

These draft test specifications and sample items and other materials are just that — drafts. As such, they will systematically evolve over time. These sample items are meant to illustrate the shifts in the redesigned SAT® and are not a full reflection of what will be tested. Actual items used on the exam are going through extensive reviews and pretesting to help ensure that they are clear and fair, and that they measure what is intended. The test specifications as well as the research foundation defining what is measured on the test will continue to be refined based on ongoing research.

Relevant Words in Context

Studies going back nearly a century have documented the strong link between vocabulary and comprehension. With a broad and deep vocabulary, readers are more likely to understand what they read and, in turn, to derive the meaning of words in the contexts in which they appear. Indeed, the role of vocabulary in reading comprehension is difficult to overstate given the word richness of text. A quick comparison between oral and written language is instructive: while the conversation of college-educated adults contains an average of 17.3 rare words per thousand, even children’s books exhibit almost double that frequency (30.9).¹

Clearly, then, acquiring vocabulary from conversation alone is insufficient to attain skilled comprehension. Moreover, while some researchers and educators have drawn needed attention to improving and increasing direct instruction in vocabulary, such instruction — here defined as formal vocabulary programs as well as words teachers select for emphasis and study from students’ texts — is insufficient as well. Estimates of how many words students learn either annually or during the course of a K–12 education show that far too many words are acquired to have been gained only from direct instruction. Since adequate vocabularies cannot be acquired from either conversation or direct instruction alone, students must develop the skills to gain the rest of what they need indirectly from their reading, and instruction should offer students opportunities to practice and nurture these skills in addition to direct vocabulary teaching.²

Which words deserve the most instructional attention becomes the next critical matter given the vast number of words that could be taught and the all-too-real limits on instructional time. Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan have sensibly focused on what they refer to as Tier Two words — “words that are of high utility for mature language users and are found across a variety of domains” — because they appear frequently in written texts (but uncommonly in oral language) across a wide range of subjects. (By contrast, Tier One words require little instruction for most students because they are generally acquired through conversation, and Tier Three words are either limited to a certain domain of knowledge — and thus are best studied as part of work in that domain — or too rare to be found with any frequency in written text.) Although differing somewhat in the terms for and

boundaries of their word levels, other researchers have reached a similar conclusion about the need to concentrate instruction on these high-utility words.³

It would be a mistake to conflate frequency with ease; the level of command of these more frequent words required by the exam will sometimes be very high. Students will encounter words in challenging passages and must read and understand them in context. The exam will assess an in-depth command of words and their multiple meanings and require sensitivity to context. Rather than develop a superficial familiarity with obscure words, the SAT will invite students to read widely and study words deeply.

The redesigned SAT® supports a sharp focus on relevant words in context in multiple portions of the exam. In the SAT Reading Test, students are called on to determine the meaning of vocabulary in context, with an emphasis on Tier Two words and phrases. In the SAT Reading Test, SAT Writing and Language Test, and SAT Essay, students are also presented with other vocabulary-related challenges, including analyzing word choice rhetorically; improving the precision, concision, and context appropriateness of expression; and (in the Essay) using language to convey their own ideas clearly and carefully.

The following brief passage excerpts and sample questions help illustrate how students are asked to demonstrate an understanding of relevant words in context in the redesigned SAT.

In the Reading example below, students must determine word meaning within a social science context. (Note that the tested word is highlighted here only for convenience; in an actual test, no highlighting would appear. See also the complete passage at the end of this document for the full context in which this skill is measured.)

[. . .] The coming decades will likely see more **intense** clustering of jobs, innovation, and productivity in a smaller number of bigger cities and city-regions. Some regions could end up bloated beyond the capacity of their infrastructure, while others struggle, their promise stymied by inadequate human or other resources.

Adapted from Richard Florida, *The Great Reset*.
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As used in line 55, “intense” most nearly means

- A) emotional.
- B) concentrated.
- C) brilliant.
- D) determined.

This question asks students to analyze how the word “intense” is used in context. While students may frequently use the word “intense” to describe personalities or emotions, the context of this sentence requires students to recognize that “intense” can also mean “concentrated.” The best answer here is choice B because the context makes clear that the clustering of jobs, innovation, and productivity is expected to be denser, or more concentrated in a smaller number of bigger cities and city-regions, over the coming decades. The best answer can be determined from context clues, and none of the other answer choices makes sense in context although each is a legitimate synonym of the tested word; the tested word is also a high-utility word likely to appear in many types of reading. In these ways, the question draws students back to the text rather than rewarding only isolated vocabulary knowledge.

