

# **Understanding PSAT/NMSQT Results**

**A CLASSROOM PRESENTATION**



**The College Board**  
Educational Excellence for All Students

# Your PSAT/NMSQT Score Report: How to Read It and What to Do Next

## 40-Minute Lesson Plan

### Preparation

What follows is a complete script to use with the set of transparency masters provided. You are the best judge of how much information your students need and how best to present it. We hope this is helpful.

1. Meet with your Principal or Dean of Instruction to discuss conducting the PSAT/NMSQT Score Interpretation Workshop for your students.
2. Agree upon the date(s) and how to assemble the students.
3. Select your workshop site(s) (individual classrooms or large meeting room).
4. Reserve the audiovisual equipment you will need.
5. Inform all faculty and staff.
6. Notify parents that a special guidance workshop will be conducted to help their children understand and use the information on their PSAT/NMSQT Score Reports. In this note, you could include your recommendation that students take the SAT® I during the spring dates (March, May, or June) to maximize the academic growth they have experienced during this school year and the practice they received by taking the PSAT/NMSQT. Postponing their

first SAT until next year creates a wider gap between their current level of readiness and the test. It may also mean taking the exam for the first time on a Saturday morning after one of the many Friday night events of the fall semester.

You can include this information in a regular newsletter or prepare a special notice to be sent to homes or hand-carried by the students.

7. Prepare your workshop materials. Make transparencies from the masters provided. Secure enough copies of the free College Board booklet, *Taking the SAT I*, to distribute to all workshop participants. In addition, you may want to make copies of the PSAT/NMSQT Score Report (1 in the presentation) to distribute to your students. If possible, three-hole punch these documents so that the students can keep them, along with any notes they took during the presentation, in their binders to use when they receive their own reports.
8. Obtain enough *SAT Program Registration Bulletins* for all your juniors to register for the spring dates.
9. Study the script and transparencies thoroughly before your first

program. They are intended to make your task easier by complementing your own knowledge and presentation skills.

## Script

Today you will learn how to read a PSAT/NMSQT Score Report and use it. PSAT/NMSQT stands for Preliminary SAT and National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.

We are going to study the Score Report for a student named Jason with these goals in mind:

1. You will learn how to understand your own scores.
2. You will be able to determine how well your performance on the test in October compares with the performance of 1.3 million other high school juniors who are making college plans.
3. You will receive specific information about your strengths and weaknesses.
4. You will learn how to work on improving your performance on this kind of a test before you take the SAT I this spring.
5. You will learn how to plan for and take some important “next steps.”

Everyone ready? Let's get started.

### 1 Score Report

The sample Score Report you see on the screen is exactly like the one you will receive. Glance over the whole report. Notice there are four major parts:

1. scores;
2. National Merit information;
3. educational plans; and
4. answers to test questions.

### 2 Jason's scores

Let's begin with Jason's scores. He received a Verbal score of 45, Math score of 49, and a Writing Skills score of 46. In the center, we see Jason's scores represented as ranges.

This is a really good way to think

about scores. The ranges show how much Jason's scores would vary if he took the PSAT/NMSQT many times. Notice his Verbal score would fall within 4 points above or below 45. So, a score of 47, for example, would be considered similar to Jason's score of 45. Since ranges of his Verbal, Math, and Writing Skills scores overlap, we can conclude that his skills are very similar.

Finally, to the far right, you see Jason's percentiles.

Let's take a minute to look at his percentiles and learn what they mean. Percentiles help you compare your performance on the PSAT/NMSQT to the performance of other college-bound juniors.

Notice Jason's score of 45 on the Verbal portion of the test places him in the 34th percentile. That means he scored higher than 34 percent of the students taking the test.

However, 66 percent of the students had a score equal to or higher than his. When we look at his Math score of 49, we see that it places him in the 50th percentile.

