Chapter 1

Pouring Your Brain into Little Ovals — the SAT

In This Chapter

- Determining which test to take
- Signing up for the SAT
- Allowing for special needs
- Previewing the SAT reading, writing, and math sections
- Understanding SAT scoring

You may be wondering why you're stuck with the SAT. Unbelievable as it may seem, the test was established to help, not ***annihilate*** (wipe out completely) students. Right about now you're probably thinking that I'm giving you the old "it's for your own good" line that authority figures always use when they're about to drop you off a cliff. But the SAT was created to level the playing field — to predict the likelihood of academic success of students, regardless of family background, connections, and other privileges. The SAT has never actually succeeded in this lofty goal, and the college admissions playing field still resembles the Alps more than the Great Plains. However, the SAT does give colleges a *number* for each student that, theoretically at least, measures the ability of everyone who takes it without regard for the dollar value of trust funds sitting in the vault.

In this chapter — whether you have a trust fund or not — you can find the ABCs of the SATs. . . .why you need to take the exam; when, where, and how often to take it; where to send your scores; and how to deal with special needs. Chapter 1 also provides a peek into the structure of the exam itself.

Sitting for the SAT Instead of ACTing Up

Most college applicants pass through one of two giant gates on their way into U.S. colleges and some foreign schools. One is the ACT, and the other the SAT. Most colleges accept scores from either test; check with the admissions office of the colleges on your list to be sure you're taking the tests they prescribe. (Good general rule for college admissions: Give them what they want, when they want it.) The SAT and the ACT tests are roughly the same in terms of difficulty. Unless you're really obsessed, don't bother to take both.

The ACT, for reasons lost in the mists of time, has always had grammar questions. (If you're taking the ACT, don't forget to check out *ACT For Dummies,* 3rd Edition by Suzee Vlk [Wiley].) The SAT is the new kid on the grammar block. Because you're reading *The SAT I For Dummies,* 6th Edition, instead of downloading the latest rap song, presumably you're taking the SAT.

What exactly is an SAT?

What does SAT stand for?

(A) Stressed Awed Teens

(B) Stupendously Awful Test

(C) Selectively Advantaged Totalitarians

(D) Scholastic Aptitude Test

(E) Nothing

Answer: (E). Okay, (D) used to be correct, but the test company changed the name in response to critics' charge that the SAT didn't really measure aptitude. Now the letters SAT are just letters. After the reconfiguration of the test, the dreaded exam became the SAT I/Reasoning Test. Why the change? To torture you more. Okay, seriously, the SAT-ists (no, not sadists, but pretty close; the people behind the SAT) changed the test to preserve their market share by including more writing, a skill that colleges prize.

Don't confuse the SAT I with the SAT IIs. Both terms, by the way, are now officially ***obsolete*** (out-dated, so yesterday) because the company that makes them has renamed them the SAT Reasoning Test and SAT Subject Tests though the name SAT I remains in popular use. Whatever you call them, be sure you know the difference. The SAT Reasoning Test does the proverbial 3 R's — reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic (but clearly not spelling). The SAT Subject Tests cover biology, history, math, and a ton of other stuff. They're either not required or required in various combinations by many schools.

Many libraries and nearly all bookstores have college guides — 20-pound paperbacks describing each and every institution of higher learning you may apply to. Check out the colleges on your list to see which tests they accept or require. You may also visit individual college Web sites for the most up-to-date requirements. Because the SAT Reasoning Test has gone through major changes recently, older printed materials probably aren't accurate.

Should you take the PSAT/NMSQT?

