

## Chapter 1

# Getting the Lowdown on the SAT II

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Determining just why you have to take the SAT II in the first place
- ▶ Figuring out which subject test is best for you
- ▶ Deciding on the best time to take your SAT II
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**E**ven if you're familiar with the way the general SAT I test is set up, you'll need to read this chapter. The SAT II is significantly different from the SAT I in the way that it's formatted and the way that you approach it.

## *Justification: How Colleges Use the SAT II*

How colleges and universities evaluate your SAT II Biology E/M score really depends on the particular college. Some colleges use your SAT II score as an additional admissions tool equal in value to your other standardized test scores, like the SAT and the ACT, your GPA, and other factors, like the difficulty of your high school course load. Your SAT II test scores may allow you to test out of taking specific first year college courses at some schools.

### *Figuring out whether the SAT II is an admissions requirement*

Before you fill out the application form, research the admissions requirements of your top school choices. The most up-to-date information is usually found on the college's website. Read the requirements carefully because there are all sorts of ways that schools apply the information they get from your SAT II score.

Most of the schools that require you to take the SAT II want you to take two or three of them. Some schools tell you exactly which subjects they expect you to take and others leave the choice up to you.

What part the SAT II plays in the admissions decision also varies from school to school. Some schools don't even consider your SAT II score when they decide whether to sign you on or not. Other colleges give your SAT II score the same weight as they do your SAT or ACT score and your GPA. And other colleges may not put the same amount of importance on your SAT II score as they other standardized tests and GPA, but they use it for additional consideration like they would your extracurricular activities.

## A case study: How the University of California system uses the SAT II for admissions

The University of California requires students to take the SAT II for all of its extensions; so if you plan to attend any campus of the University of California, you'll have to take the SAT II. According to Ravi Poorsina of the UC Office of the President, the primary concern of the university is that an incoming student comes to the campus ready to handle the rigors of the college curriculum. The university needs to know what the students know about particular subjects. That's why as of the time of this book's printing, the admissions committee mandates that every prospective student take two SAT II subject tests. The SAT II is so important to the University of California that it will probably weigh it equally with the regular SAT or ACT score and your GPA.

A student in the freshman class of 2006 and beyond will have to take two SAT II subject tests. Each test has to be from a different general subject area, like one science

and one history or a language test and the literature test. If you submit two scores from the same subject area, you won't meet the requirement. The university system does not require any one particular test as long as you take two from different subjects.

Because the new general SAT contains math questions that are similar in difficulty to those in the SAT II Math Level I, the University of California will no longer accept the Level I math test. Therefore, if you want to use a math test for acceptance to a University of California undergraduate program, you must take the Level II test.

Even with the advent of a new general SAT, the University of California system still values the information it gets from a student's SAT II score. We guess you'll just have to keep on taking those standardized tests!

Each SAT II subject test falls into one of five general categories. It is important to know these categories because some colleges won't accept two tests from the same category. The five categories are as follows:

- ✓ **English:** As of the spring of 2005 there is only one English test and that is the SAT II Literature exam.
- ✓ **History and Social Studies:** The two history tests make up this category, SAT II U.S. History and SAT II World History.
- ✓ **Science:** The SAT II Biology E/M, SAT II Chemistry, and SAT II Physics are all considered to be science tests. Go figure!
- ✓ **Mathematics:** The SAT II Math has two separate math tests, the Level IC and the more advanced Level IIC.
- ✓ **Languages:** The SAT II has language tests in nine languages, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Modern Hebrew, and Spanish. Some of the languages consist of one-hour listening tests; some are one-hour written tests. The French, German, and Spanish each have two separate tests, one listening and one written. You can choose which of these you prefer.

Find out how your college choices evaluate your score, and if you are confused by their websites call their admissions offices directly. It's nice to know just what is at stake before you walk into the test.

