

# Chapter 1 Getting to Know the SSAT and ISEE

## *In This Chapter*

Exploring the SSAT and ISEE   est Seeing what the SSAT is all about  
Discovering the ins and outs of the ISEE

If you had a choice, you may choose a trip to the dentist over taking a standardized test like the SSAT or ISEE. Neither option is fun, but at least the dentist doesn't require you to study! Nevertheless, you're reading this book because you need to take either the SSAT or ISEE. You're taking one of these exams for entrance to a private school, and you know that your performance on the exam is important. The SSAT and ISEE aren't designed to be easy and fun, but they're important and necessary.

When you face a challenge, becoming a mini-expert on the subject is a good idea. After all, the more you know, the more likely you are to be successful. So this chapter is designed to fill you in on all the details of the tests. Before you start to study for the SSAT or ISEE, you need to know what these exams are all about, what kinds of content to expect, and how to register and prepare.

## *Approaching the SSAT and ISEE*

When you first found out that you needed to take a test for admission to a school, you probably didn't jump for joy. No one likes taking tests, but at least at this point in your life, you're not a stranger to test days. After all, you've faced many of them in school so far.

Before you start thinking, "Great. Another test . . .," you need to realize that the SSAT and ISEE aren't like the exams you take for a particular subject in school. In fact, these tests are very different from a typical school test, and that's why you need to ramp up your knowledge about the exams before you begin to study. In the following sections, we explain the purpose of taking the SSAT or ISEE, what to expect on either test, and how to prepare for test day.

## *Testing your ability*

The SSAT and ISEE are different from typical school exams because they're *standardized* tests, meaning that the tests are designed to test your current ability. In other words, suppose you take a math test at school. More than likely, the math test explores several concepts and skills you've learned from a chapter or unit in your book, and therefore it tests your knowledge about those

concepts. The SSAT and ISEE, however, aren't designed to test your knowledge.

## **Part I: Paving the Way to Private School: Introducing the SSAT and ISEE**

The purpose of the SSAT and ISEE isn't to find out how smart you are. After all, human beings are so complex that no test really is able to measure that very well. Instead, the SSAT and ISEE help school administrators and admissions officers determine your current *ability* with a limited number of school subjects. Knowing your ability helps them determine your likelihood for success in their private school.

### **MEMBER**

Unfortunately, all standardized tests (including college admission tests, like the SAT and ACT) aren't just about your current ability: they're also about your skill in test taking. To do well on the SSAT and ISEE, you have to know *how* to take the test. That's why this book is so important. We review content you need to know, but we also focus heavily on how to take the test so you can do as well as possible.

## ***Knowing what to expect from test questions***

Of course, the big question you want to know is what kinds of questions you'll see on the SSAT and ISEE. The good news is the exams are similar, and they don't test a lot of different things. The exams stick to a few basic categories: verbal, reading comprehension, math, and a writing sample. All the questions are multiple-choice except for the Writing section. This book focuses on the content you'll see, the kinds of questions you'll likely be asked, how to => tackle those questions, and how to get the best score possible.

Another big question you may have is which test you should take. We **answer that** question this way: Suppose you're about to buy a new car. You're **trying to decide** between a Ford or Chevy, so which one should you pick? In truth the decision is really yours. After all, they're both cars, and they do **essentially** the same thing. You just have to decide which one is best for you. In the same way, the SSAT and ISEE are both standardized tests designed to help you get into the school of your choice. They do the same thing, so it really comes down to **deciding which test is best for you**.

You may be applying to a school that requires one test over the other, **but if you-have a choice**, you just need to check out the **differences in the-tests** and **make a decision**. So turn to the "Getting to know the SSAT" and "**Scoping Out the ISEE**" sections in this chapter to find out some specifics about each test.

