

# The PSAT:

*It is more than  
a practice exam*

**PSAT**

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By: Andrew Peterson

As we all know, the SAT is changing. So it probably does not come as a surprise that the College Board will be modifying the PSAT as well to mirror the changes that will be seen on the new SAT. These changes will be in place for the October 2015 PSAT.

If you have been keeping up with our previous blog posts, then you are already aware of the impact that the changes in the SAT will have, so rather than rehash many of the details that we have already discussed about the changing SAT, let's just dive right into the specifics of the PSAT. (If you are interested in reading some of our previous posts regarding the new SAT, please [\*\*CLICK HERE.\*\*](#))



# The New PSAT

## The Short of It:

The PSAT will be changing much in the same way that the SAT is. Once again, if you are up to speed with the changes in the SAT, then most of the changes listed below will be old news to you, but make sure to stick around to the end of the article to ensure that you are up to speed with the many small differences between the new SAT and new PSAT.

## The Long of It:

Listed below are the section specific changes and what these changes mean for students. While it is important to read about the specific changes, it is more important to take note of the *What This Means for Students* portion below each section.



# PSAT Reading

## Format

- 60 minutes
- 47 multiple-choice questions
- 4 long passages & 1 set of paired passages
- 500-750 words per passage/paired set
- 1 passage: U.S. and World Literature
- 2 passages or 1 passage and 1 paired set: History/Social Studies
- 2 passages or 1 passage and 1 paired set: Science



## Content

- Words in Context
- Non-obscure vocabulary that can be determined by contextual evidence
- Command of Evidence
- Ability to analyze referenced lines to determine deeper meaning
- Ability to locate contextual support for given themes
- Analysis in Science
- Ability to understand and answer questions about scientific concepts (graphs and charts may be included)
- Analysis in History/Social Studies
- Ability to understand and answer questions about historic concepts (graphs and charts may be included)



# What This Means for Students

Right off the bat, students will enjoy more time with fewer questions on the Reading section of the new PSAT. In Theory, this will allow slower readers to feel a bit more at ease with the new test. But to counter this increased leniency, the source texts that are used for the passages will most likely be more challenging to get through than those that are currently seen on the PSAT. Largely in part, this is due to the fact that the passage selection for the new SAT and PSAT will stem significantly from historical and founding documentation. It goes without saying that many of these documents will be dated, and thus their texts will not be easily approachable in the eyes of many students.

**Another noticeable change** from the current PSAT to the new one is the omission of “sentence completion” vocabulary. These question sets that greeted students at the beginning of each reading section for the better part of a century are now all but officially defunct. This means that students will not have to tackle those extremely obscure vocabulary words that have become all too commonplace on the current SAT and PSAT.

While many **students** may rejoice at the omission of obscure vocabulary and the sentence completion component in general, this does not mean that vocabulary questions are nowhere to be found on the new PSAT. The College Board will be asking students to select the best definition of a given word in the context of a full passage. Fortunately, this is really no different than the average vocab-in-context question seen on the current PSAT, although there may be a greater number of these questions on the new exam.



# There will also be a couple of notable additions to the reading comprehension portion of the exam:

Students will now need to select from answer choices that cite lines of text in order to support a statement or claim posed in that question. This new question format is essentially a complete reworking of an existing question type that asks students to select the appropriate statement or claim conveyed by a given selection of text. It is important that students do not overcomplicate this question type because it realistically tests the same skills as the old question type does.

Some passages may include graphical data that students will need to analyze in order to answer additional questions for that passage. This will not represent a largely significant portion of the test, and with some practice most students should be comfortable with the majority of these questions.



## Timing:

As stated above, students will have more time per question on the new PSAT (1:17 per question) than on the old PSAT (1:03 per question).



# PSAT Writing/Language

## Format

- 35 minutes
- 44 multiple-choice questions
- 4 passages
- 1 passage: Careers
- 1 passage: History/Social Studies
- 1 passage: Humanities
- 1 passage: Science



## Content

- Expression of Ideas
- Modification of sentences to ensure that they convey a clear and concise message
- Standard English Conventions
- English grammar including but not limited to proper agreement, diction, and punctuation



# What This Means for Students

This section, by the numbers, will be a literal carbon copy of its corresponding section on the new SAT. This means that on the new PSAT there will be the same number of passages and questions for students to deal with as on the new SAT, keeping the time constraints unchanged. So heads up students: This will most likely be the best direct indicator of your future SAT performance on any given section based off of its corresponding PSAT section.

