



## **Rewinding and Reinforcing: Word Voyage's Long-Term Approach to the Skills Behind the SAT**

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Word Voyage offers lifelong vocabulary learning that carries students through and beyond high-stakes tests. Because they have learned *high-frequency roots*, *started early*, and *practiced frequently*, Word Voyage students have the knowledge and the skills to grapple with the difficult vocabulary, challenging syntax and demanding writing of the SAT.

### Rewinding and Reinforcing: True Skill-Building

Below is a list of 7 of the skills necessary to score well (in the 600-800 range) on the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the SAT as laid out by the College Board's SAT website (2011) and *Study Guide* (2009). Paired with these skills are the *methods* Word Voyage uses to teach these skills. Keep in mind that all of these methods are started *early* and are repeatedly *practiced*: the rewind and reinforce path to test success.

#### **1. Consider related roots, prefixes and suffixes:**

This advice for reading appears again and again on the College Board's website and other test preparation websites. In fact, according to the College Board, the tried and true, "use context clues to figure out the meaning," will only get you as far as a 590 on the Reading section. In order to make it those last 210 points, you will need to have subtle enough knowledge of Latin and Greek roots to be able to "understand how words can sometimes be used in unusual ways that directly refute common usage" (<http://sat.collegeboard.com/practice/sat-skills-insight>).

This is where Word Voyage's vocabulary preparation is superior. First, since Word Voyage students have been building skills incrementally over a long period of time, they are good at taking words apart. Second, they are *comfortable* taking words apart and investigating all of the potential meanings. Finally, Word Voyage's unique 'Word History and Origins' component helps students become aware of the subtleties of word history and how a word that joined the language in one period might have a very different connotation from one that joined the language a few hundred years later.

**2. Determine the meaning of a word when there is little or no supporting context:**

As discussed above, this is where the Word Voyage student shines. S/he is a critical expert in *the structure of the word*. There are a relatively small number of Latinate prefixes, roots and suffixes that make up the vast majority of SAT words. Word Voyage students work with these morphemes at home on their computers every day. More importantly, they are comfortable with the *process of word investigation*. Other bright and resourceful students may eventually be able to draw on buried root knowledge to determine a meaning, but the process of looking at a word from the perspective of its component parts is second nature to the Word Voyage student. For that student, the large, unknown word without context is a reasonable challenge.

**3. Use clear, precise and appropriate vocabulary:**

In some sense, this is the mirror image to the skills above, but for writing. A crash course with a test preparation company may actually improve your Critical Reading score, but the ability to *use* a word requires a deeper understanding than a flash card can provide. Furthermore, only after repeated rounds of practice will students confidently reach for advanced Greek and Latinate vocabulary in their writing.

Word Voyage provides both that understanding and that practice. Its innovative ‘Word Meaning Up From the Roots’ component focuses the students on the root meaning of the word and how it compares to the modern definition. In the ‘Word Origins and History’ section, the student is given an opportunity to research the word’s use in another language. This level of engagement gives Word Voyage students a subtle and multi-dimensional understanding of word meaning.

Word Voyage also offers the practice that is necessary to use appropriate vocabulary in the stressful context of a standardized test. Its ‘Sentence Writing and Grammar’ component lets students flex their vocabulary muscles by practicing difficult words (a) with different sentence structures (simple, compound, complex, compound/complex), (b) in long, multi-part sentences (the teacher can require a minimum number of words) (c) with specified numbers of nouns, commas, conjunctions and even a semicolon. Moreover, they are flexing those muscles under the trained eye of their teacher, who can guide them to use language ever more precisely. After practicing this throughout the year with Word Voyage, the student is well prepared to engage the sentence-writing exercises on the SAT.

**4. Access a broad and extensive vocabulary within a variety of syntactical structures and contexts:**

Access and context are something that psychologists are very interested in (Howard & Kahana, 2002) – how do we retrieve information stored in our brains and what role does context play? Unfortunately for students who want a quick fix to vocabulary acquisition, much human learning *is* context-bound (although see Anderson et al., 1996, for some constraints on this). This means that seeing a vocabulary item *once*, in *one* sentence, is definitely not going to be enough for

long-term learning. So a quick review of numerous vocabulary items will not solidify them for the SAT.

