

Essential SAT Writing Principles

1 Parallelism

- Here is an example of a grammatically correct sentence that the SAT would not consider correct:

He likes reading, track, and to dance.

- ◊ This violates the concept of Parallelism, because the three closely-connected ideas are grammatically expressed in different ways.

- ◊ Some “correct” ways of restructuring the sentence are as follows:

He likes reading, running track, and dancing.

He likes to read, run track, and dance.

- Lists of things/ideas are a key tell to look for parallelism.

2 Comma Splices

- A comma splice has three conditions:

1. There are two independent clauses
2. They are linked together by a conjunction
3. There is no comma before the conjunction

- Comma splice examples:

He said that his tie ripped this morning so he was a half-hour late to work.

She went to the zoo to see the bears but they were all hiding in a bush.

Most academic journals require expensive memberships to read although there are some exceptions.

3 Commas and “Essential Elements”

- Phrases whose deletion would not change the overall idea of a sentence should be split off with commas. There are several different kinds of phrases.

- Adjective Phrases:

Kate, walking briskly, continued her final lap around the track.

- ◊ Whether or not Kate was walking briskly doesn’t change the fact that she’s continuing the lap around the track; therefore, this phrase is nonessential.

The students wearing letter jackets are varsity athletes.

- ◊ Removing the underlined phrase would imply that all the students are varsity athletes and change the sentence’s meaning.

- ◊ Adjective phrases can also be introduced with a preposition:

The guy with the crazy hat needs to be escorted off the premises.

- Adjective Clauses:

- ◊ Different from adjective phrases, these are usually introduced with which or that.

- ◊ When using the word that, the information is essential.

- ◊ When using relative pronouns such as who, which, where, or when, the information is not essential.

The hat that she gave me five years ago is one of my favorites.

The ancient sculpture, which sold for \$20,000,000 last year, depicts a long-forgotten king.

- Appositive:

- ◊ Appositives (from Latin *apponere*, meaning to place beside) is a word or phrase that clarifies the meaning of a noun.
- ◊ Appositives can be both essential and non-essential depending on the context. If you can distinctly identify the noun without the appositive, then the appositive is not essential.

The author's book Life and Consequences is a treasure trove of wisdom.

The author's latest book, I'm the Problem, describes the troubles of a tenuous relationship.

My relative Oliver just started his own company.

- Leading Dependent Clauses:

- ◊ Commas are also used anytime a sentence begins with a dependent clause.

Despite the influx of grain, the settlers were still hungry.

Running to the edge of the store, Marcus frantically grabbed the last box of toilet paper.

- ◊ Beware using a semicolon after an introductory dependent clause.

▲ *Hoping to quell the rumors of rebellion; the empress gave a fantastic speech.*

4 Semicolons

- Semicolons can be used to separate two closely-related independent clauses. They are weaker than a period but stronger than a comma.

Yesterday I saw Elise at the library; she was studying for her Kinetics exam.

The blue whale is the largest known animal; it can reach a maximum length of 100 ft.

▲ *One day I would like to visit the Taj Mahal; This morning I woke up with a crick in my neck.*

- Semicolons can also be placed before a conjunctive adverb. Conjunctive adverbs include words like therefore, nevertheless, indeed, consequently, however, otherwise, etc.

I needed to take the mayor out to lunch to get my business permit; moreover, I had to donate to his "Lamborghini fundraiser."

The town isn't nearly as prosperous as it once was; indeed, the mechanization of farming has decreased the population by almost 50 percent.

5 Colons

- Colons are often used to introduce lists, but they can also provide explanations and separate two closely-related independent clauses (with emphasis on the second clause).
- The key to using colons is that you must have a complete sentence before them.

The forecast for this week isn't looking too good: rain on Monday, hail on Wednesday, and snow on Saturday.

Tess always complains when we walk by that restaurant: they never get her order right.

A square is a rectangle: a rectangle is not a square.

