

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE SAT IS YOUR STATE TEST?

Life at the Sentence Level: Teaching Students To Be Editors

John Emerson

One way to teach our students to be better writers is to teach them to be close readers, especially of the things they and their classmates write, and one way to teach them to be close readers is to teach them to be editors, to teach them to read the signals that switch us into editing mode—which I would suggest is a mode that we, as English teachers, are always in. It is one of the dispositions of our minds as we read and write.

Grammar, mechanics, and usage are actually the elements of sense (as well as elements of style) at fundamental levels, the sentence level and the sentence to sentence level (the coherence level). Students need to be fluent in the idiom of editing, essentially the idiom of grammar, so they need significant direct instruction with the terms and representative examples. Sheridan Baker's *The Complete Stylist* and Diana Hacker's *Rules for Writers* are largely concerned with writing on these levels, and both books play major roles in my efforts to teach students to be editors; I also use, among many other texts, Fowler and Aaron's *The Little, Brown Handbook*; the *MLA Handbook*; Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*; and *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*; but my primary resource for lessons is student writing itself.

I teach students to be editors not only as a way to improve and strengthen their knowledge of grammar, mechanics, and usage but as part of teaching them to be effective peer critics. It is a process, of course. Most of the elements, the signals, can be taught in the ninth and tenth grade years, but for students to internalize them fully and to be able to apply them effectively as objective spectators of their own and their classmates' writing takes time. Review has to be continuous right up through the senior year for many students, both through direct lessons and through review of student writing, which can in very original ways test the elements. Most seniors reach through their apprenticeship a kind of comprehensive success—they love to challenge the written word everywhere—and they head off to college often enough as near journeyman editors. Bottom line: I do not think we can teach students to be self-reliant writers unless we teach them to be editors, and in teaching them to be editors, they will gain more than simple correctness in their work. When students achieve precision, concision, consistency, and logic in their sentences, and therefore clarity, they often also achieve completeness, power, and eloquence.

When the SAT is or your state test, you have to ask yourself how or if what you do in the classroom has bearing on that test. You have to ask yourself, "What can I do in my classroom that will help students do well on the SAT but that will not just be test prep for the sake of test prep?" Well, I got lucky. This practice of teaching kids to be editors has direct application to the SAT: to 29 of 35 questions in section 6 and to all 14 questions in section 10 of the 2009 SAT; the numbers are the same for the 2008 SAT. But our kids also take the PSAT, both as tenth graders and as eleventh graders, and 34 of 39 questions in section 5 of the PSAT can be answered with editing skills. In their Writing sections, both exams actually ask students to think like editors; both exams essentially test editing.

The way I teach the skills, however, has changed a bit, and it was inspired in 2003 with a problem question on the 2002 SAT. The idea to immerse the students in the concepts because they are important in themselves evolved into the idea to immerse the students at the same time in the environment of the PSAT-SAT itself. Here it is: **THE SAT AND THE WRITING CLASSROOM SIDE BY SIDE.**

The Problem Question on the 2002 SAT.

10. Toni Morrison's genius enables her to create novels that arise from
A B
and express the injustice African Americans have endured. No error
C D E

THE SAT, 2002

10. Toni Morrison’s genius enables her to create
A
novels that arise from and express the injustice
B C
African Americans have endured. No error
D E

THE SAT, 2009

6/3. Nutritionists suggest that before deciding to drastically change your diet, a person should consult one’s physician.

(A) your diet, a person should consult one’s physician.
(B) your diet, you should consult your physician.
(C) one’s diet, you should consult your physician.
(D) their diet, people should consult his or her physician.
(E) their diet, consult a physician.

6/6. Once a popular form of entertainment in arcades, shops, and saloons across the United States, collectors prize coin-operated mechanical games as emblems of the nation’s past.

(A) collectors prize coin-operated mechanical games
(B) collectors who prize coin-operated mechanical games
(C) coin-operated mechanical games that are prized by collectors
(D) coin-operated mechanical games are prized by collectors
(E) coin-operated mechanical games, prized by collectors

STUDENT WRITING

1. In Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar,” he is talking about going across the line between life and death.
2. In Robert Browning’s poem “Prospice,” he envisions meeting death full on.
3. For George Gray’s part, he explains that he never felt the kind of sorrow or ambition which he extols because he was afraid.

1. If someone takes on too much you’ll just be working all the time.
2. Although neither character attempts to resolve their situation, they both show that without taking the chances you are at best left alone sipping “a manhattan—dry.”
3. I think that where ever a person grew up is very important to their life because in a lot of ways it shapes your character and personality

1. Following my philosophy, the speaker in this poem realizes that life has a limited timeframe and confronts it confidently and optimistically rather than avoiding a potentially hurtful confrontation.
2. When presenting these ideas, my true character will be shown.
3. While working in Honduras building the houses for the villagers, exhaustion starts to set in.
4. As a kindergartner, learning the piano was new and exciting.
5. When the time finally came for my audition, it was a disaster.

