The following is a list of essay prompts and assignments from actual SATs over the past several years. These are taken from various Internet sites, including the College Board’s website.

This language will always appear before the prompt and the question:

“Think carefully about the issue presented in the following excerpts and the assignments below.”

And this language will appear after 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.”

1.) Prompt: Again and again we hear the complaint that we have no heroes anymore. Heroes—people who should be admired for their great courage or noble achievements—are no longer recognized in our modern world. Many people, in fact, believe that heroes existed only in the past. But this belief is wrong. Because more praise is given to the latest technological innovation than to one individual’s heroic achievements, we may not be aware of our heroes, but we do have them.

Assignment: Is it possible to be a hero in the modern world?

2.) Prompt: Technology has dramatically increased the speed with which we can communicate and share information. Some people are critical of this development, claiming that rapid communication, often made possible by some form of technology, discourages people from focusing at length on any one topic, shortens their attention spans, and prevents them from truly learning about the world and people around them. But what is wrong with how instantly and easily information is communicated thanks to the wonders of modern technology?

Assignment: Does the way that information is communicated today result in people learning less than ever before?

3.) Prompt: Is a temporary or partial solution to a problem better than no solution at all? Many people would say so. All that humanity can hope to accomplish is to find workable
solutions to the serious problems of the world. Others would argue, however, that the world’s serious problems are, in fact, caused by the so-called solutions. These solutions are creating problems more serious than the problems they are addressing.

**Assignment:** Do temporary or otherwise imperfect solutions to problems only create more serious problems?

4.) **Prompt:** Choice improves the quality of our lives. On the other hand, the fact that *some* choice is good doesn’t necessarily mean that *more* choice is better. There is a problem with having too much choice. We are unwilling to give up any of our options, but stubbornly insisting upon having all the choices available to us can lead to bad decisions, stress, and dissatisfaction.

*Adapted from Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*

**Assignment:** Is it better for people to have limited choices?

5.) **Prompt:** Knowledge is power. In agriculture, medicine, and industry, for example, knowledge has liberated us from hunger, disease, and tedious labor. Today, however, our knowledge has become so powerful that it is beyond our control. We know how to do many things, but we do not know where, when, or even whether this know-how should be used.

**Assignment:** Can knowledge be a burden rather than a benefit?

6.) **Prompt:** Abraham Lincoln said, "Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." In other words, our personal level of satisfaction is entirely within our control. Otherwise, why would the same experience disappoint one person but delight another? Happiness is not an accident but a choice.

**Assignment:** Is happiness something over which people have no control, or can people choose to be happy?

7.) **Prompt:** Given the importance of human creativity, one would think it should have a high priority among our concerns. But if we look at the reality, we see a different picture. Basic scientific research is minimized in favor of immediate practical applications. The arts are increasingly seen as dispensable luxuries. Yet as competition heats up around the globe, exactly the opposite strategy is needed. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

**Assignment:** Is creativity needed more than ever in the world today?
8.) Prompt: I cannot comprehend those who emphasize or recognize only what is useful. I am concerned that learning for learning’s sake is no longer considered desirable, that everything we do and think must be directed toward the solution of a practical problem. More and more we seem to try to teach how to make a good living and not how to live a good life.

Philip D. Jordan

Assignment: Do people put too much emphasis on learning practical skills?

9.) Prompt: Most of our schools are not facing up to their responsibilities. We must begin to ask ourselves whether educators should help students address the critical moral choices and social issues of our time. Schools have responsibilities beyond training people for jobs and getting students into college.

Svi Shapiro

Assignment: Should schools help students understand moral choices and social issues?

10.) Prompt: The media not only transmit information and culture, they also decide what information is important. In that way, they help to shape culture and values.

Alison Bernstein

Assignment: Do newspapers, magazines, television, radio, movies, the Internet, and other media determine what is important to most people?

