

25-MINUTE ESSAY STRATEGIES

The 25-minute essay is always the first section of the SAT and counts as one third of your writing score. The topics are meant to be broad, philosophical questions that are relevant to a wide range of interests and prior knowledge. Your essay will be read by two readers, each of whom will assign it a score from 1 to 6. The two scores will then be added together to create your combined score (2 to 12). If the readers' scores differ by more than one point, the essay will go to the scoring director for evaluation. Essays will only receive a score of zero if they are completely off-topic or written in pen.

The readers will evaluate both your ability to structure a strong, convincing argument and your skilful use of language. Ask yourself: does my essay show *clarity* and *development*? Are my *reasoning*, *structure*, and *examples* as strong as possible? Grammar errors will detract from your score. Illegible handwriting may jeopardize the reader's ability to understand your argument. Readers are not supposed to penalize shorter essays, but top-scoring essays generally fill the space given. The readers will only read these two lined pages; don't write part of your essay elsewhere.

Basics

- Budget your time. Plan to spend a few minutes structuring your essay, and save a few minutes at the end to edit. Don't spend too long on one paragraph.
 - Write **legibly in pencil**. Use cursive or print, whichever is neater.
 - Don't skip lines. Using neat, medium-sized writing, fill up the entirety of the two lined pages. Use the other parts of your student response sheet for your outline and notes.
 - Indent. Make sure it is clear where a new paragraph begins.
 - Don't regurgitate. Avoid repeating the prompt in your introduction. This wastes valuable space.
 - Don't make sentences more complicated than they have to be. Complex ideas are best conveyed by **clear, simple** sentences.
 - ~~In addition, in conclusion~~. Avoid obvious transitional words and phrases.
 - ~~Stuff, thing~~. Use **sophisticated, precise vocabulary** instead of vague words and phrases. Use—but don't misuse!—your SAT vocabulary.
 - Approach the essay as an academic paper. Use traditional essay-writing conventions and formal diction. Don't use overly colloquial words or phrasing.
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Structure

You do not need to follow any set structure, but a 4-paragraph essay works well for most students. Two examples are recommended. However, you can sometimes divide a complex example into two components if you have an exceptional amount of detailed evidence.

1. Introduction

- Use clear, eloquent language to introduce your **thesis**.
- Get to the point quickly. A “funnel” structure (moving from broad to specific background information) is unnecessary in such a short essay format.
- Your thesis should state both *whether* you agree or disagree with the prompt and *why*. Think of your examples as you come up with your thesis.
- Briefly introduce your **examples** and explain how they support your position.

2. Body Paragraph 1

- Begin with a **topic sentence** introducing your main point and first example.
- In 2-3 sentences, **explain** your example with specific and relevant details.
- In 2-3 sentences, **analyze** how your example supports your main point. Your specific, detailed explanation should serve as evidence for any claims you make.
- End with a **concluding sentence** summarizing your main point and connecting it back to your thesis.

3. Body Paragraph 2

- Use a short sentence or clause to **transition** effectively from your first example to your second. Avoid obvious transitions (“secondly,” “in addition”).
- Follow the same structure as Body Paragraph 1.
- Demonstrate how your second example is **distinct** from but **connected** to your first.

4. Conclusion

- Summarize your examples, your argument, and your thesis.
- Stay on topic. Don’t introduce new material, “funnel” outwards, or conclude with an overly general statement.

Examples

The hierarchy of sources:

- Ideal: literary works by well-respected authors (including Canadians!), noncontroversial and specific historical or contemporary events, technological innovations and inventors, examples from philosophy, art history, and music history
- Questionable: personal examples. These tend to be less interesting, detailed, and objective than examples external to your personal life.
- Bad: obviously overused literary classics, historical events or figures that are common knowledge or controversial, common or insignificant personal examples
- Avoid like the plague: Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, pop culture in general

Because the essay prompts deal with such general themes, you can draw from a wide variety of subject material to support your argument. Don’t waste time thinking up examples *during* your exam— prepare a **bank of examples** beforehand so you will always have concrete, detailed evidence to draw from.

- Prepare 6-10 examples total, chosen from a variety of sources (literature, history, current events).

- Demonstrate **depth of knowledge**: know your examples inside and out! For literature, know the author, characters, plot, context, themes, significance, and relevant literary terminology. For history and current events, know key individuals, terminology, dates, statistics, and impact on other individuals and events.
- To ensure that you have mastered each of your examples, practice writing 2-3 sentence summaries. Practice using sophisticated vocabulary (SAT-caliber words) as you write.
- Make sure your examples cover a **variety of themes** (see list below). The strongest examples can be applied to multiple themes and prompts.
- Include at least 2 examples that can be applied to a question that asks about the **world today**. Note that you can manipulate literary and/or historical examples to serve this purpose, but make sure you do so convincingly.
- Test your examples. Look through the list of 20 sample prompts provided and make sure you can use some combination of two examples from your bank to respond to each and every prompt.

As you develop your bank of examples, think about how you would apply your examples to the following themes. You should be able to discuss each theme using at least two examples. If you are short examples for a specific theme, do some more research!

Themes

- self-knowledge and growth
- individual choice
- happiness and money
- memories, learning from the past
- rules vs. freedom
- truth vs. lies
- practical knowledge vs. theoretical knowledge
- the individual vs. society/authority
- cooperation vs. competition
- success vs. failure
- technology and progress
- creativity and progress
- the role of the media, government, schools