

English Grammar and Usage on the ACT/SAT

The 45-minute Section 1 of the ACT is called “English” and 35-minute Section 2 of the SAT is called “Writing and Language.” These sections of both tests are very similar in that they assess students’ comprehension of English grammar and usage rules.

The most common topics that will be assessed on these tests are included here. By learning how to identify the type of question, a direct approach to solving it will become more evident. This is more efficient than just choosing the answer that “sounds right.”

In all cases, keep an eye out for the **3:1 split**. This occurs when three answer choices are all very similar, but one is different. Usually the correct choice is the one that is different. However, still make sure that it makes sense before choosing it.

WRITING PREFERENCES:

- 1) **Avoid redundancy.** Do not include synonyms or descriptions that are inherent in the definition. Imagine every word costs money; so remember to “economize your words.” Learn more about redundancy here: <https://youtu.be/KrvwOKj3mkq>

The **flawed** redundancy is underlined in these sentences:

- Additionally, he also purchased a bike.
- Suddenly, I was instantly awakened by the alarm.
- The shelter has stone walls and an overhead roof of steel.
- The reason why I love poodles is because I had one as a child.
- The biography of her life described her childhood trauma.
- Each and every person wants to be loved.

- 2) **Avoid ambiguity.** Do not use a pronoun (he, she, they, it) if the noun it is referring to is unclear. Instead state the specific noun (the person’s name or title).

The **flawed** ambiguous pronoun is underlined in these sentences:

- If the doctor wants to help the patient, he must make sure he has insurance first.
- Sarah went to the movies with Beth after she had eaten lunch with her grandparents.
- If the seniors want to throw a party for the freshman, they must first make sure they have time.
- The restaurant’s rules state that diners must choose either an appetizer or a dessert, so the diner chose the one the waiter recommended.

- 3) **Use active voice.** Lead the sentence with who is doing the action and then the action. Do not write like Shakespeare!

The **correct** active voice is underlined in these sentences:

- Romeo loved Juliet. (*NOT: Juliet was loved by Romeo.*)
- John gave directions to all the participants.
- Joey quickly earned success and respect.
- The waitress with a bad attitude poured the coffee.
- At each concert, the soprano sang at least twice.
- Scientists have conducted experiments to test the hypothesis.

- 4) **Use proper diction.** Chose words that are more formal and less colloquial.

The **poor** diction is underlined in these sentences and the **proper** diction is in parentheses:

- The senator informed his buddies (*colleagues*) of his decision.
- The artist tried really hard (*aimed*) for perfection.
- The professor carefully thought about (*carefully considered*) the question.
- Critics spoke very nicely about (*celebrated*) the movie.

- 5) **Put in logical order.** Questions that ask where a sentence or paragraph should be placed “for the sake of logic and coherence” are major time-wasters. If timing is an issue, you should save these questions for the end. When answering, note that the number in the brackets actually indicates the sentence after it. Also pay close attention to “before” and “after” in the choices.

- 6) **Stay on topic.** Questions that ask you to insert/include, delete/omit, or choose the information that is consistent with the text are really asking if that information is relevant to the main topic of the paragraph or passage. Most often, the information is off-topic and should be removed.

- 7) **Answer the specific question.** Most problems just have four answer choices listed. These are testing usage and grammar rules. However, the problems that have an actual question before the four answer choices are testing your ability to answer the specific question. Underline clues in the question to guide your selection, such as “most logical conclusion,” “emphasizes the difficulty,” “offer an example of,” “maintains the positive tone,” “most strongly suggests the quickness of,” or “supports the idea that.” Specifically, the last question of each passage assesses your understanding of the “writer’s primary purpose.” If you are unsure, re-read the title, introduction, and conclusion to help determine the main idea. Learn more here: <https://youtu.be/KrvwOKi3mkg>

GRAMMAR RULES:

- 8) **Commas:** Learn more about commas here:
<https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/the-definitive-guide-to-comma-usage/>
- 9) **Parentheses & Dashes:** Like commas, parentheses and dashes are used to separate independent clauses from dependent clauses. More specifically, parentheses are used for emphasis, while dashes are used for de-emphasis. Only choose the answer with parentheses or dashes if you can confidently eliminate all the other answer choices. Also remember to stay consistent; for example, if a parenthesis is opened, it must be closed later in the sentence.
- 10) **Hyphens:** Some compound words are combined into one word, such as “flowerpot” and “carryover.” Other compound words are linked with hyphens, such as “right-hand,” “fast-paced,” “in-class,” “up-to-date,” “wide-eyed,” “mother-in-law,” “rock-forming,” and “mid-June.” To determine if two words should be hyphenated, ask yourself if each term could function on its own in the sentence.
- 11) **Semicolons:** Like periods, semicolons are also used to separate two independent clauses. In multiple-choice questions, treat semicolons like periods.
- 12) **Colons:** Colons do not follow specific rules in regards to independent and dependent clauses. Colons are often used as anticipation-builders, separating a clause that raises a question from the answer. Only choose the answer with a colon if you can confidently eliminate all the other answer choices.