The PSAT/NMSQT is

(A) what you see on the bottom of the bowl when you don't eat all the alphabet soup

(B) the noise you make slurping the aforementioned soup

(C) a test that prepares you for the SAT and screens scholarship applicants

(D) the average tile selection when I play word games

(E) a secret government agency that investigates music downloads from the Internet

Answer: (C). The PSAT used to be short for the "Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test," back when the initials SAT actually meant something. Now PSAT just means "Pre-SAT." The NMSQT still stands for something — the "National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test." Though it has a two-part name, the PSAT/NMSQT is just one test, but it performs both the functions described in (C). If you're a super brain, the PSAT/NMSQT may move you into the ranks of semifinalists for a National Merit Scholarship, a ***prestigious*** (high status) scholarship program. You don't have to do anything extra to apply for a National Merit Scholarship. Just take the test, and if you make the semifinals, the National Merit Scholarship Program will send you an application. Even if you think your chances of winning a scholarship are the same as Bart Simpson's passing the fourth grade, you should still take the PSAT/NMSQT. The PSAT changed along with the SAT and mirrors the new SAT, though the PSAT is slightly shorter and doesn't include an essay. Taking the PSAT gives you a feel for the SAT itself — the test conditions, the format, and (I hate to admit) the pressure.

If college isn't in your immediate future, you may want to take the SAT just to see how you do. If your plans include a stint in the armed forces or hitchhiking through Borneo before hitting higher education, you can keep your options open by taking the SAT before you go. Also, if you take the SAT while formal "book-learning" is still fresh in your mind, you may do better. Then when you retire your thumb or trigger finger, you have some scores to send to the college of your choice, though if a long period of time has passed, the colleges may ask for an updated score. (How long is "a long period of time"? It depends on the college you're applying to. Some may ask for an updated SAT after only a couple of years; others are more lenient. Obviously, whether you took three years off to work on the world's deepest tan or ten years to decipher the meaning of an obscure archaeological site also influences the admissions office decision on SAT scores. Check with the college(s) you're interested in and explain your situation.)

Getting Set for the SAT: Registering for the Right Test at the Right Time

The SAT is given at select high schools throughout the United States and in English-speaking schools in many other countries. Even home-schoolers can take the SAT, though not in their own living rooms. To find the test center nearest you or to request a registration form, ask the college or guidance counselor at your high school. If you're home-schooled, call the nearest public or private high school. Or, you may register through the SAT Web site (`www.collegeboard.com`). If you have special needs, paper is your route. Get the forms at your school. You can also request a form via the plain, old-fashioned telephone; try 609-771-7600 for the general customer service center. (Also check out the "Meeting Special Needs" section later in this chapter.) If you're stranded on a desert island without phone, Internet, or school office (in which case the SAT is the least of your problems), try writing to the College Board SAT Program, Princeton, New Jersey 08541 for the forms you need. The SAT Reasoning Test costs about $41.50, though fee waivers are available for those in financial difficulties. (See "Meeting Special Needs" in this chapter for more information.)

Where the SAT helps the most

The SAT counts the most in

(A) small, private colleges where people say hello even if they hate you because they're going to run into you five times a day for four years

(B) public universities with an enrollment larger than the population of Tokyo

(C) keeping a job with Donald Trump

(D) deciding whether Howard "Tall as a Himalaya" Jones should play center or forward on the basketball team

(E) the yearbook popularity contest

Answer: (B). Small private colleges can take the time to pour over your essays and talk to every applicant. They certainly check your SAT scores, but they can more easily see those numbers as part of a total picture. Large public universities, on the other hand, are underfunded and severely understaffed, as in "Put those 20,000 applications over there with the other 150,000 that came in yesterday." With a huge freshman class and rooms full of applications, they need quick and easy determinants. Thus they're more likely to give extra weight to things that can be quantified, such as SAT scores.

In high-stress situations — Martian invasions, nuclear meltdowns, the cancellation of your favorite TV show — rumors ***abound*** (grow and thrive). So too with the SAT. You've probably heard that certain versions of the SAT — the ones given in October or November or the ones given in a particular state — are easier than others. Not so. The SAT contains one section that you *must* answer that counts for absolutely nothing. . . for you. It's called the *equating* section. The test-makers use this section as a statistical tool to ensure that all the SAT tests, regardless of when or where they're given, are equal in difficulty. No matter how well you do on the equating section, or (in case you're having a bad day) how badly you blow it, the equating section won't affect your score.