## ***Preparing yourself: Practice makes perfect***

Okay, so you probably won't make a perfect score on either exam, but we wrote

this book to help you do your very best. With that thought in mind, study the chapters carefully, try every practice question in every chapter, and take every practice test in the book. Additionally, you can take real practice tests from the good folks who write the SSAT and ISEE; just go to [www.ssat.org](http://www.ssat.org) and [www.erblearn.org](http://www.erblearn.org), respectively. Try the practice tests. If you have a choice of which test you can take for your desired school, try them both and see how you score on each one. You may find that you have an edge with one exam over the other, so by all means, take the test on which you perform best. However, some schools require a certain test, so be sure to check with an admissions officer at your desired school so you know what's required.

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## Part I: Paving the Way to Private School: Introducing the SSAT and ISEE

### *Understanding what's on the ISEE*

Quick — when did Cortez conquer the Aztec empire? Not sure? Don't worry; you won't see questions like this on the ISEE. Actually, the ISEE tests very little of what you already know. The exam focuses only on your ability to read and answer questions about the reading passages, to handle English language questions, to write effectively, and to solve math questions. With those ideas in mind, the ISEE is divided into four basic sections:

**Verbal Reasoning:** The Verbal section tests your vocabulary mastery and your ability to relate ideas within the English language. Chapters 3 through 5 explore the Verbal section of the test and give you plenty of opportunities to practice sample questions.

**Math (Quantitative Reasoning and Mathematics Achievement):** The Math sections test your ability to solve arithmetic, elementary algebra, and geometry problems. You answer both direct questions and word-based questions. The exam breaks all these concepts into two different sections so you don't have to answer every math question at one time. Chapters 10 through 16 explore all these kinds of questions and present a bunch of practice questions as well. **Reading Comprehension:** The Reading Comprehension section of the exam tests your ability to read and understand a passage. You read a sample passage, answer a few questions about it, and then move on. You can find out about reading comprehension in Chapters 6 and 7. **Essay:** The ISEE includes an Essay section as well. For this section, you write an essay based on the prompt, or topic, given to you. Like the SSAT, the Essay section of the test isn't scored; it's simply sent on to the school(s) to which you're applying for review. You need to do well on the Essay section because the school you want to attend is going to review it. You can find out how to ace the writing sample in Chapters

8 and 9.

That's it! The ISEE limits its questions to these four categories. You're not directly tested on your knowledge of science, social studies, art, music, technology, or anything else. The ISEE is strictly a language, math, reading, and writing exam. With the exception of the Essay section, all questions are multiple-choice.

## ***Comparing the upper, middle, and lower level ISEE***

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REMEMA**

The ISEE is a little different from the SSAT because it has three versions: The upper level test is for students entering grades 9 through 12; the middle level test is for students entering grades 7 and 8; and the lower level test is for students entering grades 5 and 6. So what's the difference between the three? The upper level test is more difficult and the middle and lower tests are progressively easier. The only other difference is the upper and middle level tests include *quantitative comparison questions* in the Quantitative section, which are absent from the lower level test. (Quantitative comparison questions are math questions that ask you to compare the sizes, or quantities, of two mathematical expressions.) Other than that, the tests are exactly the same in terms of the number and types of sections, although they do vary just a bit with the number of questions on each level.

Each section of the ISEE has a time limit, which is common for all standardized tests. If you had all the time you wanted, you'd probably score higher because you could work at your own pace. But you don't have all the time in the world; for each section of the test, you have to contend with a time limit. Take a look at the next three sections that show you what you can expect on each level of the ISEE. Although the time limit will be a struggle, don't worry: We explore tactics throughout the book to help you make the most of your time (check out Chapters 2 and 4 for details).

### **Chapter 1: Getting to know the SSAT and ISEE**

***Upper level ISEE*** The upper level ISEE (for grades 9 through 12) is divided into five parts with a total testing time of 2 hours and 40 minutes. Table 1-2 breaks down the sections in this test.