## Using the SAT II as a placement tool

Colleges that use your SAT II score as an admissions requirement, and even those that don't, *may* consider it for placement purposes. Quite a few colleges and universities allow first year students to meet a core course requirement if they do well on the SAT II in that particular

subject. So, if you did really well on the SAT II Literature test, for instance, you may not have to take a 101 English class in college. Specific information about using the SAT II for placement purposes is not usually spelled out for you on the college websites, so call the admissions office directly if you need more information about whether your SAT II score can get you out of taking one of those huge freshman lectures with 500 other students.

## ***Decisions, Decisions: Determining Which Subject Test You Should Take***

Until the regular SAT changed in 2005, it used to be a little easier to decide which SAT II subject area tests you needed to take. Most of the colleges that required the SAT II made you take the SAT II Math, the SAT II Writing, and one other. The only decisions your overworked brain had to make was whether to take Level I or Level II for math and which of the other subjects would provide the least amount of torture for your third choice.

Things have changed, however. Beginning with students entering college in Fall 2006, the College Board offers a new SAT that incorporates the old SAT II Writing test and some of the elements of the Level I Math test. The result is that colleges will probably no longer mandate particular subject tests, and you will have to decide which tests are best for you.

### ***Figuring out the right subject area tests for you***

To determine which of the over 15 different subject tests are best for you, consider your strengths. Ignore what your friends are doing and choose the subjects that you do best in and that you know the most about. If you can recite the Declaration of Independence in your sleep, the SAT II U.S. History is probably a good bet. If all of your friends seek you out for help with their trigonometry homework, you'd do well taking the SAT II Math. Maybe you spend all of your free time expanding your bug collection; the SAT II Biology E/M is the test for you. Knowing what you'd like to major in can help direct you toward a particular subject test as well. If you're really conflicted, it may help you to know that you can decide which tests you're taking on test day. We highly suggest, however, that you are certain about which tests you want to take before you step into the testing room.

Harvard University, for example, requires its applicants to take three SAT II subject tests to be considered for admission. Although the requirements don't mandate that each test comes from a different general subject area (like those of the University of California) the admissions committee suggests that you show your range of understanding by taking as broad a mix of subjects as you feel comfortable with. So, it's probably best to take your SAT II tests in a variety of subjects.

### ***Knowing which emphasis of the SAT II Biology test you should take***

The SAT II Biology test allows you to choose an emphasis. You can either take the exam with the "E" emphasis or the one with the "M" emphasis. Both tests start out with a core section of 60 questions that you take regardless of whether you choose Biology-E or Biology-M. Then the test diverges into two separate parts for the last 20 questions. The Biology-E tests concentrates on things like ecology and diversity in organisms. The Biology-M test emphasizes

cellular biology and genetics. You can't take the Biology-E and the Biology-M on the same day because the first 60 questions would be the same on that day, but you could take one on one test day and the other on another test day. We can't think of too many good reasons to do this, however. Unless you apply to a university that requests that you take both emphases, we suggest that you stick to one and meet your SAT II requirement with other subject tests.

Then the trick is to discover which emphasis is better for you. Some high school biology courses stress certain areas more than others. If you have questions about what emphasis fits better with the types of things you studied in high school, you can probably find the best information from your biology teacher. Another way to figure out which emphasis you're best suited for is to carefully examine the practice tests you take in this book. We suggest that you answer all of the test questions (Biology-E and Biology-M) in the practice tests. Score yourself for both parts and see which emphasis gives you the highest score. If you do better on Biology-E questions, take the Biology-E, but if your score is higher on the Biology-M questions, choose Biology-M on test day. If you score roughly the same on both parts, take the emphasis that you like more. You may as well enjoy yourself as much as possible on test day!

## ***It's All in the Timing: When to Take Your SAT II Biology E/M Exam (and What to Bring)***

You're not done making decisions yet. Once you've figured out what subject tests are best for you, you need to determine when's the best time to take them and what you should bring along with you to the test.

