

UNDERSTANDING TEST SCORES – Handout 2



PSAT/NMSQT

Why Take the Test?

The Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) is an early practice test for the SAT I. More than 2 million students take the PSAT each year. The types of questions that appear on this test are identical to the ones you will see on the SAT I. The format of the two tests is also the same. The test is given in October, and you will have your results by December, which allows you plenty of time to set up a study schedule for taking the SAT I in May or June. In 1998, for those who had taken the PSAT/ NMSQT, the mean SAT I score was 129 points higher than those who had not taken the earlier test.

The PSAT reports what are called silent scores. Only you and your guidance counselor see your scores. They are not reported to colleges. This allows you to practice without penalty in a timed setting similar to the testing circumstances you will find for the SAT I. The test results, which are provided in a detailed, easy-to-read form, are an excellent tool to help you determine those areas where you need extra help and study.

Depending on your score on the PSAT, you may be able to enter the national scholarship competition run by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. Finally, the PSAT provides schools with the information that you are interested in attending college, which means that colleges and universities will put you on their mailing lists.

What to Bring

- ❖ PSAT entry card or your name on the guidance list for entry.
- ❖ Several sharpened #2 pencils.
- ❖ Identification, preferably with a picture, such as a driver's license or school ID. You could also bring a copy of your transcript or a note from the guidance department on school letterhead attesting to your identity. ID will be checked at the test!
- ❖ Calculator. Any four-function scientific or graphing calculator will do. Do not bring a calculator with the memory of a computer or one with a noisy typewriter-like keyboard. Do not bring a laptop, an electronic writing pad, or a pocket organizer. If you bring a calculator with a display screen so big that it can be seen by others, the test supervisor may decide not to seat you. Also, your calculator cannot speak to you, have paper tape, or require an electrical outlet.
- ❖ Leave the following at home: loud watches, CD players, tape recorders, cell phones, pagers, and school supplies. You will not need scratch paper, notes, books, dictionaries, compasses, protractors, rulers, highlighters, or colored pens or pencils. You might want to bring some fruit juice, tea, or water and a healthy snack for the breaks.

Timing

Traditionally, students have taken the PSAT in October of their junior year so that they can use the score for the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. The NMSQT compares the scores of juniors across the country. Above a certain cutoff, students are able to enter the competition for National Merit scholarships.

In recent years, it has become more common for students to take the PSAT in October of their sophomore year. About 33 percent of test takers choose this route. Taking the PSAT this early allows students and counselors more time to plan schedules to meet students' academic needs and better prepare them for their career choices. However, taking the test in October of your sophomore year does not enter you into the National Merit Scholarship competition.

Strategies

- ❖ Know the format and timing of the test. The best way to do this is to practice, practice, and then practice some more. Purchase review books and take the practice tests in them and in the Student Bulletin. Make a schedule and set aside a regular time to practice. Isolate yourself and try to simulate a testing environment when you practice.
- ❖ Know the directions for each section and type of question. The directions are the same on the PSAT as they are on the SAT I. It will save you time during the real test if you do not have to read the directions.
- ❖ Learn how to make educated guesses. All but ten questions on the PSAT are multiple-choice. You need to be able to eliminate at least one answer as wrong, however, before making your best guess.
- ❖ Build a vocabulary bank. Read, read, and read some more. No amount of drills, flash cards, or memorizing words out of context is going to help you own these words. Pick up a Sunday newspaper and read the editorial section every week. Read it with a dictionary next to you. Then do the crossword. These two activities alone will grow your vocabulary about 800 words a year.