11.) Prompt: There are situations where flattery is mandatory: The bride is always beautiful. If we look at someone’s artwork, we are obliged to say something complimentary to the artist. If we visit someone with a new baby, we are required to say the infant is cute. In such situations, to say nothing is interpreted as rudeness. We compliment each other because we understand that flattery makes life run smoothly.

Adapted from Richard Stengel, You’re Too Kind: A brief History of Flattery

Assignment: Is praising others, even if the praise is excessive or undeserved, a necessary part of life?

12.) Prompt: Every important discovery results from patience, perseverance, and concentration—sometimes continuing for months or years—on one specific subject. A person who wants to discover a new truth must remain absorbed by that one subject, must pay no attention to any thought that is unrelated to the problem.

Adapted from Santiago Ramon Cajal, Advice for a Young Investigator

Assignment: Are all important discoveries the result of focusing on one subject?
13.) **Prompt:** We measure our progress as a civilization by what we see as advances in technology, which seem more significant than such concerns as education and the condition of the natural world. Still, I would prefer to be a part of a community that judged itself on the happiness of its members rather than on the development of new technology.

**Assignment:** Does a strong commitment to technological progress cause a society to neglect other values, such as education and the protection of the environment?

14.) **Prompt:** It is not true that prosperity is better for people than adversity. When people are thriving and content, they seldom feel the need to look for ways to improve themselves or their situation. Hardship, on the other hand, forces people to closely examine—and possibly change—their own lives and even the lives of others. Misfortune rather than prosperity helps people to gain a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them.

**Assignment:** Do people truly benefit from hardship and misfortune?

15.) **Prompt:** I suspect that like many people who watch their diet, exercise regularly, and check the weather report before leaving the house, I am a little too concerned with controlling what can't be fully controlled. I know I am doing the sensible thing. But I sometimes think that the more reckless among us may have something to teach the rest of us about freedom. Perhaps there is something good about taking chances against our better judgments. Melvin Konner

**Assignment:** Is it sometimes better to take risks than to follow a more reasonable course of action?

15.) **Prompt:** It is rare to find an objective and independent viewpoint on style, literature, politics, or any other matter. Many people's opinions are formed through their associations with others. It is our nature to conform; conformity is a force that few can successfully resist. We give in to the human instinct to go along with the crowd and to have its approval. Mark Twain

**Assignment:** Do we tend to accept the opinions of others instead of developing our own independent ideas?

15.) **Prompt:** While some people promote competition as the only way to achieve success, others emphasize the power of cooperation. Intense rivalry at work or play or engaging in competition involving ideas or skills may indeed drive people either to avoid failure or to achieve important victories. In a complex world, however, cooperation is much more likely to produce significant, lasting accomplishments.

**Assignment:** Do people achieve more success by cooperation than by competition?
16.) **Prompt:** Sometimes it is necessary to challenge what people in authority claim to be true. Although some respect for authority is, no doubt, necessary in order for any group or organization to function, questioning the people in charge—even if they are experts or leaders in their fields—makes us better thinkers. It forces all concerned to defend old ideas and decisions and to consider new ones. Sometimes it can even correct old errors in thought and put an end to wrong actions.

**Assignment:** Is it important to question the ideas and decisions of people in positions of authority?

17.) **Prompt:** We don’t really learn anything properly until there is a problem, until we make a mistake, until something fails to go as we had hoped. When everything is working well, with no problems or failures, what incentive do we have to try something new? We are only motivated to learn when we experience difficulties.

*Adapted from Alain de Botton, How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not a Novel*

**Assignment:** Does true learning only occur when we experience difficulties?

18.) **Prompt:** There are two kinds of pretending. There is the bad kind, as when a person falsely promises to be your friend. But there is also a good kind, where the pretense eventually turns into the real thing. For example, when you are not feeling particularly friendly, the best thing you can do, very often, is to act in a friendly manner. In a few minutes, you may really be feeling friendlier. *Adapted from a book by C. S. Lewis*

**Assignment:** Can deception—pretending that something is true when it is not—sometimes have good results?

19.) **Prompt:** It is wrong to think of ourselves as indispensable. We would love to think that our contributions are essential, but we are mistaken if we think that any one person has made the world what it is today. The contributions of individual people are seldom as important or as necessary as we think they are.