Another way to understand percentiles is to visualize 100 students in a line and arranged by score, from the lowest or first percentile to the highest or 99th percentile. If the students are lined up according to their Verbal percentiles, Jason is number 34—ahead of 33 students in the line and behind 66 students. Where is Jason standing if we arrange the students by their Math scores? Right in the middle at the 50th percentile. Describe his Math skills in comparison to the other college-bound juniors. That's it. Average.

Looking at Jason's performance on that test day, are his Writing Skills “average” or “below average”? Right. Below average. And when we say “below average” in school, we often think that's bad, but keep this in mind. All 100 of these students are planning to attend college—even the student whose scores place him or her in the lowest percentiles. These students may not all begin at the same college, but they all can go. Don't forget that when you are looking at your own scores and percentiles

### 3 Scores: 20 to 80

PSAT/NMSQT scores are reported in two-digit numbers: 20 (lowest) to 80 (highest). Scores on the SAT I range from 200 to 800.

Now look down to the Estimated SAT Scores portion in the middle of the Scores section. Notice Jason's Verbal score of 45 on the PSAT/NMSQT is like a score of 450 on the SAT. His Math score of 49 is like an SAT Math score of 490. You will see predicted SAT scores on your report.

Think of some of the colleges you have been considering, both two-year community colleges and four-year colleges. If Jason's SAT scores were the only facts the colleges had, would he be admitted? *[Allow your students to name colleges and talk about Jason's status as an applicant for admission.]* But colleges do not just look at your SAT scores when you apply for admission. They pay special attention to your high school record, the courses you have taken, and the grades you have earned. See why it is important to continue taking college preparatory classes and making the best grades possible?

And one more thing. While some colleges do have minimum SAT scores that students need to be admitted, many colleges do not require specific or minimum scores. Don't forget this! No matter what scores you make on the SAT, there will be colleges that are very happy to have you enroll there. *The College Handbook* is an excellent place to look for information about colleges. The SAT scores of the middle 50 percent of enrolled students will be listed. Remember this: 25 percent of their students had higher scores and 25 percent were admitted with lower scores.

#### 4 Writing Skills

Notice that Jason's Writing Skills score on the PSAT/NMSQT is used to predict his score of 460 on the SAT II: Writing Test. We'll talk more about the SAT II subject tests in a moment.

#### 5 National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC)

In this section we see information about eligibility for scholarships available through the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. Each student who takes the PSAT/NMSQT has a Selection Index. The Selection Index is the sum of the Verbal, Math, and Writing Skills scores ( $V + M + W$ ). Jason's Selection Index is 140, which places him at the 41st percentile. What percent of the students had a Selection Index lower than Jason? Good! Forty-one percent is right, and I know you can picture him in that line of 100 students.

To enter competition for Merit Scholarships, a student must meet four entry requirements. You see them listed on Jason's report.

Jason is eligible to enter the competition if he:

1. is a full-time high school student;

2. will graduate in 1999 and enroll in college full-time;
3. completes grades 9–12 in four years; and
4. is a U.S. citizen.

More than one million juniors enter this competition each year. About 55,000 qualify for recognition, and only about 9,000 of these receive an award. Be sure to look at your own Selection Index and eligibility when you receive your Score Report. It usually takes a percentile rank of 96 or higher to continue in the competition.

#### 6 Educational Plans

This section is titled Educational Plans and contains a combination of information. When taking the test you provided:

- your grade average;
- the college major you are considering at this time; and
- the career field you have in mind.

Jason reported an overall grade average of B-. He plans to major in engineering in college. However, he did not find the specific career field he has in mind. Note he chose "other."

The College Board provided Jason with a description of what engineering students learn and do. Next are the special interests and skills future engineers usually have. Finally, the high school courses that will help Jason prepare to major in engineering are listed. Look at the math. Remember Jason's Math score of 49 and percentile rank of 50? What should Jason realize after reading this part of his Score Report? [Let your students assess Jason's current status and make suggestions as to what he might do about it.] You will want to read this part of your own Score Report closely to see how well your future plans match your current interests, your skills,

and the courses you have taken and will be taking in your senior year. Get more information about college majors and careers. [Refer to your school's resources.]