The **proper** uses of colons are underlined in these sentences:

- They saw something they had never seen before; a black bear.
- The plan had only one drawback; leprechauns don't exist.

- 13) **Apostrophes:** Learn more about apostrophes here:
<https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/the-apostrophe-how-and-when-to-use-it/>

- 14) **Verb Agreement:** Subjects must agree with their verbs in both person and number. Some words appear to be plural but are actually singular. These include: *anybody, anyone, anything, everybody, everyone, everything, nobody, no one, nothing, somebody, someone, something, each, either, neither, other, one, group, class, organization, flock*. Conversely, words that are actually plural include: *both, few, many, others, several*.

The **flawed** verb agreement is underlined in these sentences and the **correct** verb is in the parentheses:

- All of the mechanics, except the one smirking, is honest. (*are*)
- Each of the girls are qualified. (*is*)
- The organization of taxi drivers protest each year to raise fares. (*protests*)
- The group of pirates were infected with scurvy. (*was*)

- 15) **Present Perfect Tense** (“Present Past”): This tense is used to indicate an action that began in the past and is still occurring/true in the present. Key words that often indicate the present perfect tense are “*now*” and “*since*.” *

The **correct** present perfect tense is underlined in these sentences:

- Ever *since* the U.S. was founded, democratic theory has guided its politics.
- *Since* the dawn of time, man has worked the land.
- *Now* that you have read the book, we can discuss it.
- The paneling on the walls has been painted bright yellow.
- Doctors have cured many deadly diseases.

- 16) **Past Perfect Tense** (“Past Past”): This tense is used to identify what happened first in a series of past actions. Key phrases that often indicate past perfect tense are “by the time” and “before.” *

The **correct** past perfect tense is underlined in these sentences:

- Suddenly Chris remembered he had promised to wash the dishes.
- Jake realized he had made a mistake.
- *By the time* the detectives discovered that the jewels had disappeared, the thief was already gone.
- I had sent the email *before* he apologized.
- They lost many of the games because they had not practiced enough.

* Learn more about Present Perfect and Past Perfect tenses here:

<https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/past-perfect-and-present-perfect-tenses/>

USAGE RULES:

- 17) **Transitional Statements:** Transitional phrases can be classified as “Agree,” “Disagree,” or “Order.” See <https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/transitional-phrases/> for examples. Mark each of the answer choices with an “A,” “D,” or “O” to indicate which type it is. Then read the sentence before the transitional phrase and the sentence it is in to determine which type of transition it needs.

The **correct** type of transition phrase needed in the following sentences is in the parentheses:

- Succeeding in college is often a challenge for students. _____, most colleges provide services designed to help students. (*Agree*)
- When you ask a person what he or she does for a living, usually you will recognize that person’s profession. _____, it is possible that the person may have a job you never even knew existed. (*Disagree*)
- Joe ate too fast. _____, he had indigestion. (*Order*)

18) **Parallelism:** To maintain balance, order, and logical comparison, make sure that a list of items fits together and lines up grammatically.

The **errors** in parallelism are underlined in these sentences:

- On Saturdays, I like sleeping late, hanging out with my friends, and to go to the movies.
- The newscaster was dashingy handsome, articulate in an exceptional way, and impressively intelligent.
- The supporters of the candidate believed in his ability to quiet opposing viewpoints, unifying the citizens, and provide a stability the country had not known in years.

19) **Comparisons:** Like parallelism, when making comparisons, make sure that the items being compared fit together in form and logic.