**Assignment:** Do we put too much value on the ideas or actions of individual people?

20.) **Prompt:** Many people deny that stories about characters and events that are not real can teach us about ourselves or about the world around us. They claim that literature does not offer us worthwhile information about the real world. These people argue that the feelings and ideas we gain from books and stories obstruct, rather than contribute to, clear thought. *Adapted from Jennifer L. McMahon, "The Function of Fiction"*

**Assignment:** Can books and stories about characters and events that are not real teach us anything useful?
21. **Prompt:** "No one is perfect." There are few among us who would disagree with this familiar statement. Certain that perfection is an impossible goal, many people willingly accept flaws and shortcomings in themselves and others. Yet such behavior leads to failure. People can only succeed if they try to achieve perfection in everything they do.

**Assignment:** Can people achieve success only if they aim to be perfect?

22. **Prompt:** Everybody has some choice. People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want and, if they can't find them, make them.

*Adapted from George Bernard Shaw, Mrs. Warren's Profession*

**Assignment:** Do success and happiness depend on the choices people make rather than on factors beyond their control?

23. **Prompt:** In order to be the most productive and successful people that we are capable of being, we must be willing to ignore the opinions of others. It is only when we are completely indifferent to others' opinions of us—when we are not concerned about how others think of us—that we can achieve our most important goals.

**Assignment:** Are people more likely to be productive and successful when they ignore the opinions of others?

24. **Prompt:** In many circumstances, optimism—the expectation that one's ideas and plans will always turn out for the best—is unwarranted. In these situations what is needed is not an upbeat view but a realistic one. There are times when people need to take a tough-minded view of the possibilities of success, give up, and invest their energies elsewhere rather than find reasons to continue to pursue the original project or idea.

*Adapted from Martin E. P. Seligman, Learned Optimism*

**Assignment:** Is it better for people to be realistic or optimistic?

25. **Prompt:** It is easy to make judgments about people and their actions when we do not know anything about their circumstances or what motivated them to take those actions. But we should look beyond a person's actions. When people do things that we consider outrageous, inconsiderate, or harmful, we should try to understand why they acted as they did.

**Assignment:** Is it important to try to understand people's motivations before judging their actions?
26.) **Prompt:** Many people believe that our government should do more to solve our problems. After all, how can one individual create more jobs or make roads safer or improve the schools or help to provide any of the other benefits that we have come to enjoy? And yet expecting that the government—rather than individuals—should always come up with the solutions to society’s ills may have made us less self-reliant, undermining our independence and self-sufficiency.

**Assignment:** Should people take more responsibility for solving problems that affect their communities or the nation in general?

27.) **Prompt:** Most human beings spend their lives doing work they hate and work that the world does not need. It is of prime importance that you learn early what you want to do and whether or not the world needs this service. The return from your work must be the satisfaction that work brings you and the world's need of that work. Income is not money, it is satisfaction; it is creation; it is beauty.


**Assignment:** Is it more important to do work that one finds fulfilling or work that pays well?

28.) **Prompt:** The education people receive does not occur primarily in school. Young people are formed by their experiences with parents, teachers, peers, and even strangers on the street, and by the sports teams they play for, the shopping malls they frequent, the songs they hear, and the shows they watch. Schools, while certainly important, constitute only a relatively small part of education.

Adapted from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Education for the Twenty-First Century"

**Assignment:** Is education primarily the result of influences other than school?

29.) **Prompt:** If we are dissatisfied with our circumstances, we think about changing them. But the most important and effective changes—in our attitude—hardly occur to us. In other words, we should worry not about how to alter the world around us for the better but about how to change ourselves in order to fit into that world.

