



# The Ivy Education Center

LEAGUE

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## SAT Essay Prompts (March 2005 - June 2006 )

### June 2006

#### *Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

We measure our progress as a civilization by what we see as advances in technology, which seem more significant than such concerns as education and the condition of the natural world. Still, I would prefer to be a part of a community that judged itself on the happiness of its members rather than on the development of new technology.

Adapted from Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*.

#### Assignment:

Does a strong commitment to technological progress cause a society to neglect other values, such as education and the protection of the environment? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

#### *Prompt 2*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

People are often told to obey the rules. In reality, these rules are not permanent: what is right

at a given point in time may be declared wrong at another time and vice versa. The world changes so rapidly that rules are out-of-date almost as soon as they are created. People cannot rely on established guidelines to determine what they should and should not do.

Adapted from Gregory D. Foster, "Ethics: Time to Revisit the Basics."

Assignment:

Are established rules too limited to guide people in real-life situations? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

*Prompt 3*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

I suspect that like many people who watch their diet, exercise regularly, and check the weather report before leaving the house, I am a little too concerned with controlling what can't be fully controlled. I know I am doing the sensible thing. But I sometimes think that the more reckless among us may have something to teach the rest of us about freedom. Perhaps there is something good about taking chances against our better judgments.

Adapted from Melvin Konner , "Why the Reckless Survive."

Assignment:

Is it sometimes better to take risks than to follow a more reasonable course of action? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

*Prompt 4*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

It is rare to find an objective and independent viewpoint on style, literature, politics, or any other matter. Many people's opinions are formed through their associations with others. It is our nature to conform; conformity is a force that few can successfully resist. We give in to the

human instinct to go along with the crowd and to have its approval.

Adapted from Mark Twain, "Corn-pone Opinions."

Assignment:

Do we tend to accept the opinions of others instead of developing our own independent ideas? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

**May 2006**

*Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. Some people claim that each individual is solely responsible for what happens to him or her. But the claim that we ought to take absolute responsibility for the kinds of people we are and the kinds of lives we lead suggests that we have complete control over our lives. We do not. The circumstances of our lives can make it more or less impossible to make certain kinds of choices.

Adapted from Gordon D. Marino, "I Think You Should Be Responsible; Me, I'm Not So Sure"

Assignment:

Are we free to make our own decisions or are we limited in the choices we can make? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

*Prompt 2*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

Certainly anyone who insists on condemning all lies should think about what would happen if we could reliably tell when our family, friends, colleagues, and government leaders were deceiving us. It is tempting to think that the world would become a better place without the

deceptions that seem to interfere with our attempts are genuine communication. On the other hand, perhaps there is such a thing as too much honesty.

Adapted from Allison Kornet, “The Truth About Lying”

Assignment:

Would the world be a better place if everyone always told the complete truth? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

*Prompt 3*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. It is not that people dislike being part of a community; it is just that they care about their individual freedoms more. People value neighborliness and social interaction until being part of a group requires them to limit their freedom for the larger good of the group. But a community or group cannot function effectively unless people are willing to set aside their personal interests.

Adapted from Warren Johnson, *The Future Is Not What It Used To Be*

Assignment:

Does the success of a community – whether it is a class, a team, a family, a nation, or any other group – depend upon people’s willingness to limit their personal interests? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

*Prompt 4*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. There is an old saying: “A person with one watch knows what time it is; a person with two watches isn’t so sure.” In other words, a person who looks at an object or event from two different angles sees something different from each position. Moreover, two or more people looking at the same thing may each perceive something different. In other words, truth, like beauty, may lie in the eye of the beholder.

Adapted from Gregory D. Foster, “Ethics: Time to Revisit the Basics”

Assignment:

Does the truth change depending on how people look at things? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

**March 2006**

*Prompt 1*

Inconsistency is commonly thought to be an undesirable personality trait, and inconsistent people are viewed as indecisive and weak willed. On the other hand, firm commitment to an idea or plan of action is associated with personal and intellectual strength, stability, and honesty. Thus, once we have made a choice or taken a stand, it is best not to change.