Questions on the redesigned SAT’s Reading Test might also explore how the same word shifts meaning between or even within contexts. To understand the latter, consider, for example, how Abraham Lincoln variously uses “dedicate” in the Gettysburg Address. The word is not notably obscure or difficult in its most common modern usage. Most students would understand what it means, say, to describe another person as a dedicated friend or employee. However, in the hands of an adept writer and orator such as Lincoln, even a relatively simple, common word such as “dedicate” can take on a range of nuanced, related meanings and implications.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and **dedicated** to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so **dedicated**, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to **dedicate** a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not **dedicate** — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living, rather, to be **dedicated** here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here **dedicated** to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln, address delivered at the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863.

Early in the address, Lincoln describes the United States as “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Here, “dedicated” means something close to “committed” in the modern, everyday sense, but a more precise synonym might be “devoted,” in the sense of the nation being “brought forth” by the “fathers” expressly to fulfill the promise of equality for all. When Lincoln refers later to “this nation, or any nation” being “so conceived and so dedicated,” he means “devoted” in a similar sense. However, when Lincoln writes that “we have come to dedicate a portion” of the Gettysburg field of battle “as a final resting place,” he uses “dedicate” mainly in the sense of setting aside for a memorial purpose. His meaning shifts slightly again when he contends that “in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate . . . this ground.” Linked with “consecrate”

and “hallow,” the word “dedicate” here takes on both a sense of literal memorial making and a sense of making sacred (hallowed, consecrated). Lincoln’s final uses of the word — “it is for us the living . . . to be dedicated here to the unfinished work” and “it is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us” — take on the weight of accumulated meanings: the living must be given over and personally devoted to carrying out a sacred cause.

Although, of course, no one sat test question could get at all of these usages and levels of meaning, the redesigned test could, for instance, focus on how two different uses of a word such as “dedicate” vary in meaning, tone, and overall rhetorical effect.

In the Writing and Language example below, students must determine the most appropriate choice of language by examining the relevant context and considering nuances in the meanings of related words. (Note that in the actual test, the question and the tested portion of the passage would be linked by a common question number. See also the complete passage at the end of this document for the full context in which this skill is measured.)

[. . .] As Kingman developed as a painter, his works were often compared to paintings by Chinese landscape artists dating back to CE 960, a time when a strong tradition of landscape painting emerged in Chinese art. Kingman, however, vacated from that tradition in a number of ways, most notably in that he chose to focus not on natural landscapes, such as mountains and rivers, but on cities. [. . .]

(The following question relates to the underlined portion in the excerpt above.)

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) evacuated
- C) departed
- D) retired

This question asks students to determine which word makes the most sense in the context of a sentence from a passage about painter Dong Kingman. The best answer here is choice C because “departed” is the most contextually appropriate way to indicate that Kingman had deviated from the tradition of Chinese landscape painting in a number of ways. Each of the other choices also conveys a sense of “leaving,” but none is as effective in the sentence, as it would be both awkward and unconventional to describe a person as vacating, evacuating, or retiring from a tradition in a number of ways. In this sort of question, students must demonstrate not only facility with language in general but also skill in using language in particular contexts to convey meaning clearly and precisely.

By including the sorts of words-in-context questions sampled above, the redesigned SAT supports and rewards students’ development of broad and deep word knowledge without resorting to obscurity.

NOTES

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- Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, *Bringing Words to Life*, 19–25; Steven A. Stahl and William E. Nagy, *Teaching Word Meanings* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006); I. S. P. Nation, *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Both Stahl and Nagy’s and Nation’s approaches are discussed in *Bringing Words to Life* by Beck and her colleagues.

This passage is adapted from Richard Florida, The Great Reset. ©2010 by Richard Florida.

In today's idea-driven economy, the cost of time is what really matters. With the constant pressure to innovate, it makes little sense to waste countless collective hours commuting. So, the most efficient and productive regions are those in which people are thinking and working—not sitting in traffic.

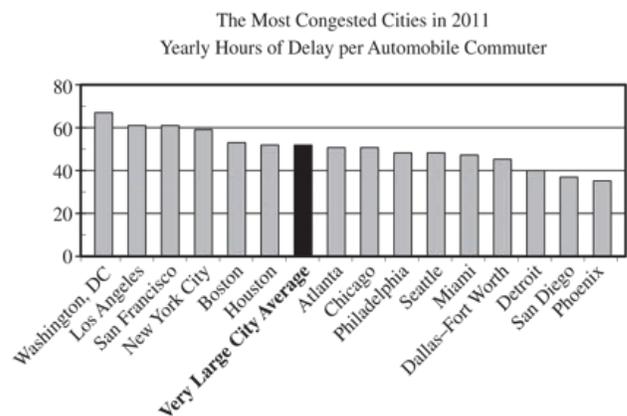
The auto-dependent transportation system has reached its limit in most major cities and megaregions. Commuting by car is among the least efficient of all our activities—not to mention among the least enjoyable, according to detailed research by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues. Though one might think that the economic crisis beginning in 2007 would have reduced traffic (high unemployment means fewer workers traveling to and from work), the opposite has been true. Average commutes have lengthened, and congestion has gotten worse, if anything. The average commute rose in 2008 to 25.5 minutes, “erasing years of decreases to stand at the level of 2000, as people had to leave home earlier in the morning to pick up friends for their ride to work or to catch a bus or subway train,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which collects the figures. And those are average figures. Commutes are far longer in the big West Coast cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco and the East Coast cities of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. In many of these cities, gridlock has become the norm, not just at rush hour but all day, every day.