The SAT pops up on the calendar seven times a year. You can take the exam as often as you want. If you're a ***masochist*** — you enjoy pain — you can take all seven tests, but most people stick to this schedule:

Autumn of junior year (about 1¾ years before college entrance): Time to take the PSAT/NMSQT.

Spring of junior year (about 1¼ years before college entrance): Take the SAT strictly for practice, though you can send your scores in if you're pleased with them.

Autumn of senior year (a bit less than a year before entrance): The SAT strikes again. Early-decision candidates prefer taking the test in October or November; regular applicants may choose from any of the three autumn dates, including December.

Winter of senior year (half-year before entrance): Some SAT-lovers take the exam in autumn and again in the winter, hoping that practice will make perfect, at least in the eyes of the colleges. The high scores won't hurt (and you probably will improve, just because the whole routine will be familiar), but don't put a lot of energy into repeated bouts of SAT fever. Your grades and extracurriculars may suffer if you're too fixated on the SAT, and you may end up hurting your overall application.

If you're transferring or starting your college career mid-year, you may sit for the SAT in January, March, May, or June. Check with your counselor or with the college of your choice and go with that recommendation.

Everyone takes the SAT on Saturday except for those students who can't for religious reasons. If you fall into that category, your SAT-day will be Sunday. Get a letter from your ***cleric*** (religious leader) on letterhead and mail it in with your registration form.

In terms of test sites, the early bird gets the worm. (Did you ever wonder why no one ever deals with the worm's fate? He got up early too, and look what happened to him.) When you register, you may request a test site, but if it's filled, you'll get an alternate. So don't delay; send in the form or register online as soon as you know when and where you want to take the exam.

Meeting Special Needs

If you have a learning disability, you may be allowed to take the SAT under special conditions. The first step is to get an Eligibility Form from your school counselor. (Home-schoolers, call the local high school.) You may also want to ask your college counseling office for a copy of the *College Board Services for Students with Disabilities Brochure* (pamphlet). If your school doesn't have one, contact the College Board directly. Send in the form well in advance of the time you expect to take the test. Generally, if you're entitled to extra test time in your high school, you'll be eligible for extra time on the SAT.

Atención! What every foreign student needs to know about the SAT

First, welcome to the U.S.'s worst invention, the Seriously Annoying Test (SAT), which you're taking so that you can attend an American institution. Getting ready for this exam may make you consider another American institution, one with padded rooms and bars on the windows. But a high SAT score is certainly within reach for individuals who have studied English as a second language. Here's one secret: The SAT's formal vocabulary is actually easier than American conversational English and slang. So if even if you look at the sky in puzzlement when someone asks, "What's up?", you should be able to decode an SAT question. (By the way, "What's up?" is a general inquiry into your state of mind, current occupation, and plans for the immediate future.) As a foreign student, pay special attention to the vocabulary builder icons in this book. You may want to keep a notebook or a computer file of new words you encounter as you work the sample questions.

Also turn your concentration up to "totally intense" in the math section of this prep book because arithmetic doesn't change from language to language. Neither does geometry or algebra. If you can crack the basic language used to put forth the problem, you should be able to rack up a ton of points.

What does extra time really mean? Extra time equals 1½ the usual amount for each section. In the past, the SAT simply added 50 percent more time to the entire test and allowed the student to work on any section for as long as he or she wanted, with the whole thing done in the "time and a half" allotted. The new SAT requires extended-time test-takers to stay on one section at a time, with time and a half allowed for each section. So if regular test-takers have 20 minutes for a section, extended-timers get 30 minutes.

The SAT also provides wheelchair accessibility, large-print tests, and other accommodations for students who need them. The key is to submit the Eligibility Form early so that the SAT-maker — the College Board — can ask for any extra documentation and set up appropriate test conditions for you.

