

Chapter 6

Command of Evidence

Despite important differences in purpose, topic, format, content, and style, well-done pieces of writing still have a lot in common. Authors of all kinds writing for all sorts of reasons must make use of support — details, examples, reasons, facts, figures, and so on — to help make their ideas compelling, their points clear, and their claims convincing.

Think for a moment about the job of a movie director. It's OK if you don't know the specifics; a general idea will do. Movie directing is in some ways a good parallel to the work that writers do. Directors tell camera operators where to stand, whether to shoot at a distance or up close, and how long to hold a particular shot. Directors also work with actors on how to deliver their lines and what physical actions to use. Music, lighting, costumes, setting, scripts — directors often have input into all of these. Every part of the production must work together and have a clear purpose if the project is to be successful. The same is true for good writing: Every word, every sentence, and every paragraph has a role to play in the overall text. Understanding and being able to explain those roles are parts of skilled reading, and they're among the many important skills that the SAT gives you an opportunity to demonstrate.

The SAT asks you to pay attention to how authors use support in texts that cover a range of subjects and styles. One important way that the SAT does this is by including questions that ask you to identify the part of the text that provides the best evidence (textual support) for the answer to another question. You'll also be asked to make sense of information presented in graphics, such as tables, graphs, and charts, and to draw connections between that information and the information presented in words. You might be asked other sorts of related questions as well, such as how the focus of a piece of writing could be improved (perhaps by deleting irrelevant information) or what role a piece of evidence plays in an author's argument.

Your command of evidence will be tested throughout much of the SAT, including the Reading Test, the Writing and Language Test, and the optional

REMEMBER

You'll frequently be asked to use evidence to create or defend an argument, or to critically assess someone else's argument, in college and in the workforce.

Essay. Command of Evidence questions accompany each Reading and Writing and Language passage and contribute to a Command of Evidence subscore. While your response to the Essay prompt doesn't contribute to this subscore, it will still call on your skill in understanding how an author uses support to make an argument effective.

What Is Meant by Command of Evidence?

The Command of Evidence category includes questions that focus on many of the ways in which authors use support. These include:

- ▶ Determining the best evidence in a passage (or pair of passages) for the answer to a previous question or the best evidence for a specified conclusion (Reading Test)
- ▶ Interpreting data presented in informational graphics (such as tables, graphs, and charts) and drawing connections between words and data (Reading Test, Writing and Language Test)
- ▶ Understanding how the author of an argument uses (or fails to use) evidence to support the claims he or she makes (Reading Test)
- ▶ Revising a passage to clarify main ideas, strengthen support, or sharpen focus (Writing and Language Test)

REMEMBER

While separate from your Command of Evidence score, the Analysis score on the Essay is largely based on skills related to those required for Command of Evidence questions.

Having a strong Command of Evidence is also central to the Essay. Your Analysis score on the Essay is based in large part on how well you can explain how the author of a passage uses evidence, reasoning, stylistic or persuasive techniques, and/or other means to persuade an audience.

Ten Reading Test questions — two per passage or pair of passages — contribute to the Command of Evidence subscore. Eight Writing and Language Test questions — again, two per passage — also contribute to the subscore. Although not part of the Command of Evidence subscore, the Essay's Analysis score is based heavily on skills related to Command of Evidence questions.

REMEMBER

A total of 18 questions — 10 from the Reading Test and eight from the Writing and Language Test — contribute to the Command of Evidence subscore.

Let's consider the types of questions in a little more detail.

DETERMINING THE BEST EVIDENCE (READING TEST)

Sometimes the Reading Test will ask you a question and then present you with another question that asks for the “best evidence” to support the answer you selected in response to the first question. This is actually simpler than it might seem at first.

