

Unit Overview

This unit provides an introduction to the PSAT, concentrating specifically on the Critical Reading and Writing components of the exam. As a springboard for the rest of the program, this unit attempted to reduce to inform, but also to inspire. It is intended to reduce students' anxiety about the PSAT and build their confidence.

One of the most important topics of this unit is the introduction of the Critical Reading and Writing question types: Sentence Completions, Reading Comprehension, and Finding and Correcting Errors (Identifying Sentence Errors, Improving Sentences, and Improving Paragraphs). Go through these pages with students carefully because these topics will reappear throughout the program.

Unit 1: Introduction to Critical Reading and Writing

Objectives

In this unit, you will learn how:

- this PSAT Critical Reading and Writing program works.
- the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the PSAT are organized.
- to approach PSAT Critical Reading and Writing to earn maximum points.

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UNIT 1:
INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL READING AND WRITING

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Teacher's Notes

- This page acts as the opening curtain to the PSAT Critical Reading and Writing program. Have volunteers read the text aloud, and explain that everything discussed on this page will be covered in greater detail throughout the unit.
- Point out to students that these units will focus on the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the PSAT. The Math sections will be covered in Math class, if your school has chosen to participate in the Test-Taking Strategies for the PSAT Math program.
- Call students' attention to the sidebar. Every Strategy Instruction page includes a sidebar that students should read before they go on to the next page. The sidebars provide helpful hints and tips that keep students focused on the strategies. They are designed to be memorable and useful for students to review.

Welcome to PSAT Advantage Critical Reading and Writing

Chances are you have been hearing about the SAT for years now, but you may not have heard of the PSAT/NMSQT. It stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. You will take it in October of your junior year, though some sophomores choose to take it, too. The PSAT provides practical experience for taking the SAT and your scores allow you the opportunity to become a National Merit Scholar. This all might seem like a big deal and maybe you're nervous. Well, don't be. This program will tell you everything you need to know about the PSAT—including how to test your best.

In this unit, you are going to learn how this program works, how the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the PSAT are organized, and what skills you need to do your best on Test Day.

On Your Mark, Get Set, Prep!

In the Critical Reading and Writing program, you will learn how to:

- read strategically.
- recognize and understand all of the question types.
- get the correct answer, even when you think you don't have a clue.

Each unit will teach you about a different question type, and the whole program will finish off with a practice test. Remember, though, you will only get as much out of this material as you put into it. If you practice what you learn in these units on your own, you will be in great shape for Test Day.

Keep in mind

Doing Your Part

While this program will help you excel on the PSAT, only you can decide how well you will do. The more effort you put in, the greater the rewards you will reap.

Teacher's Notes

- Although the PSAT may seem like a daunting task for your students, the exam is actually very predictable. This means that students can prepare for the PSAT and work to improve their scores.
- Point out the predictability of the PSAT by going over the list of facts. Students should know that these are *facts*, not just possibilities, about what they will see on Test Day.
- Make students aware that the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the PSAT are entirely multiple choice. Having multiple-choice questions means that students can learn strategies and techniques for narrowing the answer choices and making educated guesses, even if they are unsure of the answer. Strategic guessing is a major focus of this program.

How Predictable

Why do people call the PSAT a **standardized test**? Well, it's very simple, really. Even though the individual questions vary from test to test, the basic concepts, format, and question types stay very much the same. Why is that so, and what does it mean for you?

A Common Yardstick

The PSAT is standardized so that it can be used to compare students' performances within their grade levels from various locations. The PSAT must be made according to very specific guidelines so that people can compare scores from state to state or year to year.

This actually works to your advantage. You don't have to guess and worry about what the test will look like, what kinds of questions you will see, or how best to prepare for them. You can rest assured that your PSAT will look remarkably similar to previous administrations of the test. That means that, with the right tools, you can really get ready to do your best.

Facts about the PSAT

- The test is 2 hours and 10 minutes long, divided into Math and Critical Reading and Writing sections.
- Each section is scored on a 20–80 point scale. Your combined score for the whole exam will range from 60–240 points.
- The Critical Reading and Writing sections are composed entirely of multiple-choice questions.
- Each multiple-choice question has five answer choices, of which one (and only one) answer is correct.
- You are not allowed to use a dictionary or any other reference material during the exam.

keep in mind

Plan Ahead

The PSAT and the SAT are so similar that by studying for the PSAT, you're getting a jump on preparing for the SAT. For information on the SAT, go to www.sat.org or talk to your school guidance office.

