



## **Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary: How to Improve over the Long-Term**

With the advent of the new SAT, the bar has been raised on reading comprehension skills and vocabulary use. Students will need to upgrade their skills in order to succeed not only on the SAT but also in college.

The new SAT requires a higher level of reading skill than either its predecessor or the ACT. The new SAT is aligned with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (<http://www.corestandards.org>) adopted by the majority of states (although not Texas). These standards involve:

- “Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language”
- “Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational,” and
- “Building knowledge through content-rich non-fiction.”

Overall, the text complexity that students will be expected to absorb and analyze is higher. This complexity is reflected in these and other specific characteristics:

- More complicated and/or abstract topics
- Answers based on specific, textual evidence
- Synthesis of charts, tables, and other visual information with passages
- More sophisticated language and syntax
- Rich vocabulary, with an emphasis on words primarily encountered in written language

While many students rejoiced when the College Board announced that they were removing the dreaded vocabulary fill-in-the-blank questions, the students’ joy was premature. The new SAT actually requires more from students in terms of vocabulary and tests it in a way that does not allow for the usual flash card drills. Vocabulary on the new SAT is based on Tier 2 words: words that you see often in books, but hear rarely in speech. In other words, if you don’t read very often, you likely won’t know these words.

The idea of reading brings us to the crux of the matter. Today’s students must read more, and they must read more challenging material. At Woodlands Test Prep, we don’t believe, however, that this idea must necessarily lead to a collective groan of “bleh.”

The world is saturated with both excellent and interesting writing. The trick is to find sources you enjoy and read 20 minutes a day. Committing to reading just 20 minutes a day allows the average reader to read nearly 30 books a year. How does that work? The average reader reads 300 words per minute. Translated to a whole

year, that same reader can read 2,184,000 words! The average book has 75,000 words, resulting in around 29 books per year. You could conceivably fit this in while eating your breakfast every day! (Or look at Instagram or Facebook just a tiny bit less often – just saying.)

At Woodlands Test Prep, we've developed an excellent list of resources for you to consider. We recommend reading a book on an ongoing basis and interspersing that with reading from periodicals – both online and “hard copy.” Since almost everyone has a smart phone in their hand all day long, put the Kindle or other book reading app on there. Then, you'll always have a book with you for those moments when you have an unexpected five minutes of down time.

Following is a list of periodicals that appeal to students. Try to pick a new one each week to explore different perspectives and topics.

- The New York Times – Generally regarded as the flagship newspaper of the United States. Its crossword is legendary. ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))
- The Nation – Liberal magazine focused on politics and the economy ([www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com))
- National Review – Conservative magazine focused on politics and the economy ([www.nationalreview.com](http://www.nationalreview.com))
- BBC News – UK-based news organization with a non-U.S. view of news and current events. Sign up for the “6 Things You Must Read This Week” email for 6 editor-selected interesting articles. ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com))
- The Atlantic – Focuses on foreign affairs, politics, the economy, and cultural trends ([www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com))
- Scientific American – Focused on science. Oldest continuously published magazine in the U.S. ([www.scientificamerican.com](http://www.scientificamerican.com))
- Slate – Covers arts and culture, politics, sports, and news ([www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com))
- The Economist – UK-based magazine offering insight on international news and politics, business and finance, science and technology, and the connections between them. ([www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com))
- The New Yorker – Unabashedly New York City-based magazine focused on pop culture, politics, and social issues. Includes excellent (and interesting!) short fiction from top writers. Famous for its single panel cartoons. [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)
- ProPublica – Non-profit, independent newsroom. ([www.propublica.org](http://www.propublica.org))
- Edge – Conversation-based essays on intellectual topics. Be sure to check out this year's Annual Question and previous years'. ([www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org))
- Smithsonian – Official journal published by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. focused on science with excellent accompanying photography. ([www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com))
- National Geographic – Focused on scientific topics and how they relate to humanity. Read the hard-copy magazine as limited content is online. World renowned photography. ([www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com))
- New Scientist – UK-based magazine focused on science in all its forms. ([www.newscientist.com](http://www.newscientist.com))

- Science – Peer-reviewed academic journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Investigate in particular the “News” tab and the “Curated Topics” section under “Topics.” ([www.sciencemag.org](http://www.sciencemag.org))
- Science News – Devoted to short articles about new scientific and technical developments. ([www.sciencenews.org](http://www.sciencenews.org))
- Arts and Letters Daily – Diverse array of news stories, essays, and features from across the humanities. Articles are chosen for their appeal and humor. Site owned by The Chronicle of Higher Education. ([www.aldaily.com](http://www.aldaily.com))
- 3 Quarks Daily – Commentary, essays, and multimedia from “anything they deem inherently fascinating,” including literature, the arts, politics, current affairs, science, philosophy, gossip. ([www.3quarksdaily.com](http://www.3quarksdaily.com))
- National Public Radio – Online print version of news outlet. Focused on news and cultural programming. ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org))
- Wikipedia – Not high level writing but interesting to go to the main page and/or choose “Random Article” from the sidebar. Might spur your interest in topics for further reading. ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org))
- Flipboard – An app for both Iphone and Android that gathers news and social media stories and then serves them up depending on your indicated interests. Very cool! You will find articles from many of the above periodicals in it.

Multimedia Websites – to spur your interest in further reading

- TED Talks – TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a collection of conferences about “ideas worth spreading.” The emphasis in the videos is on entertainment; complex topics are presented in appealing and accessible ways. ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com))
- Radiolab – Podcasts of a radio show focusing on scientific and philosophical topics. Fun with distinctive audio style. ([www.radiolab.org](http://www.radiolab.org))