Adapted from Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: How and Why People Agree to Things*

Assignment:

Is it best not to change our ideas, opinions, or behaviors? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 2*

A teenager challenges everything and , by forming habits of intellectual and emotional independence, makes himself or herself into an adult. In a similar way, all people can learn the behaviors that they need to become the people they want to be. We can all change ourselves – our behaviors, our goals, our relationships – because our potential for change is unlimited.

Adapted from Richard Stiller, *Habits*

Assignment:

Is our ability to change ourselves unlimited, or are there limits on our ability to make important changes in our lives? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of

view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 3*

It is widely believed that people do their best work when they are promised rewards for their achievements. Our schools and workplaces operate on the assumption that good work occurs when people are competing for grades, money, or recognition from others. In truth, the prospect of rewards provided by others can inhibit and limit people's drive and creativity. People do their best work when motivated from within by their enjoyment of a particular challenge and their satisfaction in doing something well.

Assignment:

What do you think motivates people to do their best? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 4*

Young people should have the right to control and direct their own learning ---- that is, to decide what they want to learn, when, and where. If we take from someone his or her right to decide what to be curious about, we destroy that person's freedom of thought. We say, in effect, "you must think about what interests and concerns us, not you."

Adapted from John Holt, "The Right to Control One's Learning"

Assignment:

Should each individual decide what and how to learn? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

**January 2006**

1. Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

A colleague of the great scientist James Watson remarked that Watson was always “lounging around, arguing about problems instead of doing experiments.” He concluded that “there is more than one way of doing good science.” It was Watson’s form of idleness, the scientist went on to say, that allowed him to solve “the greatest of all biological problems: the discovery of the structure of DNA.” It is a point worth remembering in a society overly concerned with efficiency.

Adapted from John C. Polanyi, “understanding Discovery”

Assignment:

Do people accomplish more when they are allowed to do things in their own way?

2. Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below.

I do not feel terrible about my mistakes, though I grieve the pain they have sometimes caused others. Our lives are “experiments with truth,” and in an experiment negative results are at least as important as successes. I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made.

Adapted from Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

Assignment:

Is it necessary to make mistakes, even when doing so has negative consequences for other people?

3. Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and assignment below

An actor, when his cue came, was unable to move onto the stage. He said, “I can’t get in, the chair is in the way.” And the producer said, “use the difficulty. If it’s a drama, pick the chair up and smash it. If it’s a comedy fall over it.” From this experience the actor concluded that in any situation in life that is negative, there is something positive you can do with it.

Adapted from Lawrence Eisenberg, "Caine Scrutiny"

Assignment:

Can any obstacle or disadvantage be turned into something good?

4. Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and assignment below

Every important discovery results from patience, perseverance, and concentration—sometimes continuing for months or years--on one specific subject. A person who wants to discover a new truth must remain absorbed by that one subject, must pay no attention to any thought that is unrelated to the problem.

Adapted from Santiago Ramon Cajal, Advice for a Young Investigator

Assignment:

Are all important discoveries the result of focusing on one subject?

**December 2005**

*Prompt 1*

We like to think that if someone has "the right stuff," he or she will naturally rise to the top. But it isn't true. In that some way that acting talent doesn't guarantee stardom, the capacity for leadership doesn't guarantee that one will run a corporation or a government. In fact, at least in our time, genuine achievement is not highly valued, and those who are skilled at achieving greatness are not necessarily those who are ready to lead.

Adapted from Warren Bennis, On Becoming a Leader

Assignment:

Are leaders necessarily people who are most capable of leadership? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 2*

How valuable is history for our generation? On the surface this question is not as easy as it once might have been, for there is a widespread belief that history may no longer be relevant to modern life. We live, after all, in an age that appears very different from the world that came before us.