THE SAT, 2009

6/14. My sisters and I cherish memories of
 A B
spending hours outdoors as children,
 C
 climbing trees, building forts, digging holes
 in the dirt, and the search for bugs. No error
 D E

6/17. If you want to build a house, a book can tell you
 A
how to install drywall or run wiring, but they cannot
 B C
take the place of hands-on experience. No error
 D E

6/24. A great gray owl flying low across a forest
 A
 clearing, it's wings beating quietly and its ultrasensitive
 B
 ears tuned to the faint sounds made by small
 C
creatures concealed under leaves. No error
 D E

PSAT Practice Test 2008

5/1 To satisfy her high school's community service requirement, patients at a hospital were visited by Jan three afternoons a week.

(A) patients at a hospital were visited by Jan
 (B) Jan visited patients at a hospital
 (C) hospital patients were visited by Jan
 (D) Jan's visit to hospital patients was made
 (E) visits by Jan to patients at a hospital were

STUDENT WRITING

1. Because I have a core set of values I look out for my best interests, while at the same time looking out for the best interests of the people I love.

2. I feel that realism and photorealism take so much more discipline, skill, and training than other modes, such as impressionistic, abstract, or cubism.

3. The minutes bleed into hours, the tubs of vegetables shrink, and the wheat rolls are hard.

4. His methods are intended to incite passion in the audience and patriotism.

1. A person also needs to assert responsibility when attempting something where they are unsure of the outcome.

2. In this passage, Emerson is instructing the reader to accept their position in life.

3. Not a single boy at the establishment, besides Master Wackford, has been in contact with a family member since they became students.

1. Betraying the idea that one person can know the truth.

2. When the reader can see that Holden is truly a caring person who just never got the help he needed to deal with the loss of his brother.

3. Pearl feels that this letter symbolizes something bigger; this being the love that Hester and Dimmesdale share.

1. This was the usual way my sandwiches were made before a week was spent in Honduras

2. While comparing the poems many similarities are detected.

3. Parallelism is also seen frequently throughout the speech which has the same effect on the audience as charged words and rhetorical questions.

4. Irony is accomplished by her saying "Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites would have been less solicitous for their freedom from Egyptian slavery."

5/14 Early in her career, Diane Arbus photographed high-fashion models, however, she later found the subjects who were to make her famous—rebels and social outcasts

- (A) models, however, she later found
 - (B) models; however, she later found
 - (C) models, however, later finding
 - (D) models, but later, however, to find
 - (E) models, but, when she later found
-

1. I agree with this statement however I believe that love seeps deeper than simple attraction.
 2. He is not without fear, however he understands his calling and the importance that his internal battles will have on his integrity.
 3. Unlike Gray; however, Prufrock is a well-educated and philosophical man
-

The Question in Question

The following sentences test your knowledge of grammar, usage, diction (choice of words), and idiom. Some sentences are correct. No sentence contains more than one error. You will find that the error, if there is one, is underlined and lettered. Elements of the sentence that are not underlined will not be changed. In choosing answers, follow the requirements of standard written English. If there is an error, select the one underlined part that must be changed to make the sentence correct and fill in the corresponding oval on your answer sheet. If there is no error, fill in answer oval E.

10. Toni Morrison's genius enables her to create novels that arise from
A B
and express the injustice African Americans have endured. No error
C D E

NEW YORK -- The College Board has announced a score revision for the October 15, 2002, administration of the PSAT/NMSQT. A flawed question was identified on the writing skills section after scores were released. The question (#10) has been dropped from the test, and the test has been rescored.

Each Tuesday test-taker's original score (which included question 10) was compared with the new score (in which question 10 was dropped). The final score for each test-taker is the higher of the two scores. As a result, the writing skills scores of almost 500,000 test-takers will increase, most by only one or two points.

By the end of the second week of May, all Tuesday testing schools will have received the names of any students whose writing skills scores have been revised. This mailing will also include individual letters for students that will indicate their new writing skills scores.

A high school journalism teacher identified the item and reported it at the end of January. He argued that the correct answer was not the one specified in the reports sent to schools. During the course of development, the question received numerous internal reviews and then was reviewed by a number of external consultants. Following the teacher's challenge, Educational Testing Service, the company that creates questions for College Board tests, submitted the question to three outside experts for independent assessment.

Two of the three experts consulted indicated that the question had two possible answers, A and E, though they personally preferred the E option, the intended answer. The third expert more emphatically approved of E, while noting the possible second answer, A, is supported by more prescriptive grammarians. As one of the reviewers pointed out, the rule on which the teacher's challenge is based is presented as valid in a number of well-respected and widely used grammar and usage handbooks.

As noted above, the intended answer was E. The teacher argued that A is the correct response. The question is whether "Morrison's" can serve as the noun antecedent for the pronoun "her." Since "Morrison's" is a possessive, some experts asserted, it cannot properly be considered the referent. Others said the sentence is idiomatic English and that a possessive sometimes is used as a substitute for a noun. Therefore, the question is testing "usage" or descriptive grammar.

The decision has been made to rescore and re-equate the test without the problematic item. Adjusted scaled scores range from 20 to 80 and represent the same performance level regardless of whether a student took the Tuesday edition or the Saturday edition of the PSAT/NMSQT. (05/05/03)