Teacher's Notes

- This page introduces the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the PSAT. Students should know that there are two Critical Reading sections and one Writing section on the test.
- Students may not be familiar with the terms *sentence completions* or *reading comprehension*. Assure them that these topics will be covered in-depth throughout the program. By the time the program is over, they will know these things very well.
- You may want to tell students that on the SAT, there will be an essay component to the Writing Section. The PSAT does not have an essay, so students do not need to be concerned about timed writing just yet.

The PSAT Critical Reading and Writing Sections

The Critical Reading and Writing sections account for three out of the five sessions of the PSAT.

Critical Reading

- There are two 25-minute Critical Reading sessions that measure your vocabulary skills, knowledge of sentence structure, and ability to read and think carefully about one or more reading passages.
- These sessions feature both long and short reading passages.
- There are 48 questions: 35 reading comprehension questions and 13 sentence completions.

Keep in mind

Know What to Expect
You won't find any surprises in the structure of the PSAT. This means that you can prepare and feel confident.

Writing

- There is one 30-minute Writing session that measures your ability to identify grammatical errors and skill at effectively using language while improving sentences and paragraphs.
- There are 39 questions: 14 identifying sentence errors, 20 improving sentences, and 5 improving paragraphs questions.
- You will not need to write an essay on the PSAT.

Teacher's Notes

- This page begins the introduction to the PSAT Critical Reading question types. The first question type is sentence completions, the subject of Unit 2.
- Students may have practiced sentence completions in their earlier school years. These questions assess students' ability to understand vocabulary in context. Because students are provided the context of a sentence, they can often narrow the answer choices to one or two, based on context clues alone.
- Students will learn strategies for answering sentence completions in Unit 2.

Sample Question

1 A

The word "now" is a big clue that indicates the meaning of the missing word. If the Inuits now live in fixed settlements, they can no longer lead a nomadic lifestyle. The only answer choice that creates this meaning is (A). Choices (B), (C), (D), and (E) all would lead to a continued nomadic lifestyle for the Inuits.

PSAT Critical Reading Question Types

So what exactly do the questions look like? And what is a sentence completion?

What does Critical Reading mean? What does it mean to improve a sentence? Let's break it down.

Sentence Completions

Sentence completion questions present you with a sentence in which one or more words are missing. Your job is to determine which answer choice best fills in the missing blank(s) in the sentence. For example:

1 In the years following World War II, almost all Canadian Inuits ---- their previously nomadic lifestyle; they now live in fixed settlements.

- (A) abandoned
- (B) continued
- (C) fashioned
- (D) preserved
- (E) rebuilt

In the question above, you would have to figure out what the Canadian Inuits did regarding their "previously nomadic lifestyle." One of the answer choices correctly completes the sentence, while the others will change the sentence's meaning in ways that don't make sense. You will learn all about how to answer sentence completions with confidence when you get to Unit 2.

keep in mind

Funny Formats

The formats of some of the question types may look funny at first. However, by the end of this course, they will be very familiar.

Teacher's Notes

- Students may be more familiar with the term *reading comprehension*. Students have a very specific purpose when they read on the PSAT: they read to answer a narrow set of multiple-choice questions. Reading for pleasure or for their classes entails a much broader set of skills, including high-level conclusion making and the recognition of literary devices.
- Students should be aware of the three categories of reading comprehension questions. Otherwise, the task of reading text and answering questions under timed conditions can be overwhelming. If students know that they will see only three types of reading comprehension questions, they will be much more at ease.
- Have students identify the type of reading comprehension question for each of the three stems provided. The first one is a Big-Picture question. The second is a Vocabulary-in-Context question. The third is a Little-Picture question.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the section of the PSAT that probably most resembles the kind of work you do in school. In reading comprehension, you are presented with a passage or single paragraph to read. Then you are asked several questions that are based on the passage or paragraph. The questions are about the main ideas, details, and logic of what you read.

Both long and short reading comprehension passages may be on historical, literary, or scientific topics. There are also narrative passages, which sound more like stories or first-person memoirs. There is a special reading comprehension section called "Paired Passages." In Paired Passages, you read two passages written by different authors, but on similar topics. The questions that accompany Paired Passages test your understanding of each passage individually and also ask how the passages relate to each other.

Most reading comprehension questions fall into three categories:

- Big Picture (about the main idea of the passage)
- Little Picture (about details in the passage)
- Vocabulary in Context (how specific words are used in the passage)

A *stem* is a common question beginning. Here are a few typical reading comprehension question stems:

- 1** The main purpose of the passage is to...
- 2** As used in line 31, the word *given* most nearly means...
- 3** In the third paragraph, the author implies that...