#### 7 Verbal Questions

The Verbal sections contain Analogies, Sentence Completions, and Critical Reading questions. Notice the first line displays the number of each question as it appeared in the test booklet.

The second line displays the correct answer to each question. On the next line you see the answers Jason chose: + means CORRECT, O means OMITTED, and an alpha letter shows the incorrect answer he chose. On the last line we see the letters E, M, and H, which identify the level of difficulty of each question. E means EASY questions, M means MEDIUM difficulty, and H means HARD (the most difficult questions on the test). Except for reading questions, the questions are generally arranged from easy to hard, with the most difficult questions appearing at the end of each group. However, this test is for high school juniors who are preparing for college, so it's possible that an E or easy question might seem difficult to you.

Notice Jason answered question 1 wrong—he chose (B) instead of (D), and it was one of the EASY questions.

Because you will have your answers and your test booklet, you can quickly look up each question you missed or omitted and try to determine why.

#### 8 Answers

Now let's look at the right side of the report. This is the PSAT/NMSQT answers part. When you receive your own PSAT/NMSQT Score

Report, you will also get back your test booklet, the one you used when you took the test.

Let's look at what's here and how you can use it. The first section contains the answer information to the Verbal questions.

## 9 Sentence Completions

Let's take a quick look at a sample Sentence Completion item and see if you remember how to answer them.

### 10 Two blanks

This sentence contains two blanks. Each answer choice contains two words and both must fit into the context of the sentence better than any other pair. Read the sentence. [Wait, then read the sentence aloud to your students.]

Before you look at the answer choices, let's see what we know from the sentences: Ellen is not well coordinated, she has realized she cannot match or equal her sister, and she feels "content to remain a \_\_\_\_." You may begin by considering the words for the first blank or the words that fit into the second blank. In blank 2 would the word "fan" fit? [Reread the entire sentence using "fan" in the second blank.] Maybe. How about "friend"? She's her sister first and differences in their athletic abilities don't really tell us about friendship. Scratch it. "Contestant"? It isn't likely she would continue to compete against her sister after acknowledging the difference in their skills. "Critic"? Does criticizing her sister match up with feeling "content"? Scratch "critic."

How about "spectator"? Might she be content to watch her sister, the athlete? Yes. So we still have "fan" and "spectator" as possible choices for Blank 2.

Let's look at Blank 1. Choice A, "admitted" and "fan," is a pair.

Choice E, "envied" and "spectator," is the other pair.

Can we use "admitted"? Scratch Choice A. The correct answer is Choice E. Incidentally this is an easy question, and 77 percent of the students got it right.

### 11 One blank

Here is another Sentence Completion item with only one blank. Read the sentence. Look at the answer choices: "enumerated," "rebutted," "obliterated," "alleviated," and "implemented." How many of these words are familiar to you?

Now before you try to select the correct answer, read the sentence again and fill in the blank with a word of your own that seems to make sense. What did you choose? "Explained"? "Spelled out"? "Detailed"? Now look at the answer choices. Which one fits? (A) is right. Even though there is only one blank in this sentence, the level of difficulty is HARD. Only 23 percent of the students got it right.

### 12 Analogies

Analogies are next. Remember these?

### 13 Sample Analogy

MICROSCOPE: IMAGE::  
What's the process for solving analogies? Right. Make a sentence with the words that describes the relationship between them. OK. How about this pair? "A microscope enlarges an image." Now look at each pair of words in the answer choices. You're right, (B) is the correct answer. This is an EASY question that 81 percent of the students got right.

### 14 Sample Analogy

How about one more?  
OBSEQUIOUS: OBEY::  
Raise your hand if you know the

meaning of "obsequious." Now look at the answer choices. Do you know most of these words? Well this is a very difficult question, which only 15 percent of the students answered correctly. Another 27 percent omitted the question. The difficulty lies in determining the relationship between the words: "obsequious," which means servile or extremely compliant, and "obey." "Obsequious" describes a person who obeys in an extremely humble or exaggerated way, as "fawning" describes a person who praises in an exaggerated way. The correct answer is Choice B.