If your special need resides in your wallet, you can apply for a fee waiver, which is available to low-income high school juniors and seniors who live in the United States, Puerto Rico, and other American territories. Ask your school counselor for an application. (As in everything to do with the SAT, if you're a home-schooler, call the local high school for a form.)

The SAT charges extra for more than four score reports to colleges, for late or changed registrations, and for "extras" like extra-quick reporting. It *doesn't* charge extra for special needs accommodations, such as large print or wheelchair accessible testing.

Measuring Your Mind: What the SAT Tests

Statistically, the SAT tests whether or not you'll be successful in your first year of college. Admissions officers keep track of their students' SAT scores and have a pretty good idea which scores signal trouble and which scores indicate clear sailing. Many college guides list the average SAT scores of entering freshmen.

That said, the picture gets complicated whenever the wide-angle lens narrows to focus on an individual, such as you, and admissions offices are well aware of this fact. How rigorous your high school is, whether you deal well with multiple-choice questions, and how you feel

physically and mentally on SAT-day (Fight with Mom? Bad romance? Week-old sushi?) all influence your score. Bottom line: Stop obsessing about the SAT's unfairness (and it *is* unfair) and prepare.

The college admission essay is a great place to put your scores in perspective. If you face some special circumstances, such as a learning disability, a school that doesn't value academics, a family tragedy, and so on, you may want to explain your situation in an essay. No essay wipes out the bad impression created by an extremely low SAT score, but a good essay gives the college a way to interpret your achievement and to see you, the applicant, in more detail. For help with the college admission essay, take a look at *College Admission Essays For Dummies,* published by Wiley and written by yours truly.

The SAT doesn't test facts you studied in school; you don't need to know when Columbus sailed across the Atlantic or how to calculate the molecular weight of magnesium in order to answer an SAT Reasoning question. Instead, the SAT takes aim at your ability to follow a logical sequence, to comprehend what you've read, and to write clearly in standard English. The math portion checks whether you were paying attention or snoring when little details like algebra were taught. Check out the next sections for a bird's eye view of the three SAT topics.

Critical Reading

This topic pops up three times per SAT, in terms of what counts toward your score. (All SATs include an extra section either in reading or math that the SAT-makers use for research only.) You face two 25-minute sections and one 20-minute section of Critical Reading, a fancy term for reading comprehension. Each section may contain Sentence Completions and/or Reading Comprehension passages that are either short (about 100 words) or long (700 to 800 words). You also see a set of paired passages — a double take on one topic from two different points of view.

Sentence Completions

The Sentence Completions are just fill-ins. You may encounter one or two sets of nine or ten questions. Sentence Completions test vocabulary and your ability to decode the sentence structure, as in the following:

The SAT Sentence Completion section is guaranteed to give you a headache, so the test-makers thoughtfully provide _____ with each exam.

(A) aspirin

(B) dictionaries

(C) answer keys

(D) tutoring

(E) scalp massage

Answer: (A). Given that the sentence specifies "headache," your best choice is "aspirin," at least in SAT world. In real life you may prefer a day at the spa, but the test-makers haven't included that option. (E) is a possibility too, but the SAT goes with the best answer, not the only answer.

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension questions are a mixture of literal (just-the-facts-ma'am) and interpretive/analytical. You may be asked to choose the meaning of a word in context or to assess the author's tone or point of view. Passages may be drawn from the natural and social sciences, humanities, or fiction, as in the following:

Thanhowser was frantic to learn that the first GC-MP8 handheld was already in circulation. And here he was wasting his time in college! The degree that he had pursued so doggedly for the past three years now seemed nothing more than a gigantic waste of time. The business world, that's where he belonged, marketing someone else's technology with just enough of a twist to allow him to patent "his" idea.

