Declining Test Scores

Since the test expanded to three sections in 2005, the mean scores for both the Critical Reading and the Writing Sections have declined annually. This steady decrease in performance has occurred in spite of (or, perhaps, partially because of) the hundreds of study guides that promise shortcuts to a perfect score.

Q: Why do SAT scores keep dropping?
A: Many causes have been suggested. Some of them (a broader range of test-takers; funding cuts) are beyond the control of educators. There are, however, many factors we can control that have contributed to declining scores:

Modernized Simplified Curricula: Schools are assigning progressively fewer 19th-Century novels, and are replacing “The Classics” with prose from newspapers, magazines, and weblogs. Increasingly, students are not exposed to difficult and unfamiliar sentence structures and vocabulary. This shift in educational priorities puts 21st-Century students at a disadvantage: standardized exams are testing students on formal skills they were never taught in the first place.

Test-Prep Methods Shortcuts: The globalization of “standardized testing” is changing the way we learn: usually, for the worse. Students worldwide are opting to spend their valuable time preparing for a test, as opposed to the alternative: learning. All statistical data point to a strong correlation between “test-tip secrets” and decreases in performance. This culture of “test-cracking” is unfortunate not only because it prevents children from learning, but also because it doesn’t work. The multimillion-dollar test-prep industry seems to be making our kids dumber.

Q: What kind of score increase can I expect?
A: That’s up to you. If you learn all the skills in this book, you should see a significant increase. Students who complete this textbook consistently exceed the 90th percentile, with several having achieved the 800-point plateau of a perfect score on the SAT Reading Section, or its equivalent on other standardized exams.

Q: How can I raise my score?
A: The best (and only) way to significantly raise one’s score is to get smarter. If there were a “magic formula” to raise test scores without putting in any effort, everyone would be doing it. Rather than trying to trick the test, it is quicker—and more effective—simply to learn the relevant skills that the College Board is testing for. This volume is designed to teach students the skills (not secrets) necessary to achieve a perfect score:

Approaches to Critical Reading: this volume uniquely breaks down the logical development of difficult passages, and teaches the skills necessary to evaluate structure and draw inferences. Students are taught not only to identify literary and rhetorical devices, but also to apply this knowledge and draw conclusions from it.

Vocabulary in Context: today, most students are learning “SAT-level vocabulary” by memorizing long lists that contain hundreds (or even thousands) of words. Yet memorization does not guarantee application: most students struggle to identify the proper word in context, and also to use the words properly in their own writing. This volume uniquely annotates over a thousand words in the context of famous writers like Shelley, Poe, Dickens, and London.

Setting Goals (optional): If you’ve taken the SAT before and are unsatisfied with your results, you may consider setting ambitious-but-realistic goals to motivate you:

Writing Target: _____ / 800
Critical Reading Target: _____ / 800
Mathematics Target: _____ / 800
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Meaning in Context

“Definition” or “Meaning in Context” questions will ask you which word or phrase is closest in meaning to another word or phrase from the passage. They are among the easier questions on standardized tests, often level “1” or “2” difficulty because they seldom require complex thought processes. They can be tricky, however, if you don’t know the meaning, or if you approach the problem the wrong way.

Warning: even if an answer choice is a “synonym” for the word in question, it is not necessarily the correct answer. Words can be denotatively synonymous but connotatively different; i.e., they might mean similar things in a different context, but not in the context of the passage.

Approach: In order to be nearest in meaning, the correct answer choice must

1. be able to replace the word in question. The way to solve these problems is to substitute the answer choices into the original sentence and see which is grammatically possible.

Sample Meaning in Context Passage

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones.1

1. The word “likeness” (line 2) most nearly means

   (A) agreement  
   (B) analogy  
   (C) correspondence  
   (D) picture  
   (E) harmony

2. In line 3, “fancies” is closest in meaning to

   (A) phantasms  
   (B) notions  
   (C) ostentations  
   (D) prophecies  
   (E) yearnings

Qualifications: note that we are not being asked which answer choice is exactly the same as the original word, but for the one that is closest in meaning, in this particular context.

Justification: to paraphrase, the speaker lets us know that he has never seen a picture, or photograph, of his parents. Accordingly, he has no idea what they looked like, and his first notions of their appearance came from the descriptions on their tombstones.