Notice that Sentence Completion items and Analogy questions appear in Sections 1 and 3 of the test. They account for one-half of the Verbal questions. The other half are Critical Reading. Does that remind you how important it is for you to do some sustained reading everyday? Not just skimming or looking at the pictures, but reading without interruption, forcing yourself to concentrate on what you're reading and what it means.

### 15 Critical Reading

Here are the kinds of Critical Reading questions you answered on the PSAT/NMSQT:

- Vocabulary in Context;
- Literal Comprehension; and
- Extended Reasoning.

### 16

Do you remember these questions from your test? Vocabulary-in-Context questions test your vocabulary, but the words are presented within paragraphs to help you determine the meaning. Literal Comprehension questions test your ability to understand what you read. Extended Reasoning questions require you to make inferences, recognize implications, and analyze and evaluate ideas. These are often the more difficult items.

17

Read this sample question and choose the answer that most nearly means the same as “functions”? Choice B: “purposes” is correct, and 66 percent of students answered this question right.

### 18 Reading example

Quickly read this example. In which of your classes would you read about this subject? History, government, economics, or business classes? So it's not just in your English classes that reading is important!

This is an Extended Reasoning question at the MEDIUM level of difficulty. Forty-three percent of the students answering it got it right, Answer (D).

### 19 Double passage

Sometimes you are required to read two passages that have some common element that links them. Read both passages before trying to answer the questions. This example is a Literal Comprehension question in which you must recognize that the word “self-deluding” describes “modern culture” as well as the four-line sentence. Only 42 percent of the students chose the right answer, Choice A.

### 20 Mathematics

Let's begin the Math section. The questions require knowledge of arithmetic, first-year algebra, and some geometry, not algebra II or trigonometry questions. The math on the PSAT/NMSQT and SAT I covers only arithmetic, algebra I, and geometry.

### 21 Math Section

Notice you will have the same information about each math item that we observed in the Verbal section:

- question number;
- correct answer;
- your answer; and
- level of difficulty.

On the last line you see the letters A, R, and G, which tell you the content of the question. **A** means algebra, **R** means arithmetic, and **G** means geometry.

### 22 Sample Math Question: $3(2+x) = 9$

Here's a simple mathematical sentence that reads, “If three times the sum of two numbers, 2 and  $x$ , is nine, what is the number ( $x$ )?” What steps must you take to solve it? Right. Multiply  $(2+x)$  by 3. That's  $6 + 3x$ . Then subtract 6 from both sides and divide by 3. Choice A is right, and 88 percent of the students answered this EASY question right.

### 23 Word problem

Now read this one and choose your answer. How many of you chose 12? How about 54? The key to answering this one correctly is to read carefully. If you chose 12 (A) for your answer, you stopped before you completed the question. The right answer is 54 (D), and only 30 percent of the students got this HARD question right.

### 24 Taking the SAT I

These next items, **Quantitative Comparisons**, have very specific directions. Let's look at the directions. Open the booklet *Taking the SAT I* to page 57. You should become thoroughly familiar with these directions, perhaps even memorize them, before you take the SAT this spring. The directions and examples are always the same.

Having to study them on test day will be a waste of your time. For every minute you spend on the directions, you have a minute less to

answer test questions.

### 25 Geometry

The language of math, that is, the meaning of mathematical terms, plays an important part in solving this question. Words like semicircle, radius, center, etc., must be understood. Is OV a radius? How about OW? What's the correct answer? Answer (C). Eighty-two out of 100 students got this EASY question correct.