- ◊ A colon cannot separate a noun from its verb, verb from its direct object, preposition from its object, or subject from predicate.

▲ *The four kinds of ice cream flavors at the local shop are: chocolate, strawberry, vanilla, and mint.*

- ◊ Again, just remember that it must be a complete sentence.

6 Idioms for Conjunctions and Prepositions

- Certain conjunctions follow specific formats. Here are some that commonly show up:
 - ◇ not only...but also
 - ◇ either...or
 - ◇ both...and
 - ◇ neither...nor
 - ◇ whether...or
 - ◇ as...as
- Some verbs also take specific prepositional phrases given the context. Here are some:
 - ◇ as
 - * view as
 - * see as
 - ◇ about
 - * ask about
 - * anxious about
 - * curious about
 - ◇ at
 - * arrive at
 - * succeed at
 - ◇ by
 - * accompanied by
 - * amazed by
 - * struck by
 - ◇ for
 - * advocate for
 - * responsible for
 - * pay for
 - * strive for
 - ◇ from
 - * abstain from
 - * protect from
 - ◇ of
 - * approve of
 - * deprive of
 - * fan of
 - * model of
 - * take advantage of
 - * source of
 - ◇ to
 - * oblivious to
 - * able to
 - * in addition to
 - * adhere to
 - * partial to
 - ◇ with
 - * interfere with
 - * agree with
 - * sympathize with
- There are much better uses of your time than memorizing lists like these. The main tell that a question is testing this concept is when all four of your answer choices are prepositions. If the phrasing sounds off to you then it probably is.

7 Dashes

- Dashes can be used to introduce a list/explanation, hyphenate adjectives, or mark off a nonessential clause.
- Introducing Lists/Explanations:
 - ◊ Much like a colon, a dash can introduce a list or add an explanation.
 - ◊ In this sense it follows the same rules; that is, the sentence must be complete before the dash.

Take the new dogs for a walk—Draco, Ozzy, and Rosie.

The vassal was furious—the peasants were partying too hard.
- Hyphenation:
 - ◊ Hyphenation occurs when two or more words that act as a single idea modify a noun.

six-year-old son

long-haired Athenian

on-campus dining hall
- Mark off Nonessential Clauses:
 - ◊ These follow the same rules as commas. Do not mix a dash on one side and comma on the other.

The thieves—steeling themselves—got ready for the big heist.
 - ▲ *The thieves, steeling themselves—got ready for the big heist.*

8 Possessive Determiners

- Contrary to how possession is usually expressed in English (with an apostrophe), *it's* is a contraction meaning it is, and *its* is a possessive adjective.
- Examples:

Its color is green. It's green.

It's raining outside.

The pressure was too much for its load-bearing column to handle.

It's pretty tough to read since its letters are so faded from acid rain.
- There are other words to look out for, too: *their there they're* and *your you're*.
- *Their* and *your* are also possessive adjectives. *They're you're* are contractions meaning they are and you are, respectively.
- Finally, *there* is an adverb that means in or at a specific place.

9 Effect vs Affect

- Affect is a verb. Effect is a noun.
 - ◊ You do not *effect* something, you *affect* something.
 - ◊ You do not feel the *affects*, you feel the *effects*.
 - ◊ The hurricane greatly affected those who were unable to evacuate.
 - ◊ The effects of the hurricane were felt for months after it initially hit.
- If you are stuck, try swapping different words in that are either verbs or nouns.
 - ◊ In the first example: The hurricane harmed those, hurt those, drenched those, etc.
 - ◊ In the second: The aftermath of the hurricane, tremors of the hurricane, results of the hurricane, etc.