You should begin by reading and answering the first question to the best of your ability. This question will often ask you to draw a reasonable conclusion or inference from the passage. As you're reaching that conclusion or inference, you're using textual evidence. Textual evidence can be as simple as a small piece of information, such as a fact or a date, but it can also be more

complex, such as the words an author uses that signal his or her point of view on an issue. Textual evidence helps you defend the answer you might give to a teacher asking how you reached a particular interpretation of a text. Consider the following examples:

- ▶ “I think the author supports clearer labeling on food because . . .”
- ▶ “The narrator seems to feel sympathy for the main character because . . .”

What would follow “because” in each of these examples is likely to be textual evidence — the “how I know it” part of the statement.

All that the second question in a pair of SAT Reading Test questions is asking you to do, then, is to make explicit what you’re already doing when you answer the first question in a pair. Typically, the second question will present you with four snippets from the passage, generally a sentence each, and ask you which one provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question. All you need to do is figure out which one does the best job of answering the question of “how I know it” — in other words, which one provides the best textual evidence.

It could be that looking at the choices in the second question makes you reconsider your answer to the first one. That can be OK. Maybe rereading particular parts of the passage made something clearer than it had been before or drew your attention to a crucial detail you hadn’t considered. While you don’t want to second-guess yourself endlessly, sometimes it can be a good idea to rethink an answer based on new information.

You may also see questions that present you with a conclusion already drawn and ask you to determine which of the four answer options provides the best evidence from the passage for that conclusion. You can treat these questions just like the textual evidence questions described earlier, except this time you don’t have to draw the conclusion yourself in a separate question.

INTERPRETING DATA IN INFORMATIONAL GRAPHICS (READING TEST, WRITING AND LANGUAGE TEST)

Certain passages in both the Reading Test and the Writing and Language Test are accompanied by one or more informational graphics. These graphics, which are typically tables, graphs, or charts, usually represent numerical data in visual form, such as results from a scientific experiment. On the Reading Test, you may be asked to interpret the information in the graphic, but you may also or instead be asked to draw connections between the graphic and the accompanying passage, such as deciding whether data in the graphic support or weaken a particular conclusion reached by the author of the passage. On the Writing and Language Test, you may be asked to revise a passage to, say, correct an error in the writer’s interpretation of a table or to replace a general description with precise figures.

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When a question refers to a table, graph, or chart, carefully examine the graphic to get a strong understanding of the data being displayed. This may include reading the title, identifying what the x- and y-axes represent, noting the increment values on the axes, and reading any captions or subheadings.

It's important to note that these Reading and Writing and Language questions aren't math questions in disguise. You won't need to add, subtract, multiply, or divide (and you won't have access to a calculator). The questions instead ask you to “read” graphics and draw conclusions, much as you do when you read and interpret a written text.

UNDERSTANDING HOW AN ARGUMENT USES (OR DOESN'T USE) EVIDENCE (READING TEST)

Being able to figure out how an author constructs an argument is an important skill needed for success in college and workforce training programs — and on the SAT. Arguments seek to convince readers (or listeners or viewers) of the rightness of one or more claims, or assertions. To do this, authors of arguments make use of evidence, reasoning, and stylistic and persuasive elements, such as vivid imagery or appeals to emotion, to flesh out and support their claims. A reader convinced by an author's argument may end up changing his or her view on a topic or be persuaded to take a particular action.

Arguments are a consistent part of the Reading Test (as well as the Writing and Language Test and the Essay). Reading Test questions that focus on evidence use may ask you to identify what type of evidence a particular author relies on most heavily (personal anecdotes or survey results, for example) to determine what evidence in the passage supports a particular claim, or to decide whether a new piece of information (such as a research finding) would strengthen or weaken an author's case.

Analyzing an argument, including its use of evidence, is the main focus of the optional Essay, which we'll turn to momentarily.