Furthermore, even consistent reviewing of the same materials is not sufficient: seeing a vocabulary item numerous times in the same sentence *will* promote long-term learning, but it will not allow that item to be *accessed* “within a variety of syntactical structures and contexts.” In order to have easy access to vocabulary, students need to use the same roots in different words, in different sentence types, and in different contexts (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This is what the combination of Word Voyage’s extensive SAT word lists and sentence writing tasks achieves: practice with a *broad and extensive vocabulary* within a *variety of syntactical structures and contexts*. And even better: it happens over time and under the practiced eye of a trained teacher.

**5. Recognize correct use of complex syntax:**

While vocabulary is certainly the primary foundation of most standardized tests, syntax comes in a close second. Knowing a wide variety of words is critical, but if students cannot decipher the relationship of the words to one another, a large vocabulary does no good.

As discussed above, Word Voyage’s holistic approach does not stop at the boundaries of the word. Its ‘Sentence Writing and Grammar’ component gives students opportunities to move beyond merely *recognizing* complex syntax to *using* it. Throughout the year, teachers can move students stepwise from simple sentences, to compound sentences, to complex sentences, and finally to compound/complex sentences. They can increase the minimum number of words, starting at 5 or 6 and finishing the year at 18 or 20. In this way, students will actually be *practicing* using SAT words in increasingly complex syntactic environments so that when they see new words in those environments, they will have the skills to decode them.

**6. Vary the sentence structure:**

Again, writing a variety of sentence types – from simple through compound/complex – is something Word Voyage students practice repeatedly. This prepares students to write essays in class, out of class, and certainly in a testing environment. As an additional benefit, it sharpens the student’s ability to perform on the SAT sections: Improving Sentences and Identifying Sentence Errors.

**7. Apply conclusions drawn from a text to other contexts:**

The College Board wants its applicants, particularly in this information-rich age, to be able to move information fluidly from one context to another. This is a critical skill in higher education, in which interdisciplinary classes are becoming more the norm than the exception. In order to solve the increasingly complex problems facing our globe – economic, environmental, political, linguistic, and social – we need thinkers who can draw upon theories from a wide range of disciplines and fields.

Word Voyage encourages this kind of critical thinking by asking students to move fluidly through a study of the *sound*, the *morphemes*, the *grammatical category*, the *overall meaning*, the *foreign source-word*, the *English period*, and a *syntactic context* for a single word. Through daily practice, students begin to see patterns among these different contexts and learn to use, say, the morphemes to determine the grammatical category, or the language of the borrowing to guess the English period. They are learning to move fluidly among intellectual contexts.

Beyond this, however, Word Voyage is at its most valuable when teachers use it throughout the curriculum, making word lists of the science terms for the week and, conversely, creating research projects out of the insights from the ‘Word Origins and History’ component. Word Voyage is a valuable addition to a classroom that encourages creative thinking across the curriculum. And, in this role, it sets students up to be able to move among the varying SAT contexts.

Thus, the skills that Word Voyage teaches are not only critical for standardized entrance exams like the SAT, they also teach students skills that are essential throughout their lives: knowledge of – and comfort with – the internal structure of words; a clear, precise and appropriate vocabulary; access to an extensive vocabulary across syntactic contexts; the ability to recognize and use complex and varied syntax; and creative, interdisciplinary thinking abilities.

## About the Author

**Abigail Konopasky** received her Ph.D. in Linguistics and Slavic Linguistics from Princeton University in 2001. After completing a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Duke University, she went on to a tenure-track position in the English Department at the University of New Orleans. Throughout her career she has been interested in literacy and access to literacy resources, teaching writing, ESL, and Women's Studies in addition to Linguistics and Discourse Theory. She is currently the curriculum consultant for Word Voyage and the Presidential Scholar at the George Mason University College of Education and Human Development.

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