10 Concision

- The goal of the Concision Principle is to eliminate redundancy.
- A sentence should not have two words competing to fulfill the same purpose.
- There are five common scenarios where you will be asked to use Concision:
 1. Redundant verb phrases: *Refrigerators cool and chill food you would like to store.*
 2. Redundant adjectives: *Illuminated by the flashlight, the swift and quick raccoon scampered away.*
 3. Redundant adverbs: *The bomb-defusal technician cautiously and carefully clipped the green wire.*
 4. Redundant nouns: *This home and dwelling was where I grew up.*
 5. Redundant implied descriptors: *I wanted to speak with the tall giant.* The word “giant” already implies that the person is tall.
- The phrase “in order that they may” also sometimes appears. This can be rephrased to “in order to” or even just “to.”
- Try to identify repetition in the test question. If each answer choice essentially means the same thing but has a different number of words it is probably a concision question.
- The shortest choice is *usually* the correct choice, but you must be wary of shorter answer choices that actually remove important information from the sentence. So, be sure to read each answer choice first and not blindly choose the shortest one.

11 Shifts in Verb Tenses and Moods

- The main idea of these questions is to conserve the verb tense if nothing happens in the sentence that warrants a change. These questions are heavily contextual.
- When you see multi-word verbs, look to the helper verb (e.g. had, will, will have, has) to help determine the tense.
- Example*: *Michelangelo **took** on the Giant with zeal and **finished** the statue in just two years. The statue’s form and poster **echoed** the proportions of classical Roman sculpture, but its expressiveness and level of detail **has reflected** Renaissance sensibilities.*

We can tell by looking at the other bold-faced verbs that this sentence is operating in the past tense, but the verb in question **has reflected** is a different verb tense, so we need to correct it to just **reflected**.

- Here are some of the common pitfalls when using verb tenses:
 - ◊ The pluperfect tense, e.g. “had made”, is when we use “had” or “has” before a verb. This tense indicates that an action was completed in the past relative to some other event. The perfect tense, e.g. “made”, indicates that something happened in the past, but we don’t know relative to what exactly.
 - ◊ The idea is similar for the future perfect tense, e.g. “will have made”, but the action will be completed in the future relative to some other point.
 - ◊ The words “could”, “should”, and “would” need to have a reference to a condition, e.g. *I would have won if he didn’t cheat.* Imagine if someone walked up to you and said: “*You should buy this shirt.*” You would probably say: “*Why should I?*” because you’re looking for that condition.

12 Subject-Verb Agreement

- The form of the subject needs to agree with the form of the main verb and vice-versa.
The dogs bark. The dog barks.
- We don’t care about any fluff between the subject and main verb for these questions.

▲ *NRG Stadium, boasting a capacity of over 72,000 people, were the first NFL facility to have a retractable roof.*

*taken from the khanacademy video lesson

- This is wrong because NRG Stadium is singular. If we remove the fluff clause about its capacity we can see that we're essentially saying *NRG Stadium were the first*. This is grammatically incorrect and should be changed to *NRG Stadium was*.
- ▲ *The most important thing we can do to mitigate the damages **are** to immediately remove the affected machines.*
- This is again wrong: our subject is “thing” and the verb is “are.” We are only talking about a single “thing,” so “is” should be used instead.

13 Noun Agreement

- Use the context of a sentence to determine if the noun in question should be singular or plural.
- ▲ *Raising their glass, the guests proposed a toast to the new year.*
- The way this sentence is written implies that all the guests share only a single glass. We need to use the plural form of glass, i.e. glasses, to get our nouns to agree.
- Another potential scenario is to get a list of nouns.
Dogs, cats, and platypuses are all classified as mammals. Not “mammal.”

14 Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

- *Antecedent* is the word used to describe what a pronoun is referring to.
Yesterday, I sadly dropped my phone in the toilet. I had to take it to a phone repair store.
- Here, *it* is the pronoun and the antecedent is *phone*. You had to take what to the phone repair store? The phone.
- Not all pronouns can be used to refer to all nouns, however, and this is where the agreement comes into play.
- ▲ *The pallet full of toilet paper reams arrived at my house yesterday, so I made sure to put them in a safe place.*
- Despite you intuitively grasping the meaning of this sentence, it is actually grammatically incorrect. The pronoun *them* is referring to the subject of the sentence – “pallet.” *Them* is a plural pronoun and *pallet* is singular. We need to change *them* to *it* to fix this sentence. We could also keep *them* and change the beginning of the sentence to *The toilet paper reams*
- ▲ *Robin and Alice completed we homework twenty minutes ago.*
- Obviously, this one doesn't work. Change *we* to *their*.