#### **Structure of Upper Level ISEE**

**Table 1-2 Section** Verbal Reasoning Quantitative Reasoning Reading Comprehension  
Mathematics Achievement

Essay

**Questions** 40 questions 37 questions 36 questions based on about 6 reading passages  
47 questions One writing prompt

**Time Limit** 20 minutes 35 minutes 35 minutes 40 minutes 30 minutes

### *Middle level ISEE*

The middle level ISEE (for grades 7 and 8) is divided into five parts with a total testing time of 2 hours and 40 minutes. Table 1-3 shows you what to expect.

### **Table 1-3 Structure of Middle Level ISEE**

**Section** Verbal Reasoning Quantitative Reasoning Reading Comprehension  
Mathematics Achievement Essay

**Questions** 40 questions 37 questions 36 questions based on about 6 reading  
passages 47 questions One writing prompt

**Time Limit** 20 minutes 35 minutes 35 minutes 40 minutes 30 minutes

*Lower level ISEE* The lower level ISEE exam (for grades 5 and 6) is divided into five parts with a total testing time of 2 hours and 20 minutes. Check out Table 1-4 to see how many questions are in each section and what the time limits are.

### **Table 1-4 Structure of Lower Level ISEE**

**Time Limit** 20 minutes

**Section** Verbal Reasoning Quantitative Reasoning Reading Comprehension  
Mathematics Achievement Essay

**Questions** 34 questions 38 questions 25 questions based on about 5 reading  
passages 30 questions One writing prompt

35 minutes 25 minutes 80 minutes 30 minutes

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## Scoring the ISEE

As we noted earlier, the Essay section of the ISEE isn't scored, but the essay is sent to the school(s) to which you're applying for review. The rest of the exam's scores are also sent to the desired schools. The scores and writing sample may be sent to up to six schools or counselors. However, if you want to send the scores to more than six schools or counselors, you can do so for an additional fee. After the test, the scores are typically sent to schools and counselors within 7 to 10 days.

The following sections explore a few issues you need to know: how questions are graded, what exactly is sent to your desired school(s), and how schools use your scores.

**How questions are graded** When you take the ISEE, you answer a series of multiple-choice questions across several different sections. Like all tests you take, the idea is to get as many questions correct as possible. The good news is the ISEE doesn't penalize you for guessing. In other words, if you answer a question incorrectly or if you skip it, you don't lose points. You only get points for questions that are answered correctly. So your best bet is to try and answer as many questions as you possibly can. Even if you don't know the exact answer to a question, you can still guess the correct answer and may earn points that way.

Because the exam is mostly a multiple-choice exam, guessing and the process of elimination are tools that can help you increase your score. We explore this technique in detail in Chapter 2

**What is sent to your school** After you finish the ISEE, your percentage of correct answers is calculated into what's called a *scaled score*. This just means that your raw score (the number of questions you answered correctly) is reported in such a way that it has a meaningful relationship to the scores of all others who take the test. ISEE scaled scores for each section of the test range from 760 to 940; the higher the score, the better.

In addition to your total scaled score and scaled scores for each section of the exam, the following information is also reported to your school:

**ISEE Percentile Ranks:** The ISEE ranks your performance for each category by comparing your score to the scores of other students who've taken the ISEE in the past three years. You get a ranking of 1 to 99 percent, showing where your score falls in relation to the scores of others. For example, say your percentile rank on the Reading

Comprehension is 85 percent. This score means that you scored better or equal to 85 percent of the other students on the Reading Comprehension section. Naturally, the higher your percentage score, the better. **Stanine (standard nine)**: This rank is an abbreviated version of the percentile rank. With this rank, students are divided into nine possible groupings. Stanine 1 provides a percentile rank of 1 to 3 percent; stanine 2, 4 to 10 percent; stanine 3, 11 to 22 percent; stanine 4, 23 to 39 percent; stanine 5, 40 to 59 percent; stanine 6, 60 to 76 percent; stanine 7, 77 to 88 percent; stanine 8, 89 to 95 percent; and stanine 9, 96 to 99 percent. These more general rankings aren't as specific as the percentile rank, but admissions officers sometimes use them to generally compare the performance of a group of potential students. **Analysis**: The ISEE also provides an analysis section that reports the number of correct questions per section as well as specific results data for different types of questions.

