

## Chapter 4: Why is College Board Doing This?

*“It’s a bit of a nothing burger.”*

— The best line I’ve heard about the digital test.

Now that you’re more familiar with the format of the digital SAT, you might be asking yourself, “Why is College Board making this change? What’s the point?”

(Granted, you might have been asking yourself before we even started.)

But seriously, why would College Board go through such a major overhaul of the SAT?

There are four main reasons for this. I agree with... two and a half of them. But according to College Board, they are transitioning to the digital test because it is:

- 1 — Easier to take
- 2 — Easier to give
- 3 — More secure
- 4 — More relevant

For those who paid attention to the first few chapters, you’ll know that I think that point number 4 is utter nonsense. But points 1, 2, and 3 are valid. Let’s take a look at each.

### 1 – Easier to Take

This is the point I’ll “half-agree” with. As we mentioned earlier, the digital test will be about an hour shorter than the paper test. College Board is touting this as a selling point for students. So yes, the digital test is less of a mental marathon.

Also, I mentioned how College Board removed a lot of the “fluff” from the math questions. The wording of these questions will now be more streamlined. However, that doesn’t mean that the math questions will be easier; they will just contain less extraneous information.

Reading passages will be streamlined as well. They will be one paragraph, instead of six or seven. So, that’s good for shorter attention spans. College Board also claims that because the passages will pull from more varied topics, students will find them “more interesting”. As I said in a previous chapter, I’ll let you all be the judge of that. (More to the point, there will still be students who will hate the reading passages with every fiber of their being.)

And of course, some students might prefer taking the test digitally instead of on paper. We all live our lives digitally, from the way we consume entertainment to the way we

interact with friends and family. To that point, students might enjoy the “choreography” of the digital test over that of the paper test. We shall see!

## 2 – Easier to Give

For this point, I’ll fully agree! The digital platform makes it much easier for College Board to deliver the test.

The paper test opened the door to many potential security risks:

- Delivering the test to the school.
- Storing and handling the test.
- Proctoring the test correctly.
- Collecting the tests and shipping them back.

Here are some actual kerfuffles that my students have encountered during their previous tests. (By the by – my spellcheck is fine with a singular kerfuffle, but it doesn’t like plural kerfuffles? Go figure.)

- Many students have told me stories about their proctors screwing up the timing of each section. Some proctors cut the time short by mistake, while others added time to a section. The point of having a proctor is to ensure standardized testing conditions for every test taker in every location. So much for that.
- Another student reported back that his proctor was a little “loosey-goosey” with the timing. At the end of a section, the proctor said something to the effect of, “Oh, you’re not done? Ok, you can take a few more minutes to finish the section.” Oh no you can’t! But these students could. Once again, way to take the “standard” out of standardized test.
- During the test, students can only work on one section at a time. They cannot go back to finish their work from a previous section, nor can they move ahead to start work on an upcoming section. However, a student recently told me she saw a nearby student working on the reading questions in section 1 while everyone was supposed to be working on the math questions in section 3. The proctor didn’t catch it.
- Another proctor told my student he was done after section 3 instead of section 4! So my student left the test room, thinking he was done. Thankfully, the proctor realized this mistake rather quickly and ran into the parking lot to call him back in. Crisis averted, but jeesh. (And shame on my student; he had taken many practice tests, so he knew very well there were four sections and not three sections. Oh Ryan, you kill me.)
- And here’s a personal favorite for paper test glitches: the 2021 April ACT got lost in the mail.

## 10 STEPS FOR ACING THE DIGITAL SAT AND ACT

Yep. Really.

Hundreds of students took the April 17, 2021, ACT at a certain high school. Their answer sheets were sent back via FedEx. Those answer sheets got lost in the mail.

Yep. Really.

Now, those students were offered another opportunity to take the test (free of charge) or a full refund. But still... c'mon, man.

The digital test eliminates the potential for these sorts of errors!