15 Pronoun Clarity

- The problem here is that we have either too many possible antecedents or zero possible antecedents.
- ▲ *A fight ensued: Michelle and Nicole wanted her favorite hair clip.*
- Who is *her* referring to? Michelle or Nicole?
- We can replace *her* with a proper noun such as *Michelle*, *Nicole*, or even a third party yet unmentioned like *Dana*.
- ▲ *The business shut down after twelve years of operation, but their owner had plans for another venture.*
- *Their* can only refer to a plural noun, but *business* is singular. Hence, there is no possible antecedent.
- We can replace *their* with *its* to properly refer to the singular noun *business*.

16 SAT Standards

- The grammar considered “correct” in SAT land doesn’t quite match up with the modern standards we have today. It is more akin to formal standards in the 1950’s.
- Issues are sure to arise because most teachers have a looser standard of grammar than what the SAT does. This is similar to what can happen in the Reading section when students are used to classroom discussions that are open for debate. Remember that the SAT **only** deals in absolutes; there are three incorrect answers and only one correct answer. There is no “good” “better” “best”.
- This is why it’s important to know the above grammar rules. The SAT only cares what is right in the eyes of the SAT writers. For example, you were probably taught less rigid standards about commas than what is covered in sections 2 and 3.

17 Non-Grammar Questions

- The questions in the SAT Writing section fall under two categories:
 1. Reading Comprehension Questions
 2. Grammar/Style/Punctuation Questions
- For the reading comprehension questions, the SAT Writing section behaves like its brother, the Reading section. And remember, there are only two ways to objectively test knowledge from a reading passage:
 1. Restate
 2. Demonstrate
- The Writing section tends to focus a lot more on demonstration.
- There are some common question types on the Writing section that aren’t pure grammar:

17.1 Transition Words

- ◇ These are words or short phrases that link two ideas together.
- ◇ For example, consider question 9 on Practice Test #1 Section 2:

Nutritionists consider Greek yogurt to be a healthy food: it is an excellent source of calcium and protein, serves to be a digestive aid, and it contains few calories in its unsweetened low- and non-fat forms. Greek yogurt is slightly lower in sugar and carbohydrates than conventional yogurt is. Also, because it is more concentrated, Greek yogurt contains slightly more protein per serving, thereby helping people stay satiated for longer periods of time.
- ◇ The transition here is the word also, but there are many other words that can be classified in the same family:
 1. Likewise
 2. Therefore
 3. However
 4. For Instance/Example
 5. Nevertheless
 6. Furthermore
 7. Although
 8. Previously
 9. In Other Words
- ◇ The key for these questions is to consider the relationship between the statements before and after the transition. Each transition word has a context associated with it, and we need to match the implied connection of the transition word to the actual connection in the text.
- ◇ In the case of question 9 above, we see that the both parts are elaborating on the same concept that Greek yogurt a healthy food. The transition word that best fits this case is also.

17.2 “Best Accomplishes”

- ◇ These are the questions that ask things like: which of the following provides the most relevant detail, best supports the author’s claims, accomplishes the goal of the author, etc.
- ◇ There will only be one answer for these question types that directly demonstrates the idea put forth in the question.
- ◇ Take question 2 on Practice Test #1 Section 2, where we are asked to provide the most relevant detail:

To address the problem of disposal, farmers have found a number of uses for acid whey. They can add it to livestock feed as a protein supplement, and people can make their own Greek-style yogurt at home by straining regular yogurt

- ◇ The idea here is the problem of disposal, so our answer **must** mention something to do with disposal.
- ◇ The **only** answer choice that does this is choice B, which mentions converting it into gas.
- ◇ This is very important! There is only a single answer choice that demonstrates what is stated in the text. You do not have to choose between a “good” and “best” answer because the SAT must be objective!