## Chapter 2 Picking Up Study Skills and Techniques for Testing Success

### *In This Chapter*

Watching and managing time limits  
The Understanding the process of elimination  
Guessing at answers the right way

Both the SSAT and ISEE test your ability in four basic yet specific areas — verbal skills, reading, math, and writing. Within these four basic areas, a lot of variety occurs in what the test writers ask because the categories are so broad. The good news is the test writers aren't terribly creative, and they tend to stick to foundational issues within English, reading comprehension, and math. The writing sample isn't scored but is simply sent to your school for evaluation by admissions officers.

For each section of the exam, you need some specialized skills and tactics to help you perform to the best of your ability on the test, and we explore those throughout Parts II and III of this book. But you also need three global testing skills and techniques that apply to every single question of every section on the test: time management, process of elimination, and guessing. The goal of this chapter is to help you understand and use these three testing strategies so you can practice them as you continue studying for the actual test.

## *Clocking Your Time*

One of the most frustrating things about any standardized test, such as the SSAT and ISEE (and the SAT and ACT college entrance exams), is the time limit. You have a time limit for each individual section of the test rather than an overall time limit for the entire exam.

So far in school, you most likely haven't had to worry about time limits on tests. For example, when you take a test, you often get the entire period to finish the test; if you need more time, the teacher usually gives you some leeway and lets you finish it later. So you're probably used to spending your time working on the test and focusing on doing your very best; you're likely not used to worrying about a strict time limit. Well, that's no longer the case, at least with the SSAT and ISEE: The time limit is a major player in your testing strategy, and it can determine how well you perform on the test. Getting that concept in mind right away is important.

For example, consider the Reading Comprehension section of the test. No matter whether you're taking the SSAT or ISEE or what level you're at, you have less than one minute to answer each reading comprehension question, but that time limit doesn't include actually reading the passages. If you take reading into account, you have much less than one minute to answer every question. So you can't spend much time reading the passages or answering questions — you have to move very quickly.

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With this reality in mind, you need to follow a few important strategies, which we discuss in the following sections, to help you manage your time.

## ***Practice, practice, practice***

### **TEMBER**

One of the best things you can do to prepare for the time **limits** of the actual **exam** is get in the habit of working through questions quickly. And you do that by practicing.

Fortunately, we give you a lot of **opportunities** to practice throughout the book. In **Parts II and III**, you find content chapters for each type of question where you can review important skills, followed by practice chapters with sample questions. When you practice, start out slowly until you get used to the testing format and managing questions,

and then try answering each question as quickly as possible. In other words, stress yourself a bit by **timing** yourself to make sure you keep moving.

#### \*IP

When you're **ready to** take the practice exams toward the back of this book, strictly follow the time limit for each section and don't let yourself run over the allotted time. Doing so helps you get familiar with how quickly you need to work on the real exam. Practicing the speed you need to work gives you a major advantage on test day, so don't waste the opportunity.

## *Resist the urge to finish*

As a student, you probably tend to think about a test in terms of finishing the test and answering all the questions. After all, teachers typically count off, or subtract, points when **you** take a test. In other words, the teacher deducts a certain number of points for each question you miss and determines your final score based on how many questions you **answered incorrectly**.

#### REMEMA

The SSAT and ISEE don't work this way; instead, they **add** points to calculate your final score. Your score is based on the number of questions you answer correctly. Neither test counts off, or subtracts, points if you leave a question blank — that question simply doesn't count for anything. In the end, the more questions you answer correctly, the better your score, so finishing a section of the test may not be the best strategy for you.