In line 5 the word *his* is in quotation marks

(A) because it's a pronoun

(B) because the reader is supposed to hiss at Thanhowser, whom everyone hates

(C) to show that the idea really came from someone else

(D) to demonstrate that the idea really came from a female masquerading as a male

(E) because the typesetter had some extra quotation marks

Answer: (C). These quotation marks refer to Thanhowser's claim to "someone else's technology." Although he isn't quoted directly, the quotation marks around "his" imply that Thanhowser says that a particular invention is his, when in fact it isn't.

Writing

To the ***chagrin*** (disappointment or embarrassment) of English teachers everywhere, the SAT Writing test contains only a sliver of actual writing: one 25-minute essay on a topic that you've never seen before, plus 25 minutes' worth of short answers. Why so little writing? As those of us who sit with four-foot high piles of essays on our laps know, it takes a long time to read student prose. The SAT test-makers must pay people to read and score essays — a much more expensive and time-consuming proposition than running a bubble sheet through a scanner. The multiple-choice questions check your ability to recognize errors in grammar, punctuation, and word use and to make sentence revisions. You also see a couple of ***pseudo*** (fake) first drafts of student essays and answer some questions about the writer's intentions. In these longer passages, you again have to select the best revisions.

Error Recognition

Error Recognition questions are long sentences (they have to be long to allow enough room for four possible errors) with underlined portions. You choose the portion with a mistake or select (E) for "no error."

Flabbergill denounced his lover (A) for her work with (B) the Revolutionary Band, he (C) had a new bass guitarist lined up whose musical talents were, he (D) said, "awesome." No error. (E)

Answer: (C). Each half of the sentence can stand alone, so a comma may not join them. You need a semicolon or a word such as *and* or *so* to glue the two parts together.

Sentence Revision

In these questions the test-gurus underline one portion of a sentence and then provide four alternatives. (A) always repeats the original wording.

Having been turned down by fifteen major league baseball teams, Gilberdub changed to basketball, and he succeeded in his goal where he was aiming to be a professional athlete.

(A) in his goal where he was aiming to be a professional athlete.

(B) in that he reached his goal of aiming to be a professional athlete.

(C) where he became a professional athlete.

(D) in his goal of becoming a professional athlete.

(E) because he wanted million-dollar sneaker ads.

Answer: (D). Just kidding about (E), though an endorsement contract actually was Gilberdub's motivation.

Paragraph Revision

These questions throw you into the mind of a fairly competent student writer who has had only enough time to complete a first draft of an essay on a general topic. Some of the questions ask you to combine sentences effectively; others resemble the Sentence Revision section — an underlined portion with possible improvements or alternate versions of entire sentences.

Essay

This section is the only spot in the Writing section that you actually get to write something. And I do mean *write.* For those of you who have keyboards permanently implanted under your fingernails, this section may be a handwriting challenge. And, thanks to ever-evolving technology, an image of your essay — inkblots, saliva drools, and all — will be available on the Web to the college admission offices that are reviewing your applications. Start practicing your penmanship.

In terms of what you write, the essay is a standard, short discussion of a general topic that the SAT-makers provide. You have to take a stand and defend it with evidence (literature, history, and your own experience or observation). The main challenge is time: You have only 25 minutes to think, write, and revise.

Mathematics

In the new SAT, gone are the dreaded quantitative comparisons, which asked you to figure out which of two items was larger. Added are questions that rely on Algebra II and some advanced topics in geometry, statistics, and probability. Your SAT contains two 25-minute math sections that count (and perhaps one equating section that the SAT uses for its own statistical analysis only). Almost all the questions are multiple choice, in which you choose the answer from among five possibilities. Ten are *grid-ins* in which you supply an answer and bubble in the actual number, not a multiple-choice letter. Look at the following sample math problem:

If $xy - 12 = z$, and the value of x is 2, which of the following must be true?

