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# Introduction

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In 2014, roughly two years in advance of a first operational administration, the College Board published *Test Specifications for the Redesigned SAT®*. This detailed blueprint, running over two hundred pages, offered not only an extensive overview of the new test’s features and content far in advance of any student taking the test for a score but also told the story of its development, included an array of sample test materials, and—most importantly for the present purpose—presented evidence undergirding the central design elements of the test. The specifications’ evidence section, covering both the English language arts/literacy and math portions of the test, provided a brief synthesis of key findings from research and practice in support of choices the College Board had made in the redesign. As part of a much larger, highly complex, wide-ranging (and, frankly, grueling to develop) document, the evidence section was, of necessity, relatively brief, hitting only the highest of the high points in support of several important emphases of the forthcoming Reading, Writing and Language, and Math Tests and the optional Essay, such as text complexity in ELA/literacy and problem-solving and data analysis in math.

The present work represents a logical extension of that earlier effort in ELA/literacy, expanding, updating, and enriching the documentation of evidence underlying major design elements of the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing section of the SAT (and its counterpart in the other SAT Suite of Assessment programs—PSAT/NMSQT®, PSAT™ 10, and

PSAT™ 8/9) and the SAT Essay. This collection of materials represents an enhancement of that earlier work in a number of ways:

- Topics that had been touched on briefly in a short section of a multifaceted test specifications document have here been given chapter-length treatments.
- The author or authors of each chapter are highly knowledgeable about the topic(s) under discussion. (Brief author biographies accompany the chapters.)
- Each chapter is written to be broadly accessible, with a focus on secondary teachers rather than academic researchers as the target audience (though other audiences should find the material useful as well). To that end, each chapter makes few assumptions about readers' prior knowledge of the topic, limits jargon to key concepts necessary to follow the discussion, provides numerous concrete examples, and devotes considerable detail to how to implement the concepts in everyday classroom practice.
- Each chapter (except chapter 6) is accompanied by sidebars written by the College Board (rather than the chapter author or authors) that draw explicit connections between the subject under discussion and its representation on the SAT and provide some additional College Board–specific evidence in support of the topic's inclusion on the test (more on this later).
- In addition to revisiting the ELA/literacy evidentiary topics found in the 2014 *Test Specifications* in greater depth, this collection includes a new chapter discussing how teachers can help all English learners (ELs) achieve college and career readiness.

Each of the six chapters has a similar structure. Every chapter provides a highly readable synthesis of the best available evidence concerning the relationship of the topic (e.g., text complexity) to college and career readiness for all students; includes examples and offers advice on addressing the topic in the classroom (with a particular emphasis on secondary classrooms, though many of the approaches would work well with students of all ages); contains SAT-specific sidebars (chapter 6 excepted); and ends with a bibliography of works cited. Many chapters also contain links to various free third-party supplemental resources that educators may find useful when incorporating the concepts covered in the chapters into their teaching.

Each chapter has two main goals. The first is to make the case for the importance of the topic addressed to college and career readiness for all students and, hence, to K–12 instruction. The authors are, to a person, firmly committed to the proposition that *all* students are capable of becoming college and career ready by no later than the end of high school if given the proper instruction, support, resources, and opportunities to learn. The implementation advice isn't primarily in the

vein of what specific lesson a teacher might convey the next day but rather in terms of the approaches a teacher might make use of across an entire academic term or year. The second main goal of the first five chapters, which pertain directly to major design elements of the SAT (and the other SAT Suite tests), is to provide evidence in support of the College Board's decisions regarding key aspects of the 2016 redesign of the exam. This purpose is served both by the research-and-practice synthesis prepared by the authors and by the College Board-written sidebars.

A sidebar in four of the first five chapters of this collection makes reference to the *College Board National Curriculum Survey Report 2019*. This report presents the results of the latest in the College Board's periodic series of surveys of secondary teachers' instructional practices and postsecondary instructors' views of prerequisites for success in first-year, entry-level, credit-bearing courses. In brief, every few years the College Board asks secondary teachers and postsecondary instructors to identify what skills and knowledge the former are stressing in their classroom teaching and what skills and knowledge the latter expect incoming students already to possess to be ready for instruction in their classrooms. The basic mode of response in both cases is a four-point rating scale (with 4 being high importance/emphasis) associated with lists of skill and knowledge survey items in both ELA/literacy and math. Ratings from individual educators are averaged, and these mean importance/emphasis ratings yield evidence of what postsecondary instructors consider essential for incoming first-year students to already know and be able to do and of what secondary teachers are stressing in their lessons. Overall, evidence from this most recent survey supports the claims that the SAT assesses key postsecondary prerequisites in ELA/literacy and in math; that the key SAT design elements discussed in this collection are highly valued by educators; and that the SAT is well aligned with important secondary instructional emphases. The full report is available at <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/national-curriculum-survey-report.pdf>.