Adapted from Michael Hymers, "Wittgenstein, Pessimism and Politics"

**Assignment:** Is it better to change one’s attitude than to change one's circumstances?
30.) Prompt: It is a mistake to suppose that men succeed through success; they much oftener succeed through failures. Precept, study, advice, and example could never have taught them so well as failure has done.”

Samuel Smiles, Scottish author (1812-1904)

Assignment: Is there truly no success like failure?

31.) Prompt: People are happy only when they have their minds fixed on some goal other than their own happiness. Happiness comes when people focus instead on the happiness of others, on the improvement of humanity, on some course of action that is followed not as a means to anything else but as an end in itself. Aiming at something other than their own happiness, they find happiness along the way. The only way to be happy is to pursue some goal external to your own happiness.

Adapted from John Stuart Mill, Autobiography

Assignment: Are people more likely to be happy if they focus on goals other than their own happiness?

32.) Prompt: Heroes may seem old-fashioned today. Many people are cynical and seem to enjoy discrediting role models more than creating new ones or cherishing those they already have. Some people, moreover, object to the very idea of heroes, arguing that we should not exalt individuals who, after all, are only flesh and blood, just like the rest of us. But we desperately need heroes—to teach us, to captivate us through their words and deeds, to inspire us to greatness.

Adapted from Psychology Today, "How To Be Great! What Does It Take To Be A Hero?"

Assignment: Is there a value in celebrating certain individuals as heroes?

33.) Prompt: The advancements that have been made over the past hundred years or more are too numerous to count. But has there been progress? Some people would say that the vast number of advancements tells us we have made progress. Others, however, disagree, saying that more is not necessarily better and that real progress—in politics, literature, the arts, science and technology, or any other field—can be achieved only when an advancement truly improves the quality of our lives.

Assignment: Have modern advancements truly improved the quality of people's lives?
34.) **Prompt:** It is not true that prosperity is better for people than adversity. When people are thriving and content, they seldom feel the need to look for ways to improve themselves or their situation. Hardship, on the other hand, forces people to closely examine—and possibly change—their own lives and even the lives of others. Misfortune rather than prosperity helps people to gain a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them.

**Assignment:** Do people truly benefit from hardship and misfortune? 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.

35.) **Prompt:** Materialism: it's the thing that everybody loves to hate. Few aspects of modern life have been more criticized than materialism. But let's face it: materialism—acquiring possessions and spending money—is a vital source of meaning and happiness in our time. People may criticize modern society for being too materialistic, but the fact remains that most of us spend most of our energy producing and consuming more and more stuff.

Adapted from James Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism"

**Assignment:** Should modern society be criticized for being materialistic?

36.) **Prompt:** Knowledge is power. In agriculture, medicine, and industry, for example, knowledge has liberated us from hunger, disease, and tedious labor. Today, however, our knowledge has become so powerful that it is beyond our control. We know how to do many things, but we do not know where, when, or even whether this know-how should be used.

**Assignment:** Can knowledge be a burden rather than a benefit?

37.) **Prompt:** We do not take the time to determine right from wrong. Reflecting on the difference between right and wrong is hard work. It is so much easier to follow the crowd, going along with what is popular rather than risking the disapproval of others by voicing an objection of any kind.

Adapted from Stephen J. Carter, Integrity

**Assignment:** Is it always best to determine one's own views of right and wrong, or can we benefit from following the crowd?

38.) **Prompt:** It is often the case that revealing the complete truth may bring trouble—discomfort, embarrassment, sadness, or even harm—to oneself or to another person. In these circumstances, it is better not to express our real thoughts and feelings. Whether or not we should tell the truth, therefore, depends on the circumstances.

**Assignment:** Do circumstances determine whether or not we should tell the truth? 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.