17.3 Contextual Vocabulary

- ◇ As implied by the name, these are heavily contextual questions that have words which are “flatly” synonymous, but only one word is an appropriate use case in the context of the sentence.
- ◇ By “flat,” I mean that the words are superficially synonyms, but they are used to refer to specific concepts only.
- ◇ Take question 10 on Practice Test #1 Section 2:

Greek yogurt contains slightly more protein per serving, thereby helping people stay satiated for longer periods of time.

- ◇ We are presented with three possible alternatives to satiated: fulfilled, complacent, and sufficient.
- ◇ All of these can mean some variation of the word “full”, but we use them in different ways:
fulfilled often means intellectual or spiritual fullness – not physical fullness
complacent means smug satisfaction with one’s capabilities – a fullness in the sense of ability
sufficient means fullness in terms of some task or service rendered, or of a resource of some kind
satiated is the only fullness that we use specifically to refer to a person’s appetite, so we should leave the sentence as it is.
- ◇ You must think in an exact way about what each word actually means and what kinds of things we use that word to describe.
- ◇ And remember that there is only ever one correct answer choice on the SAT. If you don’t know one of the words but are confident that a word you do know is a good fit, then go with it. Or if you’re confident that the three words you do know don’t work, then pick the fourth word even if you don’t know it.

17.4 Sentence Inclusion/Exclusion

- ◇ These questions involve two main things:
 1. Presenting you with a new sentence not in the paragraph and asking if it should be added
 2. Present a sentence that is already in the passage and asking if the author should keep or delete it
- ◇ There are several main points to consider when you get a question like this:
 1. Ensure that the sentence’s role in the text is properly explained in the question
 - * Don’t bother considering the “yes” or “no” part yet and just verify that what the answer choice says about the role of the sentence in the text is stated or demonstrated.
 - * Cross out any answer choice that fails to accurately describe the relationship between the sentence and the text.
 2. Don’t contradict any data given by the passage or figures

- * If an answer choice seems to be correct but contradicts any data provided by reading a figure or the passage then it is wrong.
 - 3. Use Transitions
 - * Transitions between paragraphs
 - * Transitions between differing ideas
 - * Introduce any concepts before they are elaborated upon
 - * Reflect the relationships present in the text
 - 4. Factor in Relevancy
 - * Don't use any ideas that are not explained or discussed further anywhere else in the passage
- ◇ Let's look at question 6 of Practice Test #1 Section 2. Applying our first concept, we can already eliminate answer choices A and C.
 - ◇ Answer A is wrong because the sentence is clearly providing a transition between the two paragraphs.
 - ◇ Answer C is wrong because the sentence is not directly elaborating on the disposal practices of acid-whey. It describes them as costly and time-consuming, but again it doesn't actually explain how the acid-whey is disposed.
 - ◇ Answer B survives the first pass because it doesn't mention anything about the popularity of Greek yogurt.
 - ◇ Answer D also survives the pass because it sets up the idea that there is something beneficial about Greek yogurt.
 - ◇ We keep answer D as our final answer because we know that there must be transitions between paragraphs.

17.5 Sentence/Paragraph Relocation

- ◇ The essence of these question types is to place sentences so that they follow each other in logical order.
- ◇ Additionally, if a sentence makes a reference to something in another sentence, the two sentences should be as physically close to each other as possible.
- ◇ Using question 5 on Practice Test #1 Section 2, we note that the concept of acid runoff is bad.
- ◇ Our first instinct when dealing with these problems should be to look in the passage to find the sentence where the concept of acid-whey runoff is defined and place the move-able sentence immediately after that.
- ◇ We find that sentence 2 is the sentence that introduces this concept, so our answer is to place it immediately after sentence 2.