On the SSAT and ISEE, finishing most of a section and getting many questions correct is better than finishing the entire section and getting fewer questions correct. Because skipped questions don't count against your score, finishing a section of the test doesn't necessarily mean you'll score well. You need to get as many questions correct as possible — that's how you get a good score. So break away from the answer-all-questions mentality for the SSAT and ISEE, and remember that the goal is to answer as many questions correctly as possible. If you're running out of time, deciding whether to guess at **unanswered questions** depends on which test you're taking. We explore guessing strategies for both tests later in this chapter.

## *Skip questions*

Say you hit a really difficult math question on the SSAT or ISEE. You believe you may be able to solve the question and answer it correctly with a little time, but the problem is, time **is something** you don't really have. What should you do? *Skip it.*

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# Testing Success

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## Why the time limit?

In the real world, no one ever says, "Solve this problem questions under the exact same time limits. Also, the in less than a minute." In the real world, you have a test creators aren't so concerned with whether you reasonable amount of time to solve problems in school can figure out questions; they want to see how fast you and life as well. So why the time limits on standardized can work and how quickly you can answer questions tests, like the SSAT and ISEE? After all, if you had more without having time to dwell on them. Because everyone time, you'd probably score better.

taking the test has the same stress, you end up with an

accurate view of how well you can perform based on Here's the deal: A standardized test works on a standard

how well other students can perform. Fun? No way, but so your score is comparable to the scores of other people

that's the reasoning behind the system. taking the test. This means that your score is comparable to the scores of other students who must also answer

### MEMBER

An easy question counts as much as a hard question. Part of your time-saving strategy should be to answer easy questions correctly and skip really difficult questions. You can always come back to hard questions and work on them if you have time, but working on a hard question when you may be able to answer two or three others correctly in the same amount of time makes little sense. You need to make a quick decision on hard questions, so as soon as you realize the question is difficult, pull the trigger and move on. Come back to it if you have time.

**Write things down.** Writing down math steps, main passage ideas or key words in the reading comprehension, and so on makes your work faster and easier because you're not depending on your brain to help you remember everything. Use your pencil and make it work for you as you plow through the test.

## Using the Process of Elimination

Except for the writing sample, all questions on the SSAT and ISEE are multiple-choice. The SSAT includes **five** answer choices and the ISEE gives four. A typical question looks something like this:

### EXAMPLE

#### EXAM

How does the author feel about NASA's space exploration budget? (A) The author believes that NASA wastes too much money. (B) The author believes the space program has benefits but needs more creative fundraising methods. (C) The author believes space exploration is more important than other governmental programs. (D) The author doesn't state an opinion about NASA's budgeting. (E) The author believes NASA should have more governmental funding.

As you can see, you have a question and some answer choices. Here's the reality: The **answers** on the SSAT and ISEE are always in front of you. One of the answers is correct. You simply need to figure out which answer choice is the right one. Of course, that's easier said than done, but one of the most powerful tools in your testing arsenal is the process of elimination.

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#### MAEMBER

Using the *process of elimination* simply means you very quickly rule out answer choices you know are **incorrect**. For example, if you have a question with five answer choices and can eliminate three of them, you're left with two choices. Maybe the two choices are similar or maybe you're not even sure of the answer, but by using the process of elimination, you give yourself a 50-50 shot of guessing the correct answer. In a nutshell, the more answer choices you eliminate, the more likely you are to answer the question correctly.

The following question is a synonym question. You see a word in capital letters, and you're given five answer choices (SSAT) or four answer choices (ISEE). You want to choose the word that's closest in meaning to the word in capital letters.