- Timing is no longer the job of the proctor, so all students are guaranteed to have the same amount of time allotted for every section.
- The digital format only allows students to work on that specific section, without the chance to go forward or back to other sections.
- If a student is only done with three sections instead of all four, the digital test won't excuse the student early. (Still smacking my head on that one, Ryan.)
- The digital format eliminates the need for transporting the test to and from the testing location, so answer sheets can't get lost in transit.

So I'll agree with College Board on this one; the digital test format eliminates the potential for these types of mishaps. Plus, the digital test allows schools more flexibility as to when they can offer the exam, which also makes the test easier to give.

### 3 – More Secure

I'll agree on this point as well.

There have been many tales of bootleg tests winding up on the internet. This was especially true with the paper test overseas. The digital format makes the test much more secure.

Plus, the digital test only displays one question at a time on the screen. So, potential bootleggers can't photocopy an entire page of questions.

Also, because of the section-adaptive nature of the modules, cheating off your neighbors won't offer any advantage; they're not (necessarily) taking the same test that you are.

### 4 – More Relevant

College Board and the ACT folks try to make two cases for this.

First – they claim that the material on the test is more relevant in terms of what students see in school.

Second – they claim that the material on the test is more relevant in terms of the skills that students will need later in life.

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My thoughts on the first point: nope.

My thoughts on the second point: are you flippin' kidding me?

On the first point – I won't bore you with my diatribes from the first few chapters. I'll just repeat my favorite refrain:

***There is no perfect marriage between what you see in high school  
and what is fair game on the SAT and the ACT.***

Both tests include a significant amount of material that you've likely never seen before. See the Introduction and Chapter 1 for my full thoughts on this.

On the second point – oh please.

Are reading skills important? Of course. Are basic math skills helpful in life? For sure. Will it ever help you in life to know how the discriminant of a parabola affects the nature of its roots?

Never.

(But for a video that explains it – check it out here!)



<https://tinyurl.com/DanFisch4>

Here's a favorite meme I once saw on the interwebs. You may have seen it before:

*"I'm so glad I learned about parallelograms instead of how to do my taxes. It really comes in handy during parallelogram season."*

This is a tad flippant, perhaps. Still, it makes the point nicely: most of what you learn in high school will be irrelevant the nanosecond that you finish high school.

I think it's Mark Twain who said:

*"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."*

I'm also reminded of a Paul Simon song lyric, where he jokes about the nonsense that he learned in high school. I'm with ya, Paul!

That's not meant to be pessimistic, but pragmatic. Unless you're entering very specialized fields of biology, you'll never need to know anything about the mitochondria of a cell. If you're not going to be a statistician, you'll never need to know about standard deviation.

Pay attention in school to do your best on your tests, midterms, comps, trimesters, finals, state regents, A.P. exams, I.B. exams, etc. *But do not believe it for a moment when the testing companies say that any of this crap is relevant beyond high school.*

## My Real Beef with Each Test Company – And My Main Thesis of the Entire Book

In its practice test book, College Board repeatedly makes the point that the best way to prepare for the SAT is to “actively engage in challenging courses”. They reiterate this claim throughout the book.

False. Utterly false.

The best prep for the SAT, and the ACT, is to learn what arbitrary topics are “fair game” on that test. If your high school classes don’t cover the topics in the first place, it doesn’t matter how actively you engage in them. You still haven’t learned the topics that are fair game on that test.

I’ll illustrate with the concept of margin of error, which has become increasingly popular on the SAT in recent years. A question on this topic might look like this.

- Q. A Central Park intern stands at Columbus Circle, interviewing a random sample of people as they leave the park. She asks them how far they walked during their park stroll. She calculates that the estimated mean was 3.4 miles, with an associated margin of error of 0.3 miles. Which of the following is the most appropriate conclusion that can be drawn?
- A. It is likely that most visitors walked exactly 3.4 miles.
  - B. It is not possible that any visitor walked less than 2 miles.
  - C. It is likely that all visitors walked between 3.1 and 3.7 miles.
  - D. It is plausible the mean distance walked for all visitors is between 3.1 and 3.7 miles.