## Overview of This Collection

Chapter 1, by David Liben, covers the topic of **text complexity**. As the author notes, text complexity has become a prominent topic in ELA/literacy instruction over the last ten to fifteen years as researchers and practitioners have come to recognize its distinct role in college and career readiness and in K–12 success and as state academic standards have embedded complexity considerations into their requirements. To put the matter directly, all students must be able, by no later than the end of high school, to read and comprehend complex texts independently if they're to be ready for the reading demands of college and workforce

training. The chapter addresses the importance of text complexity to college and career readiness, discusses various definitional issues, draws in important concepts closely related to text complexity (including *standard of coherence* and *volume and range of reading*), surveys how text complexity can be evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively, and offers some suggestions for how teachers can take text complexity into account when designing or modifying their lessons. An appendix provides a College Board–developed rubric for assessing the complexity of text qualitatively.

Chapter 2, by Meredith Liben, is something of a companion piece to the first chapter, as it deals with **close reading**, **textual evidence**, and **source analysis**. While chapter 1 focuses chiefly on text complexity as a concept, chapter 2 helps illustrate how all students can gain access to appropriately challenging text. The author begins by giving an extended overview of close reading, which she defines as “sustained, purposeful intellectual work that centers on carefully reading a brief rich, complex text (or excerpts from a longer work) in order to understand what the text says and how it says it.” Throughout her discussion, she shows how close reading, particularly when practiced in a social, interactive way in a welcoming classroom environment, can help both proficient and struggling readers engage with difficult text. As part of close reading and in other activities, such as speaking and presenting, students must make successful use of textual evidence—for instance, quotations, paraphrases, and quantitative data—to support their interpretations. One important way students can make use of and demonstrate both close reading skills and facility with textual evidence is in analyzing one or more text sources and drawing evidence from those sources to support argumentative claims or interpretive points. The chapter also includes implementation advice relating to close reading, textual evidence use, and source analysis. Among the author’s points here are that close reading takes time and that close reading tasks are best distributed across the curriculum rather than limited to ELA classrooms.

Chapter 3, again by David Liben, treats the subjects of **vocabulary** and **knowledge** in relation to reading comprehension. The author argues that “reading” is less a generic, transferrable skill than a context-dependent activity, the success of which is importantly helped or hindered by readers’ vocabulary and knowledge stores. He observes that students and teachers should attend to both *breadth* and *depth* of vocabulary—that is, to both acquiring new words and phrases (breadth, the typical focus of vocabulary instruction) and learning more about words and phrases already acquired, such as their senses, morphology, orthography, phonology, part(s) of speech, and etymology (depth). He also urges an instructional focus on tier two vocabulary—those general academic words and phrases found relatively often in a range of readings (especially in complex texts) across content areas but less frequently in everyday

speech—and attention to both direct vocabulary instruction and indirect vocabulary learning through wide and frequent reading. Knowledge, too, is critical to effective comprehension, he contends—and is especially important for less skilled readers, as a deep well of knowledge on a text’s topic can help make up for gaps in reading ability. He notes that “while knowledge enhances reading comprehension, it’s not always a prerequisite”: that is, the act of reading itself helps build knowledge that, in a virtuous cycle, facilitates comprehension of subsequent texts that themselves add to those stores of knowledge. The chapter concludes with an array of implementation suggestions, including using sets of connected texts on a topic as a way to develop knowledge and finding opportunistic ways to “drop in” vocabulary definitions during lessons.

Chapter 4, by Amanda Godley, concerns the **conventions of Standardized English**—as she defines it, “the variety of English most valued in academic and professional settings.” While Godley recognizes the importance of students acquiring command of these conventions for success in college, career, and life, she sees them as less a fixed set of rules and more as an evolving set of practices facilitating students’ (and others’) communicative acts. Godley makes numerous nuanced points about the teaching and learning of Standardized English: that careful use of select terminology helps students learn the conventions and understand the purposes behind them; that students and teachers should be aware of and appreciate the many varieties of English that exist alongside Standardized English; that learning about the conventions of Standardized English doesn’t happen in a linear fashion; that the teaching of the conventions should use students’ home languages and dialects as a foundation; that the conventions are best thought of as communicative and rhetorical tools; and that the conventions are best learned in authentic contexts. Throughout the chapter, the author weaves in ideas for making conventions instruction meaningful and engaging to students.

