

SATurday School â€” so it goes

by Jason_Love

Do you know what SAT stands for? Quick, you have five seconds.

Insert Jeopardy music.

Thatâ€™s right. It doesnâ€™t mean squat! It used to stand for Scholastic Aptitude Test, but then scholars got to arguing over â€œaptitudeâ€• and finally everyone agreed that SAT would stand for Stressed and Anxious Teenagers.

Todayâ€™s kids have extra reason to stress: The test is newly revamped. The College Board, those wacky inventors of the SAT, have introduced new grammar questions, advanced math, in-depth reading, and, the cherry on top, a 25-minute essay.

For these reasons, students are flocking in record number to SAT-prep courses like Eureka One-on-One Review (www.eurekareview.com), which offers mock SATs throughout the year. In the spirit of not learning from my mistakes, I decided to retake the SAT myself. It would at least put to rest a burning question: Just how dumb have I become in these 15 years since high school?

We assume that people grow smarter with age, but did you know that for every reality TV show you watch, your SAT score drops 2 points? My own schooling has been driven out by an onslaught of usernames; passwords; PIN codes; bank accounts; credit cards; phone, fax, cell, and pager numbers; lyrics to songs I donâ€™t even like!

What was I saying?

Yes, I took the SAT at 17 and scored a stingy 1,070. We must consider, however, that I was sitting next to Debbie Toops who was emitting potent pheromones. My score was a blow to the family, who had previously considered me smart. Little did they know that until the third grade I thought "elemeno" was one big letter between "ek" and "ep."

Preparation

For moral support, I revisited my alma mater, Newbury Park High School. The grounds were much as I remembered: iron gates secured with bullet-proof padlocks, guards by the light tower, buzzards circling overhead.

I called on my two favorite people: Mr. Nelson, the trig teacher who inspired me to surf, and Mr. Ellis, an English teacher who has published two books of poetry and also taught me how to write good.

I found Mr. Nelson tutoring students over a brown bag sandwich, just as he once did for me. I sat down beside 18-year-old Brendan Konrath, who was "on purpose" spending his lunch hour like this:

"A biker rode a 60-mile route at a speed of r miles per hour. If she had ridden 5 miles per hour faster, how much shorter would the ride have been in minutes in terms of r ."

Answer: You don't lose your innocence when you start dating; you lose your innocence the day someone asks you to solve for minutes in terms of r.

To think that I once came close enough to the answer that Mr. Nelson gave me partial credit. Today I can't recall a lick of math but can tell you exactly what Mike Olive was wearing the day he beat me up in wood shop. So it goes.

In his own words, Brendan did "okay" on the SAT, good enough to be waved in by two colleges. In high school parlance, he is sitting pretty. Of course, it did beg the question, "What are you doing here on your lunch hour?!"

Brendan chuckled. "I'm still applying to other schools to keep my options open."

"So you'll be retaking the SAT?"

Brendan laughed. "Let's not get crazy."

In Room B32, we found Mr. Ellis writing, as always, on his whiteboard. Mr. Ellis is not your average English teacher. Think Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*. By the time you reach Mr. Ellis's class, you're expected to know your grammar and be ready to learn what's happening between the lines.

Mr. Ellis couldn't say much about the SAT, but we did reminisce about the day he played a song of Bob Dylan to help us learn the sonnet. He and I sang it together for old times' sake. "If you see her, say hello. She might be in Tangier. She left here last early spring, is living there, I hear."

It should be noted that although Mr. Ellis remembered the words, I had a better voice.

The Big Day

I arrived at Oaks Christian High School, site of the mock SAT, with butterflies in my stomach. Well, it was the beginning of butterflies. Worms. Jason Moreno, owner of Eureka One-on-One Review, ushered me into the aptitude dungeon.

I had prepared for the test only by drinking extra coffee that morning. I didn't even bring a calculator. Jason said that theoretically I could finish the test without one, just as theoretically I could become President.

Students milled about stretching and groaning, wondering about the old guy with no calculator. They entered the room reluctantly, sideways almost, finally totaling 22. Even though it was a practice test, they had arrived with game faces. Today's results would, after all, predict their success on the SAT, estimate their value to society, and possibly be tattooed on their foreheads for access or denial to public buildings.

Jason administered the test the way it would be on the real day—like a drill sergeant.

“Listen up, students. This is a simulated combat situation. The migraines you experience will be real.”

Well, that's how it felt. Oaks Christian is, in fact, a converted military building and plusher than some universities. Down the hallway by the arboretum! Little ones were taking the ISEE in hopes of being admitted. Get used to it, kids.

