

Debate and the New SAT

Training Students for Evidence-Based Thinking

In March, the College Board announced fundamental changes to the SAT. According to the *New York Times*, the test has been “redesigned with an eye toward reinforcing the skills and evidence-based thinking that students should be learning in high school, and moving away from a need for test-taking tricks and strategies.”

“The next incarnation of the SAT will require students to think harder, analyze more, and anchor their answers to evidence,” reported *The Chronicle On Higher Education*. “Students will be asked not just to select the right answer,” the *Times* explains, “but to justify it by choosing the quotation from a text that provides the best supporting evidence for their answer.”



Woodward debaters evaluate and formulate a response to their opponents' evidence during a debate.

These changes shouldn't be surprising. The test's designer — David Coleman, President of the College Board — was a highly successful high school policy debater at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. In 1988, he and his partner reached the final round of the national championship. And the new SAT is designed to test the skills students learn from participating in competitive high school policy debate.

In a *Washington Post* overview of the changes, the connections between the new SAT and policy debate are clear:

Overview of Test Changes (<i>Washington Post</i>)		Our Analysis
Current SAT	Redesigned SAT	Debate's Role
Reading and writing sections do not require students to cite evidence. Students select answers to demonstrate their understanding of texts but are not asked to support their answers.	Evidence-based reading and writing. Students will support answers with evidence, including questions that require them to cite a specific part of a passage to support their answer choice.	Debate is evidence-based. Students learn to research, analyze, synthesize, compare, apply, discuss, and defend evidence in a time-pressured, competitive environment.
Source documents do not represent a wide range of academic disciplines. While many different types of text might appear on any SAT, there is no requirement that students encounter scientific or historical sources.	Source documents originate from a wide range of academic disciplines. On every SAT, students will encounter source texts from science, history, and social studies, analyzing them the way they would in those classes.	Debate is interdisciplinary. Students learn to research and analyze advanced scholarly writing from a wide range of subjects including social studies, history, economics, philosophy, and science.
Vocabulary focused on words that are sometimes obscure and not widely used in college and career. These words, while interesting and useful in specific instances, often lack broad utility in varied disciplines and contexts.	Vocabulary focused on words that are widely used in college and career. The exam will focus on words such as synthesis and empirical, whose specific meaning depends on the context.	Debate requires college-level vocabulary. Students are challenged to rigorously engage with difficult source materials, boosting their applied vocabulary and improving their critical reading skills.
The essay measures students' ability to construct an argument based on their background and experiences. Since students are not given source material, there is no way to verify the accuracy of their argument or examples.	The essay measures students' ability to analyze evidence and explain how an author builds an argument to persuade an audience. Responses will be evaluated based on the strength of the analysis as well as the coherence of the writing.	Debate requires the marshaling of evidence. Students must research and present arguments from subject area experts. Instead of relying on personal beliefs, debaters must justify their positions by summarizing and defending their research against opponents' attacks.

More than anything, preparation for the new SAT requires students to develop evidence-based reasoning skills. There is no better way to do so than to participate in high school policy debate.