I’ll kick you into play, and then I’ll let you answer.

Margin of error measures... well... the margin of your error. Or put another way, it measures how much you’re “off” by.

For example, if you measure something to be 85% with a margin of error of 2%, it means that your measurement might be 2% too high or 2% too low. So from 85, you can add 2 and subtract 2 to get the full range. This gives you a range of 83% to 87%.

But here’s the thing: *that doesn’t mean the answer is between 83 and 87. It means 83 to 87 is a plausible range for the mean.*

In other words, there could very well be values that are below 83 and above 87. Those numbers are not hard and fast boundaries. Again, it just means 83 to 87 is a plausible range for the mean.

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Have my students learned that in school? Nope.

Does the SAT want them to know it? Yep.

Does knowing that concept have anything to do with “how challenging your coursework is”? Nope.

So, now that you understand how margin of error works, go back to the Central Park question. Take a moment and give it a shot.

I’ll be over here, wrestling with my Wordle.

*(It’s all about the vowel movement.)*

If the mean is calculated to be 3.4, you would add and subtract the margin of error of 0.3. This gives you a range between 3.1 and 3.7. However, careful of choice C! It does *not* mean the final answer is between 3.1 and 3.7. Again, the magic words are that 3.1 to 3.7 is a *plausible range for the mean*. There very well could have been measurements outside of that range. The answer is D.

Now that you’re warmed up, let’s try another.

- Q. Brian asks a random sample of amusement park visitors how long they had to wait for the flight simulator ride. He found that the mean wait time was 80 minutes, with a margin of error of 12 minutes. What is the best conclusion that can be drawn from Brian’s survey?
- A. It is not possible that any visitors waited more than 92 minutes.
  - B. It is not possible that any visitors waited less than 68 minutes.
  - C. It is likely that all visitors waited between 68 and 92 minutes.
  - D. It is plausible that the mean wait time for all visitors was between 68 and 92 minutes.

I’ll be over here, finishing that Wordle. Give it a shot.

*(Whew, I got it at the buzzer. My win streak is preserved.)*

Many of my students are tempted by choice C. However, the answer is D. It is not enough to simply add the 12 and subtract the 12. We need those magical words: *plausible range for the mean*.

And this is a classic example of an arbitrary fact that the SAT wants you to know. Once you know it, it’s not hard.

However, this concept is not taught in many math classes.

And it is certainly not relevant in life.

And it is *certainly* not dependent on how challenging your high school classes are.

## 10 STEPS FOR ACING THE DIGITAL SAT AND ACT

So, College Board and the ACT can keep singing their song about how their tests are:

- measuring the knowledge and skills that are taught in schools.
- measuring the knowledge and skills that are relevant in life.

And as long as they do, I'll be over here singing "B.S." in reply.

(I really wanted to say it, but my editor and my mother told me not to.)

***Only a small portion of SAT and ACT material overlaps with what my students see in high school. Period.***

***And even less of it is relevant beyond the classroom.***

To say otherwise is simply untrue.

### So Why Does College Board (or the ACT) Get to Decide What is "Most Relevant"?

Exactly.

This is the crux of standardized testing. There is nothing *standard* about it. Students from high schools A, B, and C might learn this math topic over there. Students from high schools X, Y, and Z might learn this grammar topic over there.

How can the SAT and the ACT perfectly align their tests with what all students have learned?

*They can't.*

We simply have to acknowledge that these test makers are the gatekeepers; they get to decide which topics are "fair game" and which topics are not. It's not fair. It's not right. It just is. And we have to deal with it.

In their materials, College Board talks about the surveys they conduct to decide what topics appear on the test and what topics get cut. And they're conducting more of these surveys over the coming years. But again, they get to decide. We just have to adapt.