Kids, if you're tense about the essay, you'll be pleased to hear that it comes first. You have 25 minutes to prove, for instance, how people always want to either stay the same or bring about change, supporting your thesis with concrete examples, and GO!

I wrote about how nothing stays the same, not even the SAT, but I changed my mind so often that all the eraser in the world couldn't help me. How I longed for a Backspace.

The timer went off and Sarge tossed us into the next section, which tested our knowledge of “obstreperous” and “etermagant,” words I hadn't seen since age 17 WHEN I TOOK THE SAT THE FIRST TIME. One time as a boy I boasted of knowing the word “lugubrious,” to which my father

replied, "That's great, son. Now you just have to find someone else who does."

The sections rolled over "English, math, jab, hook" in gripping succession. Once in a while a pencil would snap and break the spell. After section five, we received four minutes and thirty-two seconds to run, literally, to the bathroom.

I interviewed 17-year-old Jacob Anglin while doing my business.

"You nervous?" I asked.

"Yeah, I mean, these scores will determine a big part of my future."

Jacob will major in business with emphasis on finances. He first took the SAT in sixth grade as part of a screening by Johns Hopkins University. In related news, a 13-year-old named Lee Kennedy-Shaffer last year scored a perfect 1,600 on the SAT. He credits his success to an early interest in science. This, while his classmates' idea of science is gargling Pop Rocks with Coca-Cola.

Before our hands could dry, the math was back and madder than ever. Solving for x is one thing, but we had ventured into Dante's Realm of Compound Math, where you find functions, tangents, probability! one problem featured the yin-yang symbol! No kidding.

Where I live, math usually goes like this: “If I earn x amount of dollars per day and my wife spends y , how long will it take the repo man to reach our home?”

Because the SAT penalizes for wrong answers, I found myself staring out the window, where Oaks High students were doing the backstroke in their Olympic-sized pool. Proctor Jason told me that I had made the mistake of rushing through the easy problems to get to the impossible ones. Only 8% of the country gets the final math question right despite a one-in-five chance of guessing. One divided by five is, um!

“There are just too many traps,” he said.

Aftermath (and After-English)

The test had started at 9:00 a.m. and ended sometime the following Tuesday. No, it ended at 12:45 p.m. We turned in our sheets while Jason lectured now-arriving parents. They listened not only because Jason is six-foot-four but because he made some good points. The SAT, he said, does not test the three r 's. It tests a fourth r : reasoning. The full name of the exam is, in fact, The SAT Reasoning Test.

“That is why,” Jason says, “students with straight A 's often score below average on the SAT.”

The room began to buzz as they handed out our scores, our self-esteem, our FUTURE. Some kids nodded their heads, pleased but still cool; others slumped so far into their seats that they became little piles of clothing. One boy used a word that falls outside the scope of this article.

Finally they got to me. I peeked through a crack in my fingers and saw the most beautiful thing in the world—a 1,750! That’s better than perfect. I AM A GENIUS!

“The first thing you’ll notice,” said Jason, “is that the new top score is 2,400 points.”

And down I came. My 1,750 wouldn’t even fly at UC Santa Cruz, the college I attended! It will, however, get me into Vinnie’s Discount Degrees down on Main. My English marks were offset by a math score so low that it’s a wonder I can tell time. With a digital watch. Okay, It was 4:30. Happy? 4:30. I am officially not only shorter than the average teenager but considerably less alert.

“It’s okay,” said 16-year-old Jessica Hagy. “I didn’t like the math at all.”

Makenzie Rasmussen was cracking the test out of her neck, a veteran of four mock exams.

“This one wasn’t so bad,” she said. “It seemed to go fast today.”

I can think of a lot of words to describe the experience, but “fast” is not among them. Yet therein lies the

crux of our tale: Practice kills the pain. Students who had already taken the SAT were most at ease in the trenches.

“There is no penalty for retaking the test,” says Jason. “Most colleges and all UCs look only at your top scores.”

This year a projected 43,827 students will apply for 3,831 freshmen openings at UCLA. If I had a calculator, I could tell you the percentage. UCLA will expect a SAT score of 2,043. You also must be related in some way to Albert Einstein.

There you have it.

The stakes are high and the odds stacked heavily against, but kids, that’s no reason to fret. As someone who has taken the test on either side of the 90’s, I can tell you that this is only one in a long series of annoying tests and that my own marks didn’t prevent me from fulfilling a lifelong dream of never waking up to an alarm clock.

Just be sure to air out your skills once in a while. Use the Pythagorean Theorem to hang a picture; introduce the word “obstreperous” in casual conversation. Otherwise, your smarts give way to an attrition of pin codes and passwords and reality TV until one day you find yourself alone with the letter “e”.

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