the Scantron machines that grade the multiple-choice sections of the SAT, the graders of your SAT response are human. Thus, they will respond to factors in addition to the content of your essay. Below are a few of these factors that you should consider as you craft your response.

Length

The makers of the SAT state that what matters is the content of your essay, not its length. However, we believe that length does matter. In fact, an MIT professor recently studied the grades of actual SAT Essays and found that length is the most important factor in determining an essay's grade. To be safe, make sure your essay covers the majority of the space given. This does not simply mean write larger; instead, just add additional detail sentences to support each of your examples.

Vocabulary

Correctly using a diversity of words throughout your response will improve your essay in the eyes of a grader. However, if you are not positive of a word's meaning, do not use it to try to appear more knowledgeable. Using a simple word rather than an uncommon word will not really harm your grade; however, using complex words incorrectly can be detrimental to you grade.

Sentence Structure

Try to vary your sentence structure throughout your essay. A diverse sentence structure can be accomplished in a variety of ways. You can use sentence beginnings that differ from each other, insert commas rather than periods to create complex sentences, or use semicolons to compare to similar sentences. You should also pay close attention to transition words both within paragraphs and when transitioning from one paragraph to the next. Transition words enhance the flow of your essay by relating one particular thought or idea to the next. Popular "same direction" transition words include therefore, hence, because, consequently, moreover, and furthermore; common "change direction" transition words include although, conversely, in contrast, however, and nevertheless.

Grammar and Spelling

Essay graders understand that your response is a first draft of an essay written in only 25 minutes. Therefore, they do not expect a response that is completely free of spelling and grammar errors. Graders, however, will notice patterns of spelling and grammar errors. Therefore, do your best to spell words and punctuate your sentences correctly. During your final three minutes, in which you proof and edit your essay, be sure to look explicitly for these common mistakes.

Legibility

Some people write more neatly than others. This is simply a fact. However, you can still make an effort to ensure that your essay is readable. If possible, print rather than write cursive, keep all of your writing between the margins and on the lines provided, and don't scribble over words that you have replaced. Remember, you want your essay to be evaluated solely on its content rather than on how it looks.