The costs are astounding. In Los Angeles, congestion eats up more than 485 million working hours a year; that's seventy hours, or nearly two weeks, of full-time work per commuter. In D.C., the time cost of congestion is sixty-two hours per worker per year. In New York it's forty-four hours. Average it out, and the time cost across America's thirteen biggest city-regions is fifty-one hours per worker per year. Across the country, commuting wastes 4.2 billion hours of work time annually—nearly a full workweek for every commuter. The overall cost to

the U.S. economy is nearly \$90 billion when lost productivity and wasted fuel are taken into account. At the Martin Prosperity Institute, we calculate that every minute shaved off America's commuting time is worth \$19.5 billion in value added to the economy. The numbers add up fast: five minutes is worth \$97.7 billion; ten minutes, \$195 billion; fifteen minutes, \$292 billion.

It's ironic that so many people still believe the main remedy for traffic congestion is to build more roads and highways, which of course only makes the problem worse. New roads generate higher levels of “induced traffic,” that is, new roads just invite drivers to drive more and lure people who take mass transit back to their cars. Eventually, we end up with more clogged roads rather than a long-term improvement in traffic flow.

The coming decades will likely see more intense clustering of jobs, innovation, and productivity in a smaller number of bigger cities and city-regions. Some regions could end up bloated beyond the capacity of their infrastructure, while others struggle, their promise stymied by inadequate human or other resources.



Adapted from Adam Werbach, “The American Commuter Spends 38 Hours a Year Stuck in Traffic.” ©2013 by *The Atlantic*.

SAMPLE PASSAGE: WRITING AND LANGUAGE

NOTE: In an actual test, the following passage would contain additional questions.

Dong Kingman: Painter of Cities

A 1954 documentary about renowned watercolor painter Dong Kingman shows the artist sitting on a stool on Mott Street in New York City’s Chinatown. A crowd of admiring spectators watches as Kingman squeezes dollops of paint from several tubes into a tin watercolor box. From just a few primary colors, Kingman creates dozens of beautiful hues as he layers the translucent paint onto the paper on his easel. Each stroke of the brush and dab of the sponge transforms thinly sketched outlines into buildings, shop signs, and streetlamps. The street scene Kingman begins composing in this short film is very much in keeping with the urban landscapes for which he is best known.

Kingman was keenly interested in landscape painting from an early age. His interest was so keen, in fact, that he was named after it. In Hong Kong, where Kingman completed his schooling, teachers at that time customarily assigned students a formal “school name.” The young boy who had been called Dong Moy Shu became Dong Kingman. The name Kingman was selected for its two parts: “king” and “man,” Cantonese for “scenery” and “composition.” As Kingman developed as a painter, his works were often compared to paintings by Chinese landscape artists dating back to CE 960, a time when a strong tradition of landscape painting emerged in Chinese art. Kingman, however, vacated from that tradition in a number of ways, most notably in that he chose to focus not on natural landscapes, such as mountains and rivers, but on cities.

In his urban landscapes, Kingman captures the vibrancy of crowded cities. His fine brushwork conveys detailed street-level activity: a peanut vendor pushing his cart on the sidewalk, a pigeon pecking for crumbs around a fire hydrant, an old man tending to a baby outside a doorway. His broader brushstrokes and sponge-painted shapes create majestic city skylines, with skyscrapers towering in the background, bridges connecting neighborhoods on either side of a river, and enormous ships maneuvering out of a busy harbor. To art critics and fans alike, these city scenes represent the innovative spirit of twentieth-century urban Modernism.

During his career, Kingman exhibited his work internationally, garnering much acclaim. In 1936, a critic described one of Kingman’s solo exhibits as “twenty of the freshest, most satisfying watercolors that have been seen hereabouts in many a day.” Since Kingman’s death in 2000, museums across the United States and in China have continued to ensure that his now-iconic landscapes remain available for the public to enjoy.