**The Perfect Score**

The day had come. The best day of. my. life. It was the day that my school made after school SAT prep...mandatory. And I was so excited! Think about the opportunities! Not only would it help us gear up for the battle of standardized testing, but no more wasting money on SAT tutoring services! Okay, my Indian’s showing a bit, yet, I could not understand why others complained so much. What could they **possibly** prioritize over the SAT? So what if people had to work after school? This is the reason people get Bs! And as my friends and I carried on about how unfortunate the futures of our peers would be, I noticed that no one ever offered a contrasting opinion. And it seems as though I’m not alone. We are all susceptible to selective thinking, otherwise known as confirmation bias. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, confirmation bias is the [tendency](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/tendency#tendency__2) to [interpret](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/interpret#interpret__2) new evidence as [confirmation](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/confirmation#confirmation__2) of one’s existing beliefs or theories. As Dr. Raymond Nickerson, psychology professor at Tufts University, states “people find it easier to believe propositions they would like to be true [rather] than propositions they would prefer to be false.” And all we have to do is look to the cliques in the cafeteria or our current polarized government to see how this type of reasoning stagnates any growth towards building a communal society. So today, let’s first go over the rubric and explore why we only hear what we want to hear, then lets open some practice tests and focus on how selective thinking leads to a false perception of reality, before finally learning some new study strategies and uncovering what we can do to drop this divisive process and earn the perfect score.

When I was young, I had the virtues of standardized testing sung to me. On Sundays, while Christians went to mass, us Hindus went to class. And starting from there I was constantly surrounded by certain groups of people that were just like me, and this raises my first concern. From my SAT study group to my peers’ sports clubs or theatre groups, we are all hardwired to seek out agreement with what we already want or know. In their paper “With Malice Toward None and Charity for Some” psychologists Anthony Greenwald and Thomas Pettigrew call this phenomenon *attitude similarity.* They explain that separating ourselves into groups of like-minded individuals creates a bias that puts the group’s conjoint objectives above everyone else's, thus creating a sense of hostility towards outsiders. It’s like when 50 Shades of Grey came out and your mom and her book club were convinced that it was the greatest literary masterpiece since Hamlet… even though logic tells us Twilight fan fiction is probably not on the same level as Shakespeare. We divide our experiences into whether they support our bias or not, and then we toss out the ones that don’t align. It’s how MSNBC can frame Black Lives Matter as a protest for peace and racial equality, while Fox News reports it as a radical and unsafe fringe movement. We ignore the experiences and identities of anyone who isn’t just like us**.** Simply put, Confirmation Bias gives us an easy way to win, to always be on the right side - but only at the expense of the ideas of others.

When our classes finally started, it became clear to me what the real problem was: people just didn’t understand the material! It’s silly, I mean who doesn’t understand Pythagorean geometry? But unlike my classmates, we aren’t generally ignorant. On the contrary, we normally recognize the opposite side of the argument. However, what stops us from seeing the truth is the fact that we truly believe our biases. I have grown up with parents born in India where there is an ever-present conflict between Hindus and Muslims. And that is all I have ever known. I was led to view Muslims in a negative context, causing me to pick and choose the stories I wanted to believe were true, especially when it came to the hijab. As a female, I believe in female empowerment and equality, and have always viewed the hijab as a symbol of subjugation and sexism. And my opinion, based on nothing but the opinions of my parents, relatives, and friends, is exemplary of how we still see a severe disconnect between India and Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims, 68 years after the partitioning of India. In the first 18 months that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been in office, formal diplomatic talks between the two nations have already been cancelled. Twice. These deeply-held yet never-challenged beliefs are how we end up with the geopolitical issues that divide our world. This is how we get Israel vs. Palestine, this is how we get Sunnis vs. Shias, this is how we get Democrats vs. Republicans. These are complex issues but they share one thing in common, confirmation bias makes them harder to solve. It makes us unwilling to consider any side but our own, since it is the only one we ever hear. And in the process those of us in positions of power trap others in a world of violence and poverty. It is a continuous cycle that results in a world that is broken.

I’ll admit, once you start thinking a certain way, it’s difficult to stop. But how can we address confirmation bias when it’s so deeply ingrained? First, we need to learn how to embrace the surprises that come our way and to consider that we may need to refine our views on how things work.Charlie Toft, a high school teacher from the Phoenix Union High School District, told his students to keep a Surprise Journal where they were to record the moment that they were surprised, why it was surprising, and what this told them. Surprises like, “it took us longer to get to school than I thought” or “my mom really was right about that smell.” If we all took this approach just imagine what we’d learn! Surprise, it’s not cool to discriminate against someone for their race! Surprise, women really are capable of changing tires! Surprise, Hillary’s emails were not a global cover-up for al-Qaeda! My surprise came when I met Laela, a fellow orator, friend, and a very proud hijab wearer. When I asked why she wears her headscarf, she said that not only does the garment symbolize her faith, but she is able to change the colors, patterns, style, and the material. She takes the hijab and makes it her own. Now, instead of seeing it as a symbol of repression, I see the hijab as something I can relate to - a symbol of choice and empowerment. And that is more beautiful than any expression of feminism I have ever seen. By allowing myself to actually listen to someone else’s point of view, my entire perception of over 800 million women changed. Imagine… if we all allowed ourselves these surprises, the barriers we have built between each other could finally begin to fall.

So OK, maybe people didn’t have the time for extra SAT prep. Some of my peers are going to enlist after college, others are planning on going straight into the workforce, while most of them are working for college money...which doesn’t sound like a bad idea. As the great hairstylist Albert Einstein once said “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” We need to close this large gap in our logic and truly listen to everything that comes our way. We might not all earn the highest SAT score, but if we spend more time learning about each other than we do about diameters, maybe we can all finally come together and make our score - I mean world - a little more perfect.