In question 1, the words “agreement,” “analogy,” “correspondence,” and “harmony” only relate to “likeness” in the sense of “similarity.” We can eliminate those answer choices because “similarities” cannot be “seen.” The word “likeness,” in this context, must refer to something visible.

In question 2, we can eliminate false synonyms such as “ostentations”: “ostentatious” (adj.) has a similar meaning to “fancy” (adj.), meaning “decorative,” but this is the wrong part of speech. Similarly, “phantasms,” “ostentations,” and “yearnings” cannot be derived from tombstones.

1From Charles Dickens, Great Expectations
The two passages below are followed by questions based on their content and on the relationship between the two passages. Answer the questions on the basis of what is stated or implied in the passages and in any introductory material that may be provided.

Questions 1-12 are based on the following passages.

The following excerpts offer accounts of two leading scholars of Semitic languages during the 1910's. Passage 1 discusses the work of William Robertson Smith, while Passage 2 discusses the work of George Barton.

**Passage 1**

The eleventh volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which appeared on June 8, 1880, contained Smith's article on "Hebrew Language and Literature," an unambitious and highly condensed summary of facts, such as might naturally be looked for in such a book. The etymology of the word "Hebrew," the connotation of the expression "Hebrew language," the relations of Hebrew to the Semitic group of languages in general, the area and history of Hebrew as a spoken language, are briefly discussed. The literary development of Hebrew is considered at greater length. It is pointed out that the earliest products of Hebrew authorship seem to have been lyrics and laws, which would circulate in the first instance from mouth to mouth. Something is said as to the earliest written collections of lyrics, and it is stated that the earliest date of written law-books is uncertain. As regards history, the story of the early fortunes of the nation often presents characteristics which point to oral tradition as the original source. And so forth. Finally, a somewhat detailed narrative relating to the cultivation of Hebrew as a dead language is given. Naturally the article covered to some extent the same ground as the article "Bible." But it was five years later, and quite five years more mature. The writer had learned a good deal in the interval, and had reached greater clearness on many historical points.

**Passage 2**

The Babylonian language—the name given to the Semitic speech of Babylonia and Assyria, spoken by Semites who in the third millennium B.C. began to displace the Sumerians as rulers—is now quite familiar to scholars so that the decipherment of a Babylonian text does not occasion much difficulty. The study of Sumerian, however, is of more recent date, and Professor Barton by his publication of the first volume of the Haverford collection of Cuneiform Tablets fourteen years ago is to be ranked among the pioneers of this study in this country. Each succeeding volume issued by him showed a surer touch in copying the intricate and often blurred as well as minute characters. Difficult as the copying of these texts is, requiring long and constant practice before accuracy can be attained, the real test of a scholar's ability comes with his interpretation. It is through such interpretation when successfully carried out that valuable contributions to knowledge are made. Only by extraordinary patience, combined with ingenuity which, however, must be kept within bounds so as to prevent vagaries and pure guesswork, can definite results be reached. Professor Barton in his Sumerian researches has fulfilled the necessary conditions. Many points in Sumerian grammar and in the readings of Sumerian signs have been clarified by him, and while he would be the last to claim that his translations of Sumerian texts are in all cases final—for he possesses the modesty and self-criticism which always go with the best scholarship—it may truthfully be said that he never discusses a difficult passage without making some contribution towards its clarification. In a field like Sumerian the adage dies diem docet becomes the motto of progress. Through the combined efforts of scholars, one advancing a step further by virtue of improving on the work done by another, is progress slowly and painfully achieved.

1. What best describes the purpose of each passage?

   (A) Passage 1 provides a brief overview of a topic, while Passage 2 contributes to a more comprehensive history.
   (B) Passage 1 characterizes a language as relatively straightforward, while Passage 2 suggests that this language is more complicated.
   (C) Passage 1 argues that a language is no longer spoken, while Passage 2 contends that the language is alive and vibrant.
   (D) Passage 1 provides a standard view on an issue, whereas Passage 2 offers a controversial rebuttal.
   (E) Passage 1 provides a synopsis of an article, whereas Passage 2 offers a tribute to a professor's work.