#### EXAMPLE

#### (EXAM

DISENCHANTED: (A) Regroup (B) Specious (C) Let down (D) Encouraged (E)

Inclined

If you know what *disenchanted* means, the question is probably easy. However, if you don't know or you're not sure, the process of elimination can help. First, notice that the word in question uses the prefix *dis-*, which means not. (See Chapter 3 for a review of common prefixes.) So you know that *disenchanted* means *not* something. Looking at the answer choices, you can eliminate Choices (A), (D), and (E), because you know that *dis-* means not, or something negative, and all these words are positive in some way. So you're left with Choices (B) and (C). The good news is if you still don't know the answer, you have at least a 50-50 shot of guessing the correct one. The correct answer is Choice (C). ***Disenchanted*** means let down. You may think, "Wait a minute! That's not technically a synonym!" And you're right. The SSAT bends the rules a bit with synonym questions while the ISEE tends to stick to exact synonym words (including words that are the same parts of speech).

#### EMEMBE

In the Verbal and Reading sections of the exam, you need to find the *best* answer to the question. In other words, although you may see a couple of similar answer choices, you need to choose the best answer for the question. In order to do that, you need to consider *all* the answer choices. So typically, you may read a question, start scanning the answer choices, see that Choice (B) looks great, mark your answer sheet, and move on without considering the other options. Doing so is a mistake because Choice (D) may actually be a better answer. The process of elimination helps you avoid this mistake because you get in the habit of scanning all the answer choices in an effort to rule out ones you know are wrong and narrow in on the best one. Naturally, some answer choices will be obviously wrong, so you don't need to spend a lot of time on those, but for the answer choices that are close, make sure to always choose the best answer.

Most students read the question and try to find the correct answer in the answer choices first. Instead, read the question and quickly eliminate answers you know are incorrect. Doing so helps you focus on a few possible answers, greatly increasing your odds of answering the question correctly. The process of elimination is a powerful tool on a standardized test, so be sure to use it.

**chapter 2: Picking Up Study Skills and Techniques for Testing Success**

## But I thought it said.

Students often make what teachers call *careless mistakes* on exams, meaning they

answer a question incorrectly because they misread the question or misread an answer choice. We don't care for the term *careless mistake* because these types of mistakes aren't really careless. They happen because students are under stress and under a strict time limit. Because you have to work quickly on the SSAT and ISEE, misunderstanding a question or an answer choice and answering the question incorrectly is easy. Unfortunately, there's no easy way to eliminate reading errors, and you're likely to make a few on the SSAT and ISEE. But here's a little trick: When you read a question and its answer choices, use your pencil as a pointer. Although doing so may seem a little juvenile, pointing at the words you're reading can help you reduce the likelihood of misreading and, therefore, misunderstanding a question or the answer choices.

## ***Figuring out a Guessing Strategy***

Guessing is an important strategy that can help you increase your exam score. You'll face many questions that you're just not sure about, and guessing can help you get some of those questions right. However, you need a good strategy to make it work for you. Guessing works differently on the ISEE and SSAT, as you find out in the following sections.

### ***Guessing on the ISEE***

If you're taking the ISEE, your guessing strategy is simple. The ISEE grades your test by giving you a point for every correct answer. If you miss a question or if you leave a question blank, you get 0 points for it. In other words, on the ISEE, you're not penalized for guessing, so if you guess at a question and miss it, you don't lose any points. It's the same as if you just didn't answer the question at all.

#### **MEMBER**

#### **REMEM**

The strategy for the ISEE is this: Guess on questions you don't know -- here's how:

*bo* If you face a question you're not sure about, use the process of elimination to give yourself the best guessing odds, and then choose an answer and move on. (Review the previous section on process of elimination.) If you face a question you don't have a clue about, choose a letter, such as Choice (C),

and just guess. Use the same letter on any other question you don't know. *bare* When you're about a minute away from your time limit on a section, pick a letter and quickly bubble in all the questions you didn't have time to answer. Often, people say

that Choice (C) is the most likely answer choice, but that's not necessarily true. However, choosing the same letter for each question you guess on is important because you increase your odds of gaining a point or two. If you randomly select different letters, the odds of getting one or two more points goes way down because you're less likely to randomly guess a correct answer from the answer choices. So choose a guessing letter and stick to it — Choice (C) works fine.