

**THE BLOG****Essay Tease**

By Marty Kaplan

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Last weekend the College Board administered, for only the second time, its spanking new essay test that's now part of the SATs. The first high school guinea pigs forced to sit for the writing exam took it in March.

Of course the College Board also needed to train teachers to grade the essays. They instructed them to spend two to three minutes per essay, reading and scoring them on a 1-to-6 scale. Based on insider accounts of these teacher-graders in the NYTimes and LATimes, here's what it takes to game the system and get a 6.

Their top piece of advice: Length matters. The more you write, the better you do. If you can crank out 400 words during the 25 minutes you have, you're on the way to the top; 100 words leaves you scraping the bottom. When the director of undergraduate writing at MIT compared the scores students got with the essays they wrote, he found that length was a stunningly accurate predictor. "If you just graded them based on length without ever reading them," he told the NYTimes, "you'd be right over 90 percent of the time."

And what about content? The key turns out to be this: use a lot of examples to make your argument. Personal anecdotes are as good as examples from history or literature. And here's the rub: it doesn't matter if the examples are accurate. That's right: if you state something as a fact, even if it's not true, even if you know it's not true, that's okay. You still get points for having the appearance of a valid argument.

So it turns out that the College Board is rewarding students for demonstrating exactly the kind of skill that'll equip them to become Republican politicians, cable news anchors, and their enablers.

In his Farewell Address, George Washington warned the nation to beware of the military-industrial complex. (OK, it was Eisenhower, but who cares?) Maybe it's time to rename that the military-industrial-politico-media complex, in honor of the future Ann Coulters that the American educational system is apparently being engineered to produce.

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