(A) z = the number of days since you've had no homework

(B) $y = 12 + z$

(C) $z = 2y - 12$

(D) $2y - z = 100$

(E) $y >$ the number of hours you have to spend studying SAT math

Answer: (A). Just kidding. It's actually (E). Oops, kidding again. The correct choice is (C).

For a peek at a grid-in, check out Chapter 13.

Scoring at the SAT

No, I'm not talking about *that* kind of scoring. I'm talking academics here, or at least the SAT's version of academics. Each half of the SAT used to be scored from 200 to 800, giving you a combined maximum score of 1,600. Now that the new SAT is in place, 1,600 is just a high-rent address on Pennsylvania Avenue (the White House), and the maximum score is 2,400 (top score of 800 on each of three main sections: Critical Reading, Writing, and Math).

You get one point for each correct answer you supply on the SAT, and for everything but the essay and math grid-ins, you lose ¼ point for each incorrect answer. (If you make a mistake on a grid-in, you receive no points but nothing is deducted.) Two (severely underpaid) English teachers who have undergone special training in SAT scoring read the essay. Each reader awards it 1 to 6 points. If the readers disagree by more than one point, which happens in about 6 percent of the essays, a third super-expert reader weighs in. When you get your writing score, you see a 20 to 80 score for the multiple-choice questions and an essay subscore of 2 to 12.

Meeting market demand, or, why the SAT is changing

The SAT has changed because

(A) the company that makes the test needed a new product line

(B) the test-making gremlins were getting bored and sought a new challenge

(C) the students taking the old exam were having too much fun

(D) admissions offices demanded higher test scores

(E) a study of Americans' grammar knowledge showed gaps the size of Jupiter

Answer: (A). That's right, (A). The Educational Testing Service (ETS), a mega-exam company based in Princeton, New Jersey, produces the SAT. ETS wants to stay in business and make money. So when the University of California — one of its largest customers — announced a couple of years ago that it may drop its SAT requirement, ETS trembled. When more colleges followed suit, ETS had the institutional equivalent of a nervous breakdown. It scrambled to address the universities' concerns that the SAT didn't truly measure the skills and abilities needed for college-level work. Specifically, the colleges wanted higher-level math and some evidence that their applicants could read and write. So the new SAT includes a writing sample and grammar questions (two areas formerly taken care of by the SATIIW, the achievement test in writing, which is now dead as a day-old fish fillet) and math typically taught in Algebra II courses.

The SAT isn't curved, but raw scores are converted to the 200 to 800 format. Surprisingly, you can get a couple of answers wrong and still receive a perfect 800.

To guess or not to guess, that is the question. The answer is a definite *maybe.* On the grid-ins, always guess because there is no penalty for a wrong answer. If you have no clue on the grid-ins, bubble in your birthday or the number of cavities you had during your last checkup. For the other five-answer, multiple-choice questions, try to eliminate obviously wrong answers. If you can dump one, you have a one in four chance of guessing correctly. Go for it. If you can't eliminate anything, leave the question blank. Always guess if you can eliminate two of the five choices because the odds favor you. Students who make this sort of educated guess usually score higher on the SAT than they would have if they'd left more blanks.

The SAT company (the College Board) sends your scores to up to eight colleges. The basic fee for the test is $41.50, with the first four score reports free, but you pay $7 extra for additional score reports. (Prices, of course, are always subject to change, and don't expect any to go down. Check the College Board Web site for pricing changes.) If you're applying to more than eight colleges, you can request additional score reports on the (How do they think of these names?) Additional Score Report Request Form.

For a higher fee ($8), you can get a detailed analysis of your test performance — how many of each sort of question you answered right and wrong. Then you can tailor your prep hours to the stuff that's hard for you. Ask for *Student Answer Service* when you register. For even more money ($16), the SAT sends you a copy of the questions and your answers, but only for certain test dates. Look for *Question and Answer Service* when you register.

If you're planning to take another SAT, spring for the Answer Service. Seeing what you got wrong gives you a blueprint for review.