2. The word “unambitious” in Passage 1 (line 3) and the word “modesty” in Passage 2 (line 55) both suggest that

   (A) the researchers ought to have made greater efforts
   (B) the professors’ personalities are shy and withdrawn
   (C) future researchers will approach linguistics with greater ambition
   (D) ambition is irrelevant to the field of linguistics
   (E) the research is modest and unassuming in scope

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2 "dies diem docet" (Latin): "the day teaches the day," suggesting that one learns by experience
3. The description in lines 6-22 (“The etymology … is given”) indicates that it is a summary by using
   (A) an abbreviated counterargument
   (B) the passive voice
   (C) mild hyperbole
   (D) recurrent sentence fragments
   (E) hypothetical statements

4. In line 21, the word “cultivation” is part of
   (A) an implied agricultural metaphor to refer to the development of a language
   (B) a plea that a dead language must be revived
   (C) an extended analogy between linguistic research and farming
   (D) a parallel between a professor’s work and the language he studies
   (E) the irony that a dead language is being studied

5. In the context of Passage 1, “Naturally” (line 22) implies that
   (A) the article’s contents were fairly simple
   (B) Professor Smith’s writing style was not artificial
   (C) the Hebrews explained natural phenomena with religious myths
   (D) Nature was of great importance to the Hebrews
   (E) one would expect the two articles to contain similar material

6. What is the best way to express the relationship between “quite” in line 24 and “quite” in line 31?
   (A) the former means “barely” while the latter means “specifically”
   (B) the former means “almost” while the latter means “extremely”
   (C) the former means “altogether” while the latter means “widely”
   (D) in both cases, the word means “very nearly”
   (E) in both cases, the word means “in particular”

7. In line 33, “occasion” most nearly means
   (A) originate
   (B) persuade
   (C) evoke
   (D) occurrence
   (E) incident

8. In line 38, “succeeding” most nearly means
   (A) successful
   (B) popular
   (C) triumphant
   (D) consecutive
   (E) scholarly

9. In line 62, “virtue” most nearly means
   (A) chastity
   (B) excellence
   (C) means
   (D) luxury
   (E) rectitude

10. In line 48, “vagaries” most nearly means
    (A) speculation
    (B) vagueness
    (C) plagiarism
    (D) mischief
    (E) caprice

11. Lines 23-27 (“But it was … points”) in Passage 1 and lines 59-64 (“In a field … achieved”) in Passage 2 both agree that
    (A) a clear interpretation of Semitic languages was impossible before the 20th Century
    (B) the study of language makes tangible, albeit slow, progress over time
    (C) multiple scholars must work together to make progress in a field
    (D) Semitic languages will never be fully understood
    (E) writers inevitably demonstrate greater maturity and clarity as they grow older

12. The author of Passage 2 would most likely describe “the earliest products of Hebrew authorship” (line 12) from Passage 1 as
    (A) uncomplicated and easy to interpret
    (B) harder to explain than their Sumerian counterparts
    (C) biased and unobjective by contemporary standards
    (D) unsuitable for serious academic study
    (E) texts that require patient interpretation
Questions 13-20 are based on the following passage.

This excerpt was originally published by an American journalist in 1845.

The problem of Woman's position, or "sphere,"—of her duties, responsibilities, rights and immunities as Woman,—fitly attracts a large and still-increasing measure of attention from the thinkers and agitators of our time. The legislators, so called,—those who ultimately enact into statutes what the really governing class (to wit, the thinkers) have originated, matured and gradually commended to the popular comprehension and acceptance,—are not as yet much occupied with this problem, only fitfully worried and more or less consciously puzzled by it. More commonly they merely echo the mob's shallow retort to the petition of any strong-minded daughter or sister, who demands that she be allowed a voice in disposing of the money wrenched from her hard earnings by inexorable taxation, or in shaping the laws by which she is ruled, judged, and is liable to be sentenced to prison or to death, "It is a woman's business to obey her husband, keep his home tidy, and nourish and train his children." But when she rejoins to this, "Very true; but suppose I choose not to have a husband, or am not chosen for a wife—what then? I am still subject to your laws. Why am I not entitled, as a rational human being, to a voice in shaping them? I have physical needs, and must somehow earn a living. Why should I not be at liberty to earn it in any honest and useful calling?"—the mob's flout is hushed, and the legislator is struck dumb also. They were already at the end of their scanty resources of logic, and it would be cruel for woman to ask further: "Suppose me a wife, and my husband a drunken prodigal—what am I to do then? May I not earn food for my babes without being exposed to have it snatched from their mouths to replenish the rumseller's till, and aggravate my husband's madness? If some sympathizing relative sees fit to leave me a bequest wherewith to keep my little ones together, why may I not be legally enabled to secure this to their use and benefit? In short, why am I not regarded by the law as a soul, responsible for my acts to God and humanity, and not as a mere body, devoted to the unreasoning service of my husband?" The state gives no answer, and the champions of her policy evince wisdom in imitating her silence.