IMPROVING A PASSAGE'S STRUCTURE, SUPPORT, AND FOCUS (WRITING AND LANGUAGE TEST)

As noted earlier, the Writing and Language Test asks you to revise passages to better incorporate information from graphics into the text. The test asks you to show your command of evidence in other ways as well. You may end up adding or revising a topic sentence to improve the clarity and structure of a passage. You may also add or revise supporting material, such as a description or an example, to make the writer's claim or point more robust. Other questions may ask you to think about whether adding, revising, or removing a particular sentence would improve or blur the focus of a certain paragraph or the passage as a whole. The element that these Writing and Language questions (along with questions about informational graphics) have in common is that they require you to think about how a writer develops a topic through building up claims or points.

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Questions on the Reading Test that ask about the use of evidence may require you to take a step back from what the author is saying and to focus instead on how the argument is put together.

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Developing a strong understanding of the writer's overall purpose in a Writing and Language Test passage is critical to answering many Command of Evidence questions. Thus, be sure you're always thinking about the writer's purpose as you read passages on the SAT.

A NOTE ABOUT THE ESSAY

The optional Essay’s three scores are not combined with scores on the multiple-choice portion of the SAT and thus don’t contribute to the Command of Evidence subscore. However, as we mentioned before, the heart of the task on the Essay is to analyze an argument and to explain how the author builds the argument to persuade an audience through evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic or persuasive elements (or other elements you identify). The main focus of the Essay — and the foundation for its Analysis score — is, therefore, very much in keeping with the notion of showing off your command of evidence in the broad sense. Receiving a strong Analysis score requires making use of many of the same skills called on by the Command of Evidence questions on the multiple-choice Reading Test and Writing and Language Test.

CHAPTER 6 RECAP

The Command of Evidence subscore on the SAT is based on questions from both the Reading Test and the Writing and Language Test. These questions are designed to see whether you understand how authors make use of information and ideas to develop and support their claims and points.

You’ll find three types of questions on the **Reading Test** that address command of evidence. They are:

1. **Determining the best evidence:** You’ll be asked to figure out which part of a passage offers the strongest support for the answer to another question or for a conclusion that the question provides. These sorts of questions accompany every passage on the test.
2. **Interpreting data presented in informational graphics:** You’ll be asked to locate particular information in tables, graphs, charts, and the like; draw conclusions from such data; and/or make connections between the data and the information and ideas in a passage. These sorts of questions accompany select passages on the test, as only some passages on the test include graphics.
3. **Understanding how an argument uses (or doesn’t use) evidence:** You’ll be asked to think about how an author makes (or fails to make) use of supporting information, such as facts, figures, and quotations, to develop claims. These sorts of questions accompany select passages on the test — those that stake out one or more claims and seek to make those claims convincing through the use of evidence, reasoning, and stylistic and persuasive elements.

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Another reason preparing for and taking the SAT Essay Test is a good idea is that in doing so, you’ll also be practicing the skills you need to do well on Command of Evidence questions.

You'll find two types of questions on the **Writing and Language Test** that address command of evidence. They are:

1. **Interpreting data presented in informational graphics:** You'll be asked to use data in tables, graphs, charts, and the like when you're revising passages to make the passage more accurate, clear, precise, or convincing. These sorts of questions accompany select passages on the test, as only some passages on the test include graphics.
2. **Improving a passage's structure, support, and focus:** You'll be asked to revise passages to make authors' central ideas sharper; add or revise supporting information, such as facts, figures, and quotations; and add, revise, or delete information that's irrelevant or that just doesn't belong at a particular point in the passage. These sorts of questions accompany nearly every passage on the test.

Although not contributing to the subscore, the optional Essay is very much about command of evidence, as its task centers on analyzing how an author builds an argument to persuade an audience. To do well on the Essay — especially in terms of getting a strong Analysis score — you'll have to consider how the author uses evidence, reasoning, stylistic or persuasive elements, or other techniques to influence readers.

As you approach all of these questions and tasks, you'll want to think like an author. Answering for yourself such questions as “What point is the author trying to make?” and “What support in the passage can I find for my interpretation?” and “How relevant is this information to the passage as a whole?” is critical to getting a strong Command of Evidence subscore on the SAT.