## Additionally...

There will be a shift from the editing of single, unrelated sentences to a much more broadly based editing of full passages. Fortunately, if you have taken the old SAT or PSAT you will be familiar with paragraph editing as these tests each have at least five questions at the end of the primary writing section that ask you to improve certain portions of written paragraphs. Additionally, if you are familiar with the ACT, this section appears to closely resemble that of the English Test on the ACT. Although the questions between the two sections on the new SAT/PSAT and the ACT may be phrased differently and there may be some slight variations in the specific material that is tested, they will largely bear a strong resemblance to each other. This means that students should not only make sure to have a good handle on grammatical agreement, diction, and punctuation, but also on relevance and redundancy of information.



## Timing:

Students will have slightly more time per question on the new PSAT (48 seconds per question) than on the old PSAT (46 seconds per question), which is a pure bonus as this section of the test has historically been the most difficult to finish on time based upon the number of questions per given time limit.



# PSAT Math

## Format

- 70 minutes
- 47 questions
- 37 multiple-choice questions
- 9 grid-in  
(student-produced response)
- 1 extended thinking  
(multi-point, grid-in question)
- Calculator Section**
- 45 minutes
- 30 questions
- 27 multiple-choice questions
- 2 grid-in  
(student-produced response)
- 1 extended thinking  
(multi-point, grid-in question)
- No-Calculator Section**
- 25 minutes
- 17 questions
- 13 multiple-choice questions
- 4 grid-in  
(student-produced response)



### Algebra

- Solving equations
- creating expressions and relationships
- interpreting formulas
- Problem Solving and Data Analysis
- Proper use of ratios
- proportions and percentages
- graphical relationships
- data analysis

### Advanced Math

Rewriting and manipulating expressions, quadratics and exponential equations

### Additional Topics

Calculating area and volume, measuring lines, angles, triangles, and circles using theorems, trigonometry



# What This Means for Students

Students will be asked to solve math problems that pertain to real-world problems and situations. This most likely means that students will encounter several word problems on the test, and students should be prepared to tackle these problems.

The addition of the “extended thinking” problem is groundbreaking for a standardized test because the current **PSAT**, **SAT**, and **ACT** exclusively have single point questions (ignoring the essay component on the SAT and ACT). From the few sample “extended thinking” questions that the College Board has posted, it would seem as if this question would represent a unique challenge to most every student despite varying degrees of mathematical ability. View a sample question (Example #2) [here](#).

The inclusion of a No-Calculator section will most certainly represent a significant challenge for many students as well. The College Board claims that the math on this section will relate exclusively to concepts in which a calculator will not be helpful, but basic and intermediate arithmetic will be necessary to complete these problems. Therefore, if math is not your forte, make sure that you hone your basic algebra and your arithmetic skills before the test.

There will also be relatively fewer geometry questions across the test, which is a departure from the current PSAT as the current test has an even larger portion of geometry questions than the SAT does. This means that while students should still make sure to have mastered their geometry skills, their time will most likely be better spent honing their skills in algebra and arithmetic.



## Timing:

Students will have more time per question on the new PSAT (1:29 per question) than on the old PSAT (1:19 per question), which should be encouraging to students mostly due to the fact that there will be new and unique challenges on this test.

# General Differences

Lastly, there are some big changes that are occurring across the entire exam.

**First and foremost**, the College Board is doing away with the notorious “guessing penalty.” In short, when a question was answered incorrectly, this penalty took away points that a student already earned on the test. The College Board will be phasing out this scoring nightmare altogether with the new SAT and PSAT. This means that students should answer *every* question on the test. No excuses. Put simply, every question left unanswered is a missed opportunity to score points.

The College Board has also decided to reduce the number of possible answer choices from five to four. This effectively increases the probability of guessing correctly on any given question, and, as such, students should be even more inclined to guess on this test if they are unsure of the correct answer.

**It is also important to note** that the Reading and Writing/Language sections will be combined to technically make this a two section test where each section is scored between 200 and 800 points with a full test composite between 400 and 1600 points. And yes, the new PSAT and the SAT will both be scored on this scale. This should make it easier for everyone to see the relationship between PSAT and SAT scores in the future.

**Finally**, the new PSAT and SAT will be accompanied by a multitude of subscores. The jury is still out on how useful these subscores will be to students, teachers, and colleges, but it most certainly will cause the average parent to squint in utter confusion for a few moments longer at each score report that comes back.





# About The Author

## Andrew Peterson

The 10-year-old Andrew Peterson envisioned himself as a psychiatrist; however, as he grew to adulthood, he needed more of a challenge and decided to take on high school education instead. Andrew has drawn on his strong intellect and enduring patience to develop into one of Method Test Prep's most highly regarded tutors. He is responsible for developing new material as well as training and leading our tutoring corps. Andrew enjoys astronomy, swimming, scuba diving, and music, but not all at the same time. When he needs to summon that last bit of inner strength or inspiration to help a student, he recalls the quote,

*"Problems are not stop signs, they are guidelines."*

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