### ***The best time to take the SAT II***

Most of the SAT II subject tests are offered in January, May, June, October, November, and December. When in your high school career you choose to take a particular subject test really depends on what the subject test covers. SAT II subject tests that cover the material you learned in a two-semester course (like U.S. history, world history, biology, chemistry, and physics) are best taken as soon after you've taken the course as possible. This means that if you take U.S. history and biology in your sophomore year, you may be wise to take the SAT II U.S. History and SAT II Biology after you complete your sophomore year on either the May or June test date. This is much earlier than you would normally take other admissions tests. Most don't take the regular SAT or ACT until the end of their junior years.

The math, literature, and foreign language subject tests, however, cover information that you learn over the span of several years of coursework. You'll probably get a better score on these subjects if you wait until you've had at least two or three years of high school courses. You could take these subjects at the end of your junior year or even in the fall of your senior year in most cases.

You can take up to three SAT II subject tests in one day, but you can take only one or two on one day if that's what works for you. Some people like to get them over with all at once. Others like to be able to concentrate on just one subject. You're less likely to suffer burnout if you take only one or two tests on any one testing day.

When you've settled upon the date for your SAT II, you'll need to register. The deadline is usually a little over a month before the test date. Everything you need to know about registering for the SAT II is located in the *Registration Bulletin* published by the College Board. It has

the test dates, instructions, registration deadlines, fees, test center codes, and other related information. You can get the bulletin from your school counselor. Or you can get the same information and register online at the College Board's website, [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).

## *The things to take with you to the SAT II*

Regardless of when you take the SAT II and how many subjects you take in one day, you will need to take certain things along with you. The absolute essentials include the following:

- ✓ **Your admission ticket:** When you register for the SAT II, the College Board sends you a form that you must bring to the test with you. It proves you're registered.
- ✓ **A photo ID:** You have to prove that you are you and not your really smart neighbor coming in to take the test for you. Any form of identification that does not have your picture on it is unacceptable, so bring along one of the following:
  - a driver's license
  - a government or state-issued identification card
  - a school identification card
  - a valid passport
  - a school identification form prepared by your school counselor if you don't have any of the other forms of ID
- ✓ **Several number 2 pencils, a big eraser, and a little pencil sharpener:** Avoid anxiety by carrying a bunch of pencils with you and a pencil sharpener just in case they all break. A large eraser comes in handy, especially if you need to make clean erasures on your answer sheet.
- ✓ **A quiet watch:** Chapter 2 relates the importance of having your own watch with you during the test. Just make sure that your watch does not make any sounds at all.

If you plan to take more than one test, you should also bring in a quick, light snack (like a power bar) to eat during the short break between tests. You'll need energy for the other tests.



Don't expect to be able to eat or drink during the test. Keep your snack in your pocket for later. And don't eat anything too heavy before a test. You want the blood pumping to your brain not your stomach.

Don't bring any scratch paper, highlighters, protractors, calculators, or books with you. Pretty much anything that isn't listed above is not allowed. As nice as it would be to tune out your neighbors hacking cough with your CD player, listening and recording devices are taboo (unless you're taking a language listening test).

## *First Impressions: The Format and Content of the SAT II Biology E/M*

As we have mentioned earlier, the SAT II Biology E/M actually has two separate emphases: the Biology-E and the Biology-M. You choose one to take on test day. You could take each of these tests during separate administrations, but most colleges and universities will accept only one.

Each emphasis contains 80 questions that you have to answer within 1 hour. 60 of the questions are the same for both emphases; 20 are unique to either the Biology-E or the Biology-M. Unlike many other standardized tests, the SAT II Biology E/M questions do not necessarily get harder as you move along through the test. The different subjects that you could be tested on for biology vary so greatly that question difficulty is based more on how well you know a subject than where the question appears on the test. There may be questions toward the end of the test that are easier for you because they test a math subject that you are better at. For instance, if you know more about genetics than you do cell division geometry, you wouldn't want to spend a bunch of time trying to answer a mitosis question early on in the test because it may keep you from getting to a pea plant pollination question later on. (For more on managing your time wisely during the test, check out Chapter 2.)