The **errors** in comparisons are underlined in these sentences and the **corrections** are in parentheses:

- Some students' scores are higher than other students. (*student's*)
- Jenny's stories are more interesting than Joe. (*Joe's*)
- I like to eat nachos more than watching the game. (*eating*)
- The art curator preferred to display sculptures rather than displaying paintings. (*paintings*)
- Tim enjoys making dinner more than her. (*she*)
- His sister is better at playing poker than him. (*he*)

20) **Misplaced/Dangling Modifiers:** A modifier describes a word/phrase and should point clearly to the word/phrase that it modifies. A misplaced/dangling modifier can make the sentence meaningless or absurd. To correct these sentences, rearrange the words so that the modifier is closer to the word/phrase it modifies. Learn more about Dangling Modifiers here: <https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/dangling-modifiers/>

The **flawed** misplaced/dangling modifiers are underlined in in these sentences and the **corrections** are in parentheses:

- A man smoked a cigar wearing a beret. (*A man wearing a beret smoked a cigar.*)
- Feathered, I saw the raven. (*I saw the feathered raven.*)
- Hanging in the living room, Judy showed my mom the painting. (*Judy showed my mom the painting hanging in the living room.*)
- She saw a puppy and a kitten on the way to the store. (*On the way to the store, she saw a puppy and a kitten.*)
- Jan found a gold man's watch. (*Jan found a man's gold watch.*)
- The torn student's book lay on the desk. (*The student's torn book lay on the desk.*)

21) **Subject and Object Pronouns:** A subject pronoun (*I, he, she, it, we, they, who*) performs the action of the verb. An object pronoun (*me, him, her, it, us, them, whom*) receives the action of the verb. In either case, ignore the distractors in the sentence to decide which subject/object pronoun to use. Learn more about “I” versus “me” here: <https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/i-versus-me/>

The **correct** subject/object pronouns are underlined in these sentences, with the distractors crossed off:

- ~~John and I~~ called our friend.
- ~~Jessica and~~ he studied together.
- ~~Terrance could not believe that~~ he and she were dating.
- The ball hit ~~Nancy and~~ him.
- My mom drove ~~my sister and~~ me to the movie theatre.

22) **Who vs Whom:** If you re-word the sentence using “*he*,” then “*who*” is correct. If you can re-word the sentence using “*him*,” then “*whom*” is correct. Remember to ignore the distractors. Learn more here: <https://www.worldwisetutoring.com/who-versus-whom/>

The **correct** subject/object pronoun who or whom are underlined in these sentences, with the distractors crossed off and the re-worded sentence in parentheses:

- Who is that masked man? (*He* is that masked man.)
- ~~Michelle is the girl~~ who got the job. (*He* got the job.)
- ~~My neighbor~~ who has two dogs usually goes to the park in the evening. (*He* has two dogs.)
- ~~Will is the man~~ whom I went fishing with last spring. (I went fishing with *him*.)
- Whom can we turn to in a time of crisis? (We can turn to *him*.)
- To whom should I address this letter? (I should address this letter to *him*.)
- ~~My mother, for~~ whom I baked this cake, had her birthday party yesterday. (I bake this cake for *him*.)

23) **Comparative vs Superlative Adjectives:** Comparative adjectives (more, less, better, bigger, ___+er) compare two items. Superlative adjectives (most, least, best, biggest, ___+est) compare three or more items.

The **correct** adjective is underlined in these sentences:

- He moved more quickly than the cart did.
- Jeremy is the taller of the twins.
- Between Curly and Moe, Moe is the meaner.
- Sharon’s garden was the most beautiful in town.
- The blue whale is the largest mammal of all.
- Which of the waves do you think is highest?

24) **Fewer vs Less, Number vs Amount, Farther vs Further:** For items that are countable (choice, dollars, breaths, hours, water, volume, miles, etc.), use “fewer” or “number” or “farther.” For items that are cannot be counted (choices, money, air, time, rain, music, distance, etc.), use “less” or “amount” or “further”.

The **correct** descriptive word is underlined in these sentences:

- I mistakenly thought people would send fewer emails over the weekend.
- After hearing the outcome of the vote, I had less respect for my neighbors.
- The number of people who enrolled in this class is disappointing.
- The amount of vegetation in the woods is astounding.
- Derek drove a mile farther than he needed to before realizing he was lost.
- I want to further my career by taking classes in public speaking.

25) **Good vs Well:** “Good” is an adjective that modifies a noun; something can be or seem good. “Well” is an adverb that modifies a verb; an action can be done well.

The **proper** uses of good and well are underlined in these sentences:

- I am having a good day.
- My day is going well.
- You did a good job.
- You did your job well.
- Did you get a good score on your exam?
- Did you do well on your exam?

26) **Lie vs Lay:** “To lie” means to recline or to rest in a flat position. “To lay” means to set/place something in a resting position. “Lie” does not require a direct object, though “lay” does. One way to remember this rule: “People lie; things lay.” Another mnemonic is “LIE is to reclINE; LAY is to pLACE.”

The **proper** uses of lie and lay are underlined in these sentences:

- I cannot wait to lie down in my bed.
- The fat cat likes to lie in the sun.
- I don’t like to lay my purse on the floor.
- The dog always lays his toys next to his water bowl.