For example, the paper SAT used to include a topic called *diction*. A grammar question would have said something like this:

*I should of seen this trap coming.*

The author doesn't mean to use the word "of" in that sentence. The sentence should say, "I should *have* seen that trap coming."

This is a topic that was tested on the paper SAT for many years. Then, College Board decided that diction would no longer be in play for the digital test.

I'm not calling that good. I'm not calling that bad. It just is. Diction used to be "fair game" on the test. Now it is not. ***Because College Board says so.***

Ditto on the math section. For example, they announced that imaginary numbers would no longer appear on the digital SAT. I'm not saying that imaginary numbers are important. I'm not saying they're not. ***But College Board gets to decide "we are cutting these topics over here and adding these topics over there".***

And likewise for the ACT, which is notorious for including random math topics. At the end of each math section, they love to throw in topics that have *never* appeared on the test before. They're not hard, per se. They're just *random*.

And these are the hoops that we must jump through. College Board is the vanguard of the SAT, just as the ACT folks get to decide what goes on the ACT. The best we can do is learn what is "fair game" on these tests, based on the practice materials they've released.

But to call it standardized is false.

To call it aligned with what students see in school is false.

To call it relevant to what students need to know beyond high school is false.

And to call it dependent on "taking challenging course work" is utterly false.

## My Honest Thoughts on the Change

So, what are my honest thoughts on the shift from the paper SAT to the digital SAT? (Which is not to say that I haven't been honest up to this point!) To quote another tutor: *it's a bit of a nothing burger.*

Granted, there are aspects of the digital test that I think are an improvement, such as making the test more secure, the quicker turn-around time for the scores, etc.

But other changes are in the "who cares" category. For example, the grid-in answers can now be negative, the "no change" option was removed from the grammar questions, etc. *Nothing burgers indeed.*

So is it a "better test"? No.

My honest opinion: the SAT and the ACT are both incredibly useful and incredibly useless.

They are useful because they offer a standard yardstick against which all students can be measured. How can a student with a 4.1 GPA be compared to a student with an A+ average? And what about a student with a 103 average? As we said in the previous chapter, *everyone* now has a high GPA.

For example, when listening to a recent webinar for educators, I heard the tale of a student with a 4.3 GPA who was ranked 27<sup>th</sup> out of 125 in her class. With a 4.3, mind you. Which makes you wonder how off the charts the GPAs must be for students 1 – 26!



## 10 STEPS FOR ACING THE DIGITAL SAT AND ACT

This gives you a sense of how high GPAs are a bit “diluted” now. A high average doesn’t carry the same weight that it once did. So, these tests are designed to compare students using some standard barometer.

And I get that. Really. I do.

But this barometer is incredibly flawed.

Different students from different schools all learn different things! These tests only overlap so much with what students see in school.

Plus, there are the issues of equity and access that I discussed in Chapter 1. Again, that is why I created this book, along with my YouTube channel! (And speaking of topics that students don’t see in school, here is a particularly nasty math topic that is new to many of my students. It’s one of the harder topics, so check it out!)



<https://tinyurl.com/DanFisch5>

The bottom line: these tests don’t reflect what you’re learning in school, they don’t indicate anything about your potential for future success, and they don’t indicate anything about the quality of your character.

Are they relevant in life? Absolutely not.

But are they the necessary hoops to jump through? Yes.

And can I help you do well on them? You bet!

I’m reminded of Jimmy Fallon’s line in the movie *Almost Famous*:

*“I didn’t invent the rainy day. I just own the best umbrella.”*

That is how I feel about the SAT and the ACT. These tests are a crude assessment of arbitrary skills that are irrelevant the moment you finish the test. That said, I can help you do well on them!

So, let’s put some *nothing burgers* on the grill and get to the good stuff: how to prepare for the test.

(Secret sauce coming in 3... 2... turn the page...)