### 26 Math example

Turn to page 50 in *Taking the SAT I*. Notice that all the formulas you may need on the test are provided in the test booklet. Therefore, the PSAT/NMSQT and the SAT do not measure how well you have memorized formulas. The test measures your ability to use formulas. When you review your own Score Report and especially any math questions you missed or omitted, be sure to think about how the problem should be solved:

- the steps to take;
- the formulas to use; and
- the process.

These problem-solving steps will help prepare you to answer similar questions on the SAT and other tests.

In this example you must compare the value or amount under Column A to the value or amount in Column B. To do this both quantities must be expressed in the same unit of measure. In this example, the first step is to express both quantities in either centimeters or meters.

Take a minute to find the answer. Choice (C) is correct. This is a HARD question, and 24 percent of the students got it right.

### 27 Grid-ins

The Student-Produced Response



questions, also called grid-ins, are not multiple choice. Remember? You solved the problem and then recorded your answer on a grid. The answers must be gridded in the ovals, as you receive no credit for an answer that is written in the boxes and not gridded. When you get your Score Report, you will see the correct answer and the answer you gridded. Look at question 37 on Jason's report. Depending on how he solved the problem,  $\frac{1}{2}$  or .5 is correct. If you omitted one of the grid-in items, an O will appear. A U may appear to indicate "unscorable."

This is the only section on the test where no points are deducted for an incorrect answer. In all other sections of the test there is a deduction for an incorrect answer:  $\frac{1}{4}$  point for an incorrect answer on a question with 5 answer choices and  $\frac{1}{3}$  point for a question with 4 answer choices. This is intended to discourage students from blind or random guessing.

### 28 Read directions

Look on page 60 of *Taking the SAT I*. This same set of directions and examples appeared in your PSAT/NMSQT test booklet and will be printed in your SAT test booklet this spring. Don't wait until your SAT test day to read these directions again.

### 29 Sample Math Question: $2x + 4y = 23$

In this sample,  $x = 4$ . Work it. What's the answer? Right,  $\frac{15}{4}$  or 3.75. Either answer can be placed on the grid and scored as correct. But suppose Jason reduced  $\frac{15}{4}$  to a mixed number,  $3\frac{3}{4}$ ? If he then tried to put  $3\frac{3}{4}$  on the grid, what would happen? That's right! In the four grid squares he would have 3, 3, /, 4. Yes! The scanner would read  $3\frac{3}{4}$ ,

which is  $8\frac{1}{4}$ . WRONG! This question was EASY, and 85 percent of the students who answered it got it right. But gridding it right is as important as solving it.

### 30 Sample Math Question: $t > 10$

What do we know here? Factor  $t$  is 11, 12, 13, or higher and must also be a number that will divide evenly into 84 and 126. Right. Who has the answer? 14, 21, 42? Yes, all three are right. Very good. This is not a difficult question. Seventy-nine percent of the students got it right.

### 31 Writing Skills

The last section of Jason's Score Report is the Writing Skills section. He can use this information to compare his writing skills to those of other college-bound juniors and to prepare for the SAT II: Writing Test.

### 32 SAT II: Writing Test

The SAT II: Writing Test is one of the College Board's 23 one-hour subject tests. It contains the same kind of multiple-choice questions you answered on the PSAT/NMSQT. However, you must also write a first-draft essay during a twenty-minute period. Colleges use students' SAT II scores for:

- admission to college or to special programs;
- placement; and/or
- advanced placement, often with credits and grades.

Because colleges use the scores for different reasons, you should ask about the testing policies at each of the colleges you are considering. This will be the best way to find out which of the SAT II subject tests might be right for you. But remember—there are no Writing Skills questions on the SAT I.

### 33 Writing Skills Questions

Your Writing Skills score on the PSAT/NMSQT is excellent information for you. It will let you know how your skills compare to the writing skills of other college-bound juniors. Let's review what those Writing Skills questions from the PSAT/NMSQT were like.

### 34 Sentence Errors

In this section, you begin by reading the entire sentence. Then you decide if it is correct as written or if there is an error. If there is an error, it will appear in one of the underlined portions and your answer will be the alpha letter beneath it. Is there an error in this sentence? No? Then what's the answer? Answer (E). Good. In this type of question, (E) will always be the answer if there is no error.

