



# The Ivy Education Center

LEAGUE

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## SAT Essay Prompts (October 2011 - June 2012 )

### June 2012

#### *Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. We would like to think that progress causes problems to be solved completely, and sometimes that happens. For example, some diseases that once posed a serious threat are no longer a problem, thanks to modern medicine. Some problems can be solved, and they go away. But as often as not, problems exist in a chain of cause and effect: for each problem solved, a new one develops.

Adapted from Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*

#### Assignment:

Does progress reduce the number of problems in the world, or does solving old problems just lead to new ones? 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. Too often, people fail to solve problems because they focus only on the problems, thinking that if they study a problem, it will eventually suggest its own solution. Instead, they should remember their past successes and retrace their steps by analyzing what they did or did not do in similar situations in the past. It is often said that there is no formula for success, but if people would only focus on repeating the specific actions that worked for them before, they would surely succeed again.

Assignment:

Are people likely to succeed by repeating actions that worked for them in the past? 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. The word "uncompromising" is often used as a compliment, especially when it describes someone who is completely dedicated to certain principles and values. Uncompromising people have indeed recorded great achievements. But being uncompromising is not always a virtue. People who are uncompromising tend not to consider other people's views, seeing themselves as right and everyone else as wrong. All in all, it is better to be flexible and make compromises.

Assignment:

Are people more likely to achieve their goals by being flexible or by refusing to compromise? 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.

Most people try to be fair to others and respect their opinions. It is sometimes difficult, however, to be open to and accepting of all opinions, especially when the people expressing them are obviously uninformed or mean-spirited. It is more important to point out to others what they are doing and saying wrong than to try to tolerate every opinion.

Assignment:

Should people respect and tolerate everyone's opinions, or should people take a stand against opinions they consider to be wrong? 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 2012**

*Prompt 1*

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

People talk too much about their feelings. They share their deepest secrets and innermost thoughts on television talk shows. They write revealing autobiographies. They buy books that advise them to tell others about their feelings. We would be far better off if we followed the advice of Florence Nightingale, a pioneer in the field of nursing, who thought that people too often waste their feelings by talking about them and should instead turn their feelings into actions that bring results.

Assignment:

Is it better for people to act on their feelings than to talk about them? 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. As

people become more knowledgeable and experienced, they eventually realize that complete equity and justice—whether in politics, in education, or in day-to-day events—will never really be achieved. Even so, they are encouraged to continue to hope for and fight for fairness. But shouldn't people put their energies to better use? There will always be unfairness in life, and becoming an adult means finding ways to make the best of this fact.

Assignment:

Should people accept unfairness and find ways to make the best of it? 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. No amount of wealth can help humanity move forward and make progress, even under the management of the most dedicated and socially conscious workers. Money leads only to selfishness and becomes an irresistible temptation to its owners to abuse it. The only thing that can lead people to praiseworthy ideas and noble deeds is to follow the example of those great individuals who put other factors before money.

Adapted from Albert Einstein in Alice Calaprice, *The New Quotable Einstein*

Assignment:

Does money lead to selfishness? 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. Advertisements provide information about available products and services. Many people argue, however, that something else is going on: advertisements try to convince people that when they

buy things, they are also buying satisfaction and happiness. Advertisements merely fool people into believing that the next "new and improved" product will make their lives better, and the result is that people are even more unhappy and dissatisfied than they would have been without the advertisements.

**Assignment:**

Do advertisements contribute to unhappiness and dissatisfaction? 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 2012**

*Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. Mistakes we have made in the past are supposed to make us wiser, stronger, and better able to deal with the future. This approach suggests that we should continue to focus on our mistakes, that we should remember them, no matter how painful or embarrassing to us they may be. But nothing is to be gained by concerning ourselves with old mistakes. We should forget them as soon as possible.

**Assignment:**

Is it best to forget about past mistakes as soon as possible? 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. We all have "authorities"—experts and specialists, from authors to doctors to politicians—who seem to dictate our lives and determine our futures. In the best of circumstances, these authorities can make us feel safe. They make our decisions for us. They look out for our interests. Or so we

hope. But not everyone we consider an authority is deserving of our trust.

Adapted from Douglas Rushkoff, *Coercion: Why We Listen to What "They" Say*

**Assignment:**

Do people put too much trust in the guidance of experts and authorities? 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. The word "tradition" seems innocent enough; we associate it with holiday observations and customs practiced by our ancestors. But tradition, or at least the belief in it, is a trap. At every level, from the individual to the national, tradition is simply an excuse for doing things the way they have always been done, even if that way makes no sense or causes harm to others.

**Assignment:**

Does tradition prevent people from doing things in new or more sensible ways? 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.

**January 2012**

*Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. Most people tend to trust others too readily. To avoid being taken advantage of, however, it is generally wise to be doubtful and suspicious of others' motives or honesty. Many people would agree that if you find yourself doubting other people's sincerity or questioning their intentions, your instincts are probably correct. You are less likely to regret being cautious than being too

trusting.

**Assignment:**

Is it wise to be suspicious of the motives or honesty of other people, even those who appear to be trustworthy? 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 who complain about progress and change expose themselves to criticism. Yet there is always a subtle danger in life's improvements and refinements, a drawback or disadvantage that occurs along with the benefits of progress. It sometimes seems that we devote half of our time to making what we call "improvements"—in our lives, our work, our relationships—but so often the original conditions had some quality that is lost in the process of change.