Adapted from Stephen Vaughn, “History: Is it Relevant?”

Assignment:

Is knowledge of the past no longer useful for us today? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 3*

The free expression of thoughts and opinions is one of humanity’s most precious rights. Every citizen must be able to speak, write, and publish freely, provided that he or she is held accountable for the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by the law.

Adapted from Thomas Paine, Rights of Man

Assignment:

Is it necessary to limit or put restrictions on freedom of thought and expression? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 4*

Progress is likely to slow down once science and technology have met our basic human needs. New developments in science and technology will not continue to produce more societal benefits. In fact, the promise that science and technology will continue to benefit us is increasingly doubtful when so many individuals find their lives changing in ways they cannot control and in directions they do not desire.

Adapted from Daniel Sarewitz, “Social Change and Science Policy”

Assignment:

Do the benefits of scientific and technological developments come at the cost of undesirable changes to people's lives? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

## **November 2005**

### *Prompt 1*

Beauty is not a quality in people or in objects themselves. It exists in the mind that perceives those objects, and each mind perceives beauty differently. To seek real beauty, in some absolute sense, is pointless. Where one person sees beauty, another may even see the opposite. For this reason, we all ought to accept our own perceptions of who or what is beautiful, and not be influenced by the perceptions of others.

Adapted from David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste"

### Assignment:

Should our perceptions of beauty be influenced by the perceptions of beauty of other people? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

### *Prompt 2*

There are situations where flattery is mandatory: The bride is always beautiful. If we look at someone's artwork, we are obliged to say something complimentary to the artist. If we visit someone with a new baby, we are required to say the infant is cute. In such situations, to say nothing is interpreted as rudeness. We compliment each other because we understand that flattery makes life run smoothly.

Adapted from Richard Stengel, *You're Too Kind: A brief History of Flattery*

### Assignment:

Is praising others, even if the praise is excessive or undeserved, a necessary part of life? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your

position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 3*

Conflict is not necessarily bad, and it does not necessarily indicate a failed interaction. It is a signal, a message that says, “Things aren’t working around here. We’ve got to do something different.” Thus, conflict can be a catalyst—a motivating force—encouraging people to interact and communicate in ways that are more satisfying. Conflict can actually benefit people by pushing them to make necessary changes.

Adapted from Beverly Potter, *From Conflict to Cooperation*

Assignment:

Is conflict helpful? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 4*

What explains our increasing obsession with money and the things it can buy? It seems as though the acquisition of money is gradually replacing real measures of success, such as integrity, honesty, skill, and hard work.

Adapted from Alan Durning, “Limiting Consumption: Toward a Sustainable Culture”.

Assignment:

Has the acquisition of money and possessions replaced more meaningful ways of measuring our achievements? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

**October 2005**

*Prompt 1*

1. Success in life is largely a matter of luck. It has little correlation with merit, and in all

fields of life there have always been people of great merit who did not succeed.

Adapted from Karl Popper, Popper Selections

2. As Colin Powell said, "There are no secrets to success. Don't waste time looking for them. Success is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure."

Adapted from Barry Farber, "Selling Points"

Assignment: Is success in life earned or do people succeed because they are lucky?

*Prompt 2*

1. Celebrities have the power to attract "communities" of like-minded followers; they provide an identity that people can connect to and call their own. Celebrities are trusted; they stand for certain ideas and values to which followers can express allegiance.

Adapted from William Greider, Who Will Tell the People?

2. Admiration for celebrities is often accompanied by contempt for "average" people. As we focus on the famous, other people become less important to us. The world becomes populated with a few "somebodies" and an excess of "near-nobodies."

Adapted from Norman Solomon and Jeff Cohen, Wizards of Media Oz

Assignment:

Is society's admiration for famous people beneficial or harmful?

*Prompt 3*

This is a time for shallowness. Seriousness is so rare these days that we tend to make all kinds of allowances for those who only seem to possess it. In this way, shallow ideas are not recognized for what they are, and they are increasingly mistaken for deep thoughts.

