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I took that new SAT, and my old brain is beat

Reporter tries tougher test with added essay

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High school students across the country nervously sharpened their No. 2 pencils and opened their test booklets Saturday morning to take the new, more difficult SAT.

What's changed?

Harder math problems. No more analogies. And most dreaded of all: A new writing section that includes a 25-minute persuasive essay.

"Some people are so psyched out about it," said Ann Murphy, a guidance counselor at Charlotte Country Day school.

Dozens of teenagers in sweat pants, clutching their scientific calculators, lined up at 7:45 a.m. in a hallway at Charlotte's Garinger High School, waiting to be assigned a testing room.

Among their ranks was a 33-year-old journalist who did pretty well when he took the test 15 years ago, but can't remember what absolute value or functional notation are all about.

On the other hand, I hoped to kick butt on the essay.

That's the part that's been driving students crazy, Murphy said, because until Saturday, no one knew what to expect.

Murphy was a trustee of the College Board, which publishes the SAT, when it decided in 2002 to add a writing section.

Colleges were complaining, she said, that students were coming out of high school with poor writing skills.

So Saturday morning, the ritual that generations of high schoolers have feared as much as finding a date to the prom got its biggest makeover in decades.

Here's the most important thing you need to know about the new SAT: 1,600 is no longer the mark of perfection.

With the new writing section, which counts for another 800 points, scores go up to 2,400. And generations of valedictorians with 1,400s and 1,500s now look like total failures.

Scoring is a big deal with the new essay. Two test graders will look at it and give it a score of 1 through 6 (6 being the best). They won't know what the other thought of it.

To demonstrate the possible flaws, the Princeton Review, which offers SAT prep courses, used the College Board standards to grade essays by Ernest Hemingway and William Shakespeare. Hemingway scored a 3. The Bard got a 2. So if I tank, I know my excuse: I was writing in iambic pentameter.

I struggled badly in the math section. There are a lot of geometric equations, and a lot of tough formulas, where if x is this and y is that and z is the square root of one of those cool new Mustangs, you've got to figure out how much fuel q would have left after driving the radius of Nashville or something like that.

I'm sure an architect or an accountant would have had no problem. Me, I write for a living.

On the verbal section, though (which they now call "critical reading"), I sailed through, having no problem with words like "perspicacious" and "potentate." (Thankfully, I didn't have to spell them -- I only had to know what they meant in a sentence.)

With breaks, the test takes close to five hours. After we finished, my proctor asked students who had taken it before what they thought of the new version. They all had the same reply: "Longer."

The stress and importance are the same, though. Saturday was 11th-grader Cory Gordon's third time taking the SAT. His scores got better from the first time to the second. But he really wants to go to N.C. State, so he's going to keep trying until his scores will wow the admissions office.

There are 10 sections altogether, more than 200 questions. And of course, there's the essay.

You get a "prompt," as it's called, telling you what to write about. This one started with a quote from James A. Reed (who I now know from Google was a U.S. senator in the early 20th century):

"The majority grinned and jeered when Columbus said the world was round. The majority threw him into a dungeon for having discovered a new world."

Reed said majority rule was bad. The prompt asked us to agree or disagree with him, using examples and reasoning from our own learning and experiences.

You've got 25 minutes.

Whaaa?

The students around me seemed to know what to do. They thought about the question. They outlined. I heard them start scribbling their answers into the test booklet in longhand while I was still trying to figure out if I agreed with this Reed guy.

Lynique Clark, an 11th-grader at Charlotte's Phillip O. Berry Academy, said she liked the topic and argued against majority rule.

One of her examples: Let a class of students decide whether they want to take a test today or tomorrow. What if the majority didn't study and puts it off? That's not fair to those who did.

I wound up sort of splitting the difference -- probably not the smartest approach to a persuasive essay. I agreed that majority rule is risky. In the United States, the majority has done things such as protect slavery, slaughter Native Americans and deny civil rights.

But as a system of government, democracy's the best alternative, I said. As long as the rights of minorities are protected (and I drew on my own experiences there to make a pitch for freedom of speech and the press), majorities can learn and change.

After all, going back to Reed's example, Columbus prevailed.

The world is round.

That's geometry, but I'm pretty sure I'm right on that one.

Scott's Scores

Scott should get his scores in about a month. He promises to report them to readers, even if they're embarrassing.