Adapted from E.B. White, "Progress and Change"

**Assignment:**

Does improvement or progress usually involve a significant drawback or problem of some kind? 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. Learning and doing are their own rewards. No external rewards are required. Yet when external rewards are introduced—whether attention and praise from parents or prizes from teachers—these rewards exert a substantial influence. Instead of reading books to find out about the world, kids will read to win prizes. Kids will produce for rewards, but the quality of their activity and their interest in it will be dramatically altered.

Adapted from Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living*

**Assignment:**

Is it wrong or harmful to motivate people to learn or achieve something by offering them rewards? 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. We almost always tend to treat people on the basis of what they have done: the star athlete is recognized and rewarded with a college scholarship, while the lawbreaker is prosecuted and punished. But our past deeds provide only a partial measure of our real worth as human beings. We should be treated according to what we are capable of accomplishing, regardless of what we may or may not have actually done.

**Assignment:**

Should people be treated according to what they are capable of achieving instead of what they have actually done? 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.

**December 2011**

*Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. The pressures to conform in a modern free society are not as drastic as they were in the past, when failure to conform meant imprisonment or worse. Such influences are, however, more dangerous because they are hard to detect. These are the pressures to live like our neighbors, to think like our community, to reshape ourselves in the image of someone else. The appeal of belonging to a

group is attractive, but doesn't such conformity destroy our individuality?

Adapted from Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn By Living*

**Assignment:** Is it always harmful for an individual to think and live as other people do? 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. Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." However, it is hard to believe that just a few people can make a significant difference. Given the many great challenges that the world faces, it seems impossible to change anything for the better unless one can attract a lot of people and spend a lot of money.

**Assignment:**

Can a small group of concerned individuals have a significant impact on the world? 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. We all know idealists—people who have goals that are noble but often impractical. We also know realists—people who limit their goals to achievements that they are likely to accomplish and who only make plans that are practical and manageable. While it is true that practical people often accomplish their individual goals, humanity as a whole has more to gain from the idealistic dreamers.

**Assignment:**

Do idealists contribute more to the world than realists do? 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. Experts seem to agree that people benefit from the increased number of choices available to them in modern society. For instance, if consumers can decide from among a hundred breakfast cereals or dozens of types of cell phones, they ought to be able to find the product that is best for them. But with so many choices available, people can never be sure they chose the right thing. They agonize over every choice.

Adapted from Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox*

**Assignment:**

Do people benefit more from having many choices or few choices? 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.

**November 2011**

*Prompt 1*

Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpt and the assignment below. It has been said that "All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." This statement suggests that people should do more than merely think about themselves and a few others, that they should feel responsible for issues and concerns that affect the larger society or community. But aren't most people already doing a lot more than "nothing" by taking responsibility for their own well-being and that of their families and friends?

**Assignment:**

Should individuals take responsibility for issues and problems that do not affect them directly?

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. All communities and groups have reliable rules of right and wrong in the form of laws, values, and social standards. It is therefore generally assumed that most people know the difference between right and wrong and that they usually know the right thing to do. This view is simplistic, however. People often find themselves in complex situations for which no rule provides adequate guidance and the right course of action is unclear.

**Assignment:**

Is it often difficult for people to determine what is the right thing to do? 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. When judging ourselves, we tend to consider our motives as well as our actions. If we mean to do something that will benefit others but our actions have hurtful consequences, we may feel that our good intentions are just as important as the effects of our actions. But we give our intentions too much credit. Actions can and should be judged on their own merits, regardless of what motivated someone to take them in the first place.

**Assignment:**

Are the consequences of people's actions more important than the motives behind the actions? 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 often observed that some sense of unease or dissatisfaction with oneself or one's circumstances, some self-criticism, is absolutely necessary for people to move forward and make any kind of progress or change. But optimism—a feeling of confidence that one's actions will be successful and will pay off in the future—is even more important. If people are not optimistic, what motivation will they have to change?

Adapted from Richard B. McKenzie, *The Paradox of Progress*

**Assignment:**

Are optimistic, confident people more likely than others to make changes in their 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 observations.

**October 2011**

*Prompt 1*

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

"Discipline" is a negative word for many people because it is associated with rigorous training, strict rules, and strong self-control. But we fail to realize that freedom comes only through discipline. Discipline compels us to sacrifice immediate rewards and pleasures, but it also gives our lives structure and prevents us from making costly mistakes. It keeps us from being subject to our impulses and weaknesses and thus frees us to achieve our true goals.

Assignment:

Do people need discipline to achieve freedom? 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.

We are often encouraged to stop worrying about making mistakes and advised not to dwell on those we have already made. But without analyzing mistakes—decisions and actions that made a project fail, for instance—how can anyone be successful? Besides, there are some well-known mistakes others have made that seem worth studying carefully. Perhaps these mistakes could have been prevented if those responsible had been more concerned about making mistakes in the first place.

**Assignment:**

Do people have to pay attention to mistakes in order to make progress? 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.

The making of illusions — misleading images or ideas that appear to be authentic or true — has become the primary business of our society. Included in this category are not only the false promises made by advertisers and politicians but all of the activities which supposedly inform, comfort, and improve us, such as the work of our best writers and our most influential leaders. These promises and activities only encourage people to have unrealistic expectations and to ignore facts.

Adapted from Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image*

**Assignment:**

Are people overly influenced by unrealistic claims and misleading images? 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.