Keep in mind

Jump Around

Unlike the sentence completions, reading comprehension questions are not arranged in order of difficulty. If you're having trouble with one question, check out the next one. It might be easier.

Teacher's Notes

- This page begins the introduction to the PSAT Writing question types. The Finding and Correcting Errors questions addressed on this page will be covered in Unit 5.
- Answering multiple-choice questions about writing may seem intimidating to students because they feel that they have no way of knowing which choice is truly correct. Assure students that the way that writing is tested on the PSAT is very predictable and that by practicing the three types of writing questions, they'll be ready for anything that may come their way in this section on Test Day.
- Reiterate the importance of reading as a critical component of PSAT preparation. The more often students read, the more easily they will be able to answer many writing questions based on "feel." Experienced readers will know instinctively which choice sounds right to their ears on the Improving Sentences and Identifying Sentence Errors questions, leaving more time for the longer Improving Paragraphs questions.

PSAT Writing Question Types

Finding and Correcting Errors

The questions on the Writing section all test the same general skills: grammar, usage, and word choice. To succeed on these questions, you need to be able to trust yourself to identify when there are errors in writing. In addition, you need to determine the best way to improve writing to make its meaning clearer.

The three categories of Finding and Correcting Errors questions are:

- **Identifying Sentence Errors.** You are given a sentence with four underlined portions and one option of "No error." You must determine which portion is the error, or if the sentence is correct as it is.
- **Improving Sentences.** You are given a sentence in which one portion is underlined. The portion is unchanged in (A). In each other choice, it is rewritten in a different way. You must choose which version of the underlined portion is written best.
- **Improving Paragraphs.** You are given a full paragraph and asked how it could be best improved by, for example, adding or removing a sentence, a phrase, or punctuation.

Here is a typical Identifying Sentence Errors question:

1 In general, Jon disliked^A buying clothes from the retail chain stores, which he^B considered less^C stylish than local^D clothing shops. No error^E

keep in mind

All in Good Time
Each question type will be broken down for you in its own unit. For now, just become familiar with the different types of questions.

Teacher's Notes

- No strategies can outweigh great reading and writing skills. Make sure students understand that the more they read (particularly newspapers, serious magazine articles, and essays) and write (journals, school papers, even letters), the better they will perform on the Critical Reading and Writing components of the PSAT.
- It is never too late to start reading in preparation for the PSAT. Students who get into the “mode” of Critical Reading, even if they have not practiced the skill for years, will at least be in the mindset for answering PSAT questions.

Skills Behind the Question Types

The skills that underlie all of the question types fall into three main categories:

- Reading
- Writing
- Reasoning

In this course, you will learn many strategies to help you get points, even when you don't instantly know the answer to a question. However, having a good grasp of the English language is still essential if you want to truly master the PSAT. The best way to prepare your brain for reading and writing, build your vocabulary, and increase your understanding of the rules of language is simply to read!

Keep in mind

What Doesn't Matter

You will never be tested on pronunciation, antonyms, languages other than English, spelling, or facts about literature.

Reading Rules

We'll say it again and again. Read. Often. To some extent, it doesn't matter what you read, as long as you're doing it. The best reading choices, however, are those that most closely mimic what you will see on the test. Try reading newspapers, which tend to be written in clear language. Also look for challenging books and articles that will push you to learn new words and to think critically. You might even learn something interesting in the process!

Teacher's Notes

- Pacing is one of the most important concepts that students should remember throughout the course. To exemplify the necessity of pacing, offer your students the following question: "Is it better to get one really hard question correct, or five easy-to-medium questions correct?" The answer for the PSAT is that it is better to get as many questions correct as possible. For Critical Reading, this means moving quickly through sentence completions and paragraph-level reading to leave more time for long-passage reading comprehension.
- Students should also practice skipping around questions on the PSAT. If they prefer sentence completions with two blanks, they should find them and do them first. If students prefer Vocabulary-in-Context questions in reading comprehension, they should answer those before any others. This decision is up to the individual, and each student should determine where he or she excels.

How to Approach PSAT Critical Reading and Writing

You will learn a lot more about how to tackle each of the question types in later units. For now, here are a few basic things to keep in mind.

Pacing

The PSAT paces you at one basic level; you can only work on one section at a time and must spend only the allocated amount of time on each. You may find this frustrating at first, but it's actually a great safeguard for you. You won't accidentally find yourself having wasted 10 minutes on a tough sentence completion.

There are some other pacing practices you can use to help you work efficiently. You should aim to work at a steady clip throughout sentence completions and single-paragraph reading parts of reading comprehension. That way, you will have more time left to spend on long-passage reading comprehension portions. No one will tell you to keep moving, so as you practice, try to pace yourself. Pretty soon it will become automatic.