### 35 Improving Sentences

The next type of question was Improving Sentences. Remember these? Once again you had to read the whole sentence and then examine the underlined portion. Notice the first answer choice (A) is exactly the same as the sentence. In this type of question, (A) will always be the answer if there is no error. If you choose (A) you are saying that the sentence is correctly written. Now (A) is a possible answer, so don't force yourself to "fix" a sentence that isn't "broken." However, each of the ways the underlined portion has been rewritten must be considered before you make your decision. The sentence has a dangling participle. Which answer choice improves the sentence? Answer (B). Good! This is a moderately difficult question, and 55 percent of the students answered the question right.

## 36 Improving Paragraphs

Here's the final question type, Improving Paragraphs. After reading the entire paragraph, consider each answer choice. Which is the correct one? Answer (D). Good. This is one of the EASY questions, and 86 out of every 100 students who answered it got it right.

Do you recall how tired you were at the end of the exam? Throughout the two hours and ten minutes of the PSAT/NMSQT, you were reading, concentrating, and thinking. You will do the very same things on the SAT I exam this spring, only it is a three-hour test. So let's plan your next steps.



## Next Steps

**Step 1:** When you receive your PSAT/NMSQT Score Report and your own test booklet, study them to identify each question you missed or omitted.

**Step 2:** Find those incorrect or omitted questions in your test booklet and try them again to determine why you missed them and how you can increase your chances of answering similar questions correctly on the SAT I. You may consult classmates, teachers, and others if you need help. Look around you in this room. Every student here took the PSAT/NMSQT and wants to do even better on the SAT, so you have a ready-made study group.

**Step 3:** Review the test-taking tips, especially guessing and omitting on page 6 of your booklet, *Taking the SAT I*. Did you use these strategies on the PSAT/NMSQT? Also glance through this booklet. It contains sample SAT questions with full explanations. It contains test-taking **tips** and **hints**. It contains a complete SAT that you can take on your own and score. It's as good as a coaching course if you use it! Also, if you have access to the Web, visit the College Board Online® for more test questions, test-taking hints, and college planning information.

**Step 4:** Register for the SAT I now so you can take it in March, May, or June of this school year. You are ready. You have been reading and learning in English classes, math classes, history, science, foreign language classes, etc., all year long. Waiting until the beginning of your senior year will add three extra months in which to forget what you have learned from taking the PSAT/NMSQT.

### How to Register for the SAT

- Take an *SAT Program Registration Bulletin* with you today.
- Complete the Registration Form and the Student Descriptive Questionnaire. (Take the time to complete the questionnaire. Colleges will use that information to determine whether their institution can offer you a good match. If so, they will begin sending you information.)
- Mail the Registration Form and the questionnaire with your check for the \$23.00 fee made payable to the College Board immediately.
- Or you may register on the Internet using a computer and a credit card at the College Board's Internet address:  
**www.collegeboard.org.**

The College Board provides fee waivers for students with demonstrated need. If you believe you are eligible for a fee waiver, drop by to see me (your counselor) right away.

### Wrap Up and Dismissal

If you are using a "classroom set" of:

- Jason's PSAT/NMSQT Score Report and
  - *Taking the SAT I* booklets,
- collect them before dismissing your students.

If you have provided a copy of both documents to each of your students:

- remind them to save their copies (or place them in their three-ring binders). They will have them to use when they receive their PSAT/NMSQT Score Reports.
- allow them to take their copy of the *Taking the SAT I* booklet.

**Short Version:** To conduct a shorter workshop for your students, use transparencies

1 - 8, 15, 20, 21, 24, 26 - 28, 31 - 34, and 36 with the accompanying script.

**Program for Parents:** With minor modifications to the script, the complete workshop or shortened version may be used in a program for parents prior to the distribution of their students' PSAT/NMSQT Score Reports.