Adapted from Margaret Talbot, "The Perfectionist"

Assignment:

Do we live in a time when people do not engage in serious thinking?

**June 2005**

*Prompt 1*

The media not only transmit information and culture, they also decide what information is important. In that way, they help to shape culture and values.

Adapted from Alison Bernstein, "Artists Thrive on Freedom and Freedom Thrives on the Arts"

Assignment:

Do newspapers, magazines, television, radio, movies, the Internet, and other media determine what is important to most people?

*Prompt 2*

Many persons believe that to move up the ladder of success and achievement, they must forget the past, repress it, and relinquish it. But others have just the opposite view. They see old memories as a chance to reckon with the past and integrate past and present.

Adapted from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, "I've known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation"

Assignment:

Do memories hinder or help people in their effort to learn from the past and succeed in the present?

*Prompt 3*

I cannot comprehend those who emphasize or recognize only what is useful. I am convinced that learning for learning's sake is no longer considered desirable, that everything we do and think must be directed toward the solution to a practical problem. More and more we seem to try to teach how to make a good living and not how to live a good life.

Adapted from Philip D Jordan, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge"

Assignment:

Do people put too much emphasis on learning practical skills?

*Prompt 4*

Most of our schools are not facing up to their responsibilities. We must begin to ask ourselves whether educators should help students address the critical moral choices and social issues of our time. Schools have responsibilities beyond training people for jobs and getting students into college.

Adapted from Svi Shapiro

Assignment:

Should schools help students understand moral choices and social issues?

**May 2005**

*Prompt 1*

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Karl Popper, Popper Selections

2. As Colin Powell said, "There are no secrets to success. Don't waste time looking for them. Success is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure."

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*Prompt 2*

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Adapted from Margaret Talbot, “The Perfectionist.”

Assignment:

Do we live in a time when people do not engage in serious thinking? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observation.

*Prompt 4*

Nowadays nothing is private: our culture has become too confessional and self-expressive. People think that to hide one's thoughts or feelings is to pretend not to have those thoughts or feelings. They assume that honesty requires one to express every inclination and impulse.

Adapted from J. David Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame."

Assignment:

Should people make more of an effort to keep some things private? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

**March 2005**

*Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below:

We must seriously question the idea of majority rule. The majority grinned and jeered when Columbus said that the world is round. The majority threw him into a dungeon for his discoveries. Where is the logic in the notion that the opinion held by a majority of people should have the power to influence our decisions?

Adapted from James A. Reed, "Majority Rule"

Assignment:

Is the opinion of the majority - in government or in any other circumstances - a poor guide? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations.

*Prompt 2*

Given the importance of human creativity, one would think it should have a high priority among our concerns. But if we look at the reality, we see a different picture. Basic scientific research is minimized in favor of immediate practical applications. The arts are increasingly seen as dispensable luxuries. Yet as competition heats up around the globe, exactly the

opposite strategy is needed.

Adapted from Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Creativity: Flow and Psychology of Discovery and Invention*

Assignment:

Is creativity needed more than ever in the world today?

*Prompt 3*

Even scientists know that absolute objectivity has yet to be attained. It is the same for absolute truth. But, as many news reporters have observed, the idea of objectivity as a guiding principle is too valuable to be abandoned. Without it, the pursuit of knowledge is hopelessly lost.

Adapted from "Focusing Our Values," Nieman Reports

Assignment:

Are people better at making observations, discoveries, and decisions if they remain neutral and impartial?

*Prompt 4*

If you think that what you do is your own business, you are wrong. In this world your conduct affects not only you but the conduct of other people as well. If you behave in a way that is considered unacceptable and other people copy your behavior, you are responsible for the consequences.

Adapted from Margaret Banning, "Letter to Susan"

Assignment:

Is a person responsible, through the example he or she sets, for the behavior of other people?