## *Managing the answer sheet*

The answer sheets for the SAT II have places for 100 questions, but you will only mark answers for 80 since there are only 80 questions on the math test. Managing the answer sheet for biology can be a little tricky, so you have stay alert. If you are taking the Biology-E, you'll mark your answers on the sheet in order from 1–80. Put a little pencil mark under question 80 on your answer sheet. If for some reason you mark an answer after your pencil mark, you know you've done something wrong. Be sure to erase the pencil mark before you turn in your answer sheet.

If you choose to take the Biology-M, you'll mark answers on your sheet for questions 1–60. Then you skip over questions 61–80 on the answer sheet and start marking answers from 81–100. Put a light pencil mark under question 60 on your answer sheet and another after question 80. This tells you that you should not have any answers marked for any bubbles between 61 and 80. Erase the pencil marks at the end of the test.

## *Keeping the question types straight*

The SAT II Biology E/M present three ways of asking you questions. You'll see basic multiple-choice questions with five answer choices and classification questions (which are kind of multiple-choice questions in reverse). Included in the standard issue multiple-choice questions are data interpretation questions, which give you a bunch of information, like experiment data or charts, and then ask anywhere from three to five questions about the data. Questions that ask you to interpret data can sometimes be easier than the other types because the information you need to answer the question is right there in the question booklet. You just need to know how to analyze it.

The classification question type is pretty much unique to the biology test. It isn't all that fancy. You just get a list of answer choices first. Then you get a series of "questions" that are just descriptions. You need to choose which of the answers fits the description. We talk more about how to answer classification questions in Chapter 2.

## *Reveling in the subject matter*

Table 1-1 provides a breakdown of the general subjects covered on the SAT II Biology E/M test and how they are specifically tested on each of the emphases.

**Table 1-1** Topics Covered on the SAT II Biology

	<i>Organismal Biology</i>	<i>Ecology</i>	<i>Genetics</i>	<i>Cells and Molecules</i>	<i>Evolution</i>
Explanation	These questions test what you know about how plants and animals are structured and how they function.	You'll need to know about what makes up populations and communities and how they function, how energy flows, how organisms absorb and use nutrients, and what constitutes the variety of biomes.	Genetics questions ask you about meiosis, patterns of inheritance, Mendelian genetics, molecular genetics, and population genetics.	You'll be asked about the elements of cells, how they reproduce and "breathe." For plant cells, you'll need to know about photosynthesis. Questions will test what you know about enzymes, DNA and RNA, and biological chemistry.	Evolution questions test your knowledge of origin of life theories and patterns of evolution, the concept of natural selection, and how species come about. You'll need to know how organisms are classified and some basic differences among the different classifications.
Biology-E	About 25%	About 25%	About 15%	About 15%	About 20%
Biology-M	About 25%	About 15%	About 20%	About 25%	About 15%

The SAT II Biology E/M exam covers a lot of territory, so make sure you read through the reviews in this book thoroughly.

## *Where You Stand: Scoring Considerations*

Okay, so you know what the colleges are looking for, but when it comes down to it, the thing you're probably most concerned about is your final score, the number the colleges see when they get your report.

### *How the SAT II testers figure out your score*

The SAT II is scored similarly to the regular SAT. Each multiple-choice question has five possible answer choices. If you pick the correct answer, you get 1 full point for that question. If you pick the wrong answer, the SAT II deducts  $\frac{1}{4}$  point from your raw score. So, one right answer covers four wrong answers. If you skip a question, you don't get any points but you don't lose any points. It's still better to guess if you can eliminate at least one answer choice. For more on guessing strategies, see Chapter 2.