Chapter 5, by Cynthia and Tim Shanahan, focuses on **disciplinary literacy**, which, in the authors’ words, “aims to apprentice students into the specialized literacy practices of each of the disciplines—practices usually only developed by those immersed in the creation of knowledge in the disciplines.” The development of disciplinary literacy in students is crucial, they argue, because as students progress through school, their texts grow more specialized—more reflective of how experts in various fields create and convey knowledge, make claims and points, and use evidence to support those claims and points—and the tasks students are assigned require them to create and represent knowledge in increasingly discipline-specific ways. The authors devote a substantial portion of their chapter to “disciplinary literacy portraits”: extended illustrations of how experts in history, science, and literature read, write, evaluate, and communicate knowledge in their respective fields. They conclude with a discussion of how teachers can foster disciplinary literacy, which

requires making disciplinary texts available to students; asking students to actually read them; providing explicit instruction in discipline-based strategies, approaches, and methods of argumentation and evidence use; and building students' content knowledge alongside disciplinary knowledge. Undergirding the chapter is the notion that the ELA teacher can't solely be responsible for this work; rather, it must be a schoolwide effort that calls on the expertise of teachers across a range of subjects. In the end, the acquisition of disciplinary and content knowledge is critical if students are to be ready for course work in the various fields they'll encounter in college or workforce training.

Chapter 6, by Susan Pimentel, addresses the vital question of how teachers can help all English learners (ELs) attain college and career readiness. After reviewing some of the major and considerable challenges ELs face as they work to both gain fluency in English and grade-level-appropriate content knowledge, Pimentel lays out three principles facilitating this simultaneous accomplishment: first, ensuring that ELs receive the same academically rigorous, on-grade-level instruction that native speakers get in core classes; second, making targeted supports available to ELs as they work to acquire this core content; and third, drawing on ELs' assets, including their home languages and cultural resources, to aid in English learning, academic achievement more generally, and fluent bi- or multilingualism. Pimentel devotes the remainder of her chapter to discussing how to enact these principles in the classroom in ways that benefit all ELs as well as their native-English-speaking peers.

## Unifying Themes

As the foregoing discussion suggests, these authors, though working separately, have crafted essays that coalesce around several key ideas. These include

- the attainability of college and career readiness by all students, including students from population groups that have historically struggled to reach that goal;
- the multifaceted, complex nature of reading and the need for teachers to consider during text selection and lesson planning such factors as reader characteristics, task variables, the inherent complexity of the text itself, the discipline in which the text is situated, and the language employed in the text to communicate its messages;
- careful study of the text (broadly defined) as a key basis of ELA/literacy instruction and the importance of helping students acquire the means to access text, particularly complex text, for themselves (with appropriate scaffolding and support as needed);

- the value of a clear focus on words and phrases in instruction—as vocabulary to be learned for its own sake, as keys to unlocking the meaning of text, as representations and building blocks of knowledge, and as rhetorical tools to employ in one’s own communication;
- the value of the languages and cultures that students bring from home to school and the importance of seeing these as assets rather than impediments to English acquisition, to academic achievement, and to full and fulfilling participation in society; and
- the schoolwide responsibility for literacy development—that is, the need for all of a school’s teachers to play their important, distinct roles in helping students gain the literacy skills and knowledge they need for success after high school.

## Acknowledgements and Final Words

Over the last roughly year and a half, it’s been my distinct pleasure to have worked with a talented, dedicated, and highly knowledgeable group of authors in producing this work. In bringing it together in its present form, I have several people to acknowledge, most notably Meredith and David Liben for not only writing much of the material but also helping organize and lead the project, and members of my department’s Editorial team, including Nancy Burkholder for overall editorial direction, Georgina Keenan for her skilled and tireless copyediting, and Beth Oxler and Liz Belgarde for their design and layout work and for attending to other publication details.

As I review the outcome of this effort once again, I’m struck anew and all the more profoundly by the commitment to equity, access, and opportunity that the authors have singly and collectively brought to their contributions here, commitments embedded deeply in College Board’s mission as well. I believe these commitments are the motive force behind the authors’ willingness to expend some of their valuable time and energy on this project, and I hope that this pervading spirit infuses a renewed sense of the generative possibilities of teaching and learning in ELA/ literacy in all who take the time to engage with this work.