Skipping

Sentence completions are arranged in order of difficulty, but reading comprehension questions are not. Always attack the early questions in the sentence completions portion of each section first, as they will tend to be easier. Also, go with your first guessing instinct on early questions. Be wary of your guessing instincts later in each section, as harder questions tend to seem easier than they are. If you see a question that looks really tough in reading comprehension or Finding and Correcting Errors, circle it and move on. Try the next one, which may well be easier. You can always go back to questions you skipped within the section if you have extra time at the end.

keep in mind

A Point is a Point

Remember, you earn the same number of points for an easy question as you do for a tough one. Spend your time gaining as many points as you can, and only tackle the real brain-benders if you have time.

Teacher's Notes

- A common myth about the PSAT is that there is a “guessing penalty.” The fact is that if a student happens to guess every correct answer, she would get a perfect score. Of course this is highly improbable. The penalty that students incur is for wrong answers. If a student guesses randomly, he will probably choose enough wrong answers to offset his lucky guesses.
- For the Critical Reading section, every question counts the same amount toward a raw score (1 point for correct, 0 for blank, $-\frac{1}{4}$ for incorrect). Grid-ins refer to a specific type of Math question, which students will learn about if they take the Kaplan PSAT Math program.
- The same rules as apply to Critical Reading apply to the Finding and Correcting Errors questions.
- The basic rule for the multiple-choice questions in both sections is that if students can eliminate even one answer choice, they should make an educated guess. If they are completely in the dark about a question, they should skip it. However, the goal of this course is to provide students with enough strategies that they can always eliminate at least one answer choice.

Guessing

You may have heard of something called the **guessing penalty** on the PSAT. Do you really get penalized for guessing, even if you get the right answer? Of course not! But you do lose points for wrong answers. Let's take a look at how it works.

Type of Answer	Raw Points
Correct	1
Blank	0
Wrong	$-\frac{1}{4}$
Wrong Grid-In	0

Keep in mind

No Harm, No Foul

There is no guessing penalty on the PSAT! The wrong-answer penalty works against random guessing, but strategic guessing will earn you points on the PSAT.

What does this mean for you on Test Day? The way the **wrong-answer penalty** (that's really what it is) works is that random guessing will not increase your score. The odds of getting the answer right are counterbalanced by the penalty if you get it wrong, except for math Grid-ins, on which you should always guess. (You will cover Grid-ins in the PSAT Math program.) For the other question types, you should guess if you can eliminate at least one answer choice. Doing so greatly shifts the odds in your favor and makes the guess well worth the risk.

Teacher's Notes

- This page concludes the unit and gives students some encouragement before they move on. It also suggests a few steps that students can take outside of class to help them get better prepared for all the challenges the PSAT presents.
- Support outside reading and writing with your in-class activities. Encourage students to read by providing suggestions for reading-level appropriate books for your students and by giving students reading time in class (if possible). Talk about books you read and why you like them. Help your students to see that reading and writing can actually be fun—something that often gets lost in the race to prep for the exams.

Getting Started

We just discussed some skills that will help you master the PSAT. Here are some other things you can do now to help you get ready for Test Day.

- First of all, if you aren't reading on a regular basis, start now. Nothing will better prepare you for the questions on the PSAT than reading challenging material as often as you can.
- Get familiar with the layout of the PSAT. Spend some time looking at the directions, the format, the answer grid, and anything else that may intimidate you. Surprises are the last thing you want on Test Day. By taking the time now to familiarize yourself with the intricacies of the test, you will have much less to worry about later.

keep in mind

Practice Makes Peaceful

Preparing yourself thoroughly won't just increase your skills; it will also reduce your stress level. Because the PSAT is so predictable, if you get to know it well ahead of time, you'll be able to seriously reduce your anxiety on Test Day.

ReKAP Answers

- **Sentence completion** questions are arranged in order of difficulty.
- One thing I can do on my own to get better prepared for the Critical Reading sections of the PSAT is to **read**.
- Even though the individual questions vary from one PSAT to another, the basic structure and content tested remain **the same**, making the PSAT **predictable**.

Unit 1 ReKAP

Look back at what you found out about the PSAT in this unit. Then fill in the spaces below to show what you have learned.

- _____ questions are arranged in order of difficulty.
- One thing I can do on my own to get better prepared for the Critical Reading sections of the PSAT is to _____.
- Even though the individual questions vary from one PSAT to another, the basic structure and content tested remain _____, making the PSAT _____.