You determine your raw score by taking the total number of questions you answered incorrectly times 4. Then you subtract that number from the total number of questions you answered correctly. The SAT II doesn't stop there, however. To try to make every test measure students equally, the SAT II develops a scale for each test. Where your raw scores lands on the scale determines your final score, the one that the colleges get to see.

## Why you should never cancel your SAT II score

The fine folks at the College Board allow you to cancel your SAT II score either on the test day itself or in writing by the Wednesday after you take the test. Here are some reasons why you should never take them up on their offer.

You can't know what your score would be if you hadn't cancelled it. It is really difficult to know how well you've done on an exam when you are in the middle of it, and you can miss a fair amount of questions and still do well on the SAT II. So you may feel like you messed up when you really shined.

If you cancel one SAT II test score, the scores for any and all other SAT II tests you take on that day will be cancelled, too.

It is highly unlikely that you will do significantly better on one administration over another. Only unusual circumstances, like getting the stomach flu in the middle

of a test, will cause you to perform much differently on an SAT II test.

Most colleges and universities only consider your top scores, so if you do pretty poorly on one test, you can retake it. The yucky score will be reported with the others, but most schools will ignore it in favor of the good ones.

There are only a few circumstances where canceling a score may be a good idea. The flu scenario mentioned is one. The others involve mechanical failure. If your calculator malfunctions on the math test or your cassette player fails on a language listening test, you can cancel your score on that particular test without canceling the scores for the other tests you took that day. Be prepared, however, and have a backup calculator or cassette player with you just in case you run into this problem.

Every SAT II subject test has a final score value of 200–800 points. You get 200 points for knowing your name and recording it correctly on your answer sheet, but colleges aren't going to be satisfied with a 200, so you're going to have to work harder than that. Generally, if you answer at least 60% of the questions on the test correctly, you'll get a score of around 600. The mean score on an SAT II test is a little higher than it is on the regular SAT because most of the students who take an SAT II test take it because they think they know something about the subject.

Check with the schools you want to get into regarding acceptable SAT II scores, we think you'll find that most of the more selective schools are looking for numbers in the upper 600s and beyond. This means you can still skip about 20 questions and get a good score, as long as you are right on questions you do answer. Don't skip more than 20 questions on any SAT II test, though.

Here is a rough idea of how many questions you need to answer correctly on the SAT II Biology test to achieve a particular scaled score as long as you don't answer too many of the other questions incorrectly. Our assumption in each case is that of the remaining answer choices you skipped twenty questions and answered the rest incorrectly. The scales for the Biology-E and Biology-M tests are about the same.

To get a 500, you need to answer about 38 of the 80 questions correctly.

To get a 550, you need to answer about 43 of the 80 questions correctly.

To get a 600, you need to answer about 49 of the 80 questions correctly.

To get a 660, you need to answer about 55 of the 80 questions correctly.

To get a 710, you need to answer about 60 of the 80 questions correctly.



To get a 750, you need to skip fewer than 20 questions and answer about 69 of the 80 questions correctly.

To get an 800, you can skip about 6 questions as long as you answer all of the other 74 correctly.

## *How the SAT II testers report your score*

Unless you choose to cancel your score within three days of taking the SAT II, your score will be reported to the colleges you choose. If you take more than one SAT II subject test, all of the scores will be reported together. The colleges get to see them all, and usually they will choose the top scores to use in their admissions calculations.

## *All Over Again: Retaking the SAT II*

Because most colleges consider only your top scores, it may be in your best interest to retake a subject test if aren't happy with your first score. The SAT II administrators let you take a test over and over again if you want (that's pretty big of them considering you have to pay for it every time). The SAT II reports to the colleges scores for up to six administrations of the same test, but we don't suggest you take the same test as many as six times. If you do retake the test, make sure you take it seriously. You want to show improvement. A college will be much more impressed to see a rising score than a falling one. And most colleges will be turned off if they see that you have taken one particular subject test more than two or three times. The key is to prepare to do your best on the first try, and obviously that is your goal since you have chosen to read this book.