13. In the first sentence, the author places the word "sphere" in quotation marks to indicate that she
(A) is attempting to be as specific as possible
(B) disagrees with its restrictive connotations
(C) feels a sense of pride in her womanly duties
(D) cannot distinguish the word from "position"
(E) considers the word an appropriate moniker

14. In line 7, "to wit" is best replaced by which of the following phrases?
(A) in other words
(B) in the same category as
(C) in reality
(D) of particular cleverness
(E) for the sake of argument

15. Which of the following is nearest in meaning to "rejoins" (line 20)?
(A) returns
(B) reunites
(C) retorts
(D) agrees
(E) acknowledges

16. The word "flout" (line 27) is nearest in meaning to
(A) ridicule
(B) arrogance
(C) bluster
(D) violation
(E) shouting

17. The "scanty resources" (line 29) refer specifically to the legislators'
(A) skimpy contrivances
(B) narrow stratagems
(C) quick-wittedness
(D) limited capabilities
(E) stingy reserves

18. In line 31, the word "prodigal" most nearly means
(A) profligacy
(B) wastefulness
(C) imbecile
(D) spendthrift
(E) relative

19. The phrase "replenish the rumseller's till" (line 34) is best paraphrased as
(A) "restock the pantry"
(B) "spend at the liquor store"
(C) "boost the local economy"
(D) "support the family business"
(E) "waste on frivolous luxuries"

20. In line 41, "unreasoning" most nearly means
(A) incomprehensible
(B) unconscious
(C) prejudiced
(D) thoughtless
(E) unforeseen
Features & Devices

“Device” questions require the recognition of a particular literary or rhetorical feature. They generally do not require complex critical thinking, and as such tend to be level “2” or “3” difficulty.

Warning: Passages often feature multiple devices, not all of which will be correct answers.

Approach: Before choosing an answer choice, make sure you can answer “yes” to the following questions:

1. Can I underline this device in the passage?
2. Is this the particular device the question is asking for?

Sample Feature & Device Passage

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.1

1From Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

Process of Elimination (Q1):

Choice “A”: a “parable” is a brief, didactic narrative that illustrates a moral.
Choice “B”: “parataxis” describes the use of short, simple sentences; this sentence is the opposite.
Choice “C”: the term “paradox” correctly identifies the logically impossible, apparently contradictory juxtaposition of simultaneous opposites.
Choice “D”: a “monologue” is a (usually dramatic) speech by one character to a silent audience. Although this passage features a first-person narrator, there is no indication of a specific audience.
Choice “E”: a “flashback” abandons the current sequence of events to recall a former chronology. Although this passage is written in the past tense, it does not “flash back” to anything.

Process of Elimination (Q2):

Choice “A”: in this context, “Light” and “Darkness” do not refer literally to day and night, but figuratively to symbols of good and evil.
Choice “B”: their simultaneity, while present, is not the reason for their capitalization. None of the other simultaneous opposites in the passage are capitalized.
Choice “C”: their juxtaposition, while present, is not the reason for their capitalization.
Choice “D”: Unlike “Heaven” (line 7), “Light” and “Darkness” are not the names of specific places.
Choice “E”: “Light” and “Darkness” do not refer to a specific historical event. And even if they did, this would not be a reason to capitalize them.

Justification: Each question can be answered simply by spotting the correct device in the passage.

For question #1, the sequence of logical opposites makes “paradox” the only appropriate answer. For question #2, the capitalization of abstract or uncountable nouns almost always suggests personification which is a form of figurative language.