

Write a Better Persuasive Essay for the SAT and ACT: Having Examples Ready

Standardized test essays are short in both time and length. Nonetheless, to earn a good score your essay must be well-structured and well thought out, and this, in turn, requires that you be prepared to discuss a subject effectively without any advance notice. The key to this preparation is having good examples in hand to support your argument. This article will show you how to be ready for ANY essay prompt you may face.

Imagine a criminal trial that consisted of JUST the attorneys' closing statements, without the testimony of even ONE witness. Obviously, a lawyer could hardly expect to convince a jury that way. So you might be surprised to learn that the essays that most students write on standardized tests are just like such a trial! As an English teacher I can tell you that nearly every essay I have read has boiled down to 4 or 5 paragraphs of "I think I am right because...", and I can also tell you that that is NOT the way to impress the test graders. To accomplish that, just like the attorneys you will need "evidence".

Your evidence should take the form of examples from the following areas:

- Literature – books, plays, poems, movies, song lyrics
- History – people, places, events
- Pop Culture – politics, famous people, famous movements
- Family History – not YOUR life, but your grandparents, great-grandparents, *etc.*
Especially think about your traditions and culture or how your family came to live where they do.

But here are a few caveats:

- Don't use your own life: It's not very persuasive, resembling too closely the "I think I'm right" style of argument.
- Don't EVER use any of the following examples: They are overused to the point of horror!
 - Romeo and Juliet
 - The Great Gatsby
 - The Catcher in the Rye
 - Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks
 - Hitler
 - The current president or George Washington
- Don't make up stuff: You may expand a bit, to be sure, but fabricated evidence is hard to write with authority and will only serve to weaken your essay.

The fact is that you can use almost ANY example to prove almost any point. Seriously. This works especially well with examples from literature, because a great piece of literature always communicates ANY number of themes within the same story. For instance, consider Romeo and Juliet. You could say that the theme is any of these:



- Love at first sight really happens.
- True love is worth your life.
- Gang warfare causes nothing but sorrow.
- Lying to your parents always leads to disaster.
- Absence does make the heart grow fonder.

... depending on your point of view.

LONG before test day pick 4 or 5 different sources. Choose some with which you are at least somewhat familiar. THINK about them, and then use them for EVERY essay you write. For example:

- “However, as The Great Gatsby shows, what we love is more dangerous than what we fear.”
- “However, as The Great Gatsby shows, it is better to live in the country than to live in the city.”
- “However, as The Great Gatsby shows, challenges bring out our inner strengths.”
- “However, as The Great Gatsby shows, we need others to truly understand who we are.”

So instead of spending ten minutes (or more!) of the precious test time trying to come up with evidence after you read the prompt, select your evidence BEFORE you go into the test room. Do it right now! Fill out the following table and you will be READY!

Examples:

History	
Literature	
Pop Culture	
Family History	

If you go into the writing section of the test with examples in hand you will waste less time, avoid the “I think because...” type of essay and write a more authoritative and ultimately higher-scoring paper.

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