

The ACT English Test

THE ACT ENGLISH TEST ASSESSES YOUR knowledge of English grammar and writing. On the test, you will have 45 minutes to answer 75 questions. That may seem like a large number of questions and relatively little time, but the English Test, more than any other ACT Subject Test, assesses what you already know, rather than what you can figure out if you are given certain information. Essentially, this means you can be completely prepared for the English Test if you study all the material it covers. This section will teach you exactly that material.

Instructions for the English Test

You should learn the instructions for the English Test long before you arrive at the test center. In fact, your first step in preparing for the ACT should be learning the instructions for all four Subject Tests. On the actual test, the Subject Test instructions are time-consuming obstacles, which you can remove by learning them in advance. You can also benefit from them while you study because they contain valuable information about ACT questions and how to answer them.

At the start of each chapter on an individual Subject Test, we've given you a complete summary of the Subject Test instructions. Read through each set of instructions several times until you know them all like the back of your hand. The English Test instructions are particularly long, so you'll save yourself time on the test by learning them now.

Instructions: There are five passages on this subject test. You should read each passage once before answering the questions on it. In order to answer correctly, you may need to read several sentences beyond the question.

There are two question formats within the passages. In one format, you will find words and phrases that have been underlined and assigned numbers. These numbers will correspond with sets of alternative words/phrases, given in the right-hand column of the test booklet. From the sets of alternatives, choose the answer choice that works best in context, keeping in mind whether it employs standard written English, whether it gets across the idea of the section, and whether it suits the tone and style of the passage. You will usually be offered the option "NO CHANGE," which you should choose if you think the version found in the passage is best.

In the second format, you will see boxed numbers referring to sections of the passage or to the passage as a whole. In the right-hand column, you will be asked questions about or given alternatives for the sections marked by the boxes. Choose the answer choice that best answers the question or completes the section.

After choosing your answer choice, fill in the corresponding bubble on the answer sheet.

These instructions will seem much clearer to you after you've seen the sample English Test questions in the following sections.

The Format of the English Test

The five passages on the English Test contain two question formats: underlines and boxes. Both the underlines and the boxes will be numbered so you can find the corresponding multiple-choice answers in the right-hand column of the test booklet.

Below you'll find a sample English Test paragraph, illustrating both question -formats:

[1] That summer my parents buy me my first

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17. A. NO CHANGE

B. bought

C. have bought

D. buys

bike—my first true love. [2] One day, I crashed

into a tree and broke my leg. [3] Unfortunately,

my control of the bike was not as great as my

enthusiasm for it. [4] I spent all my afternoons

speeding around the neighborhood blocks. **18**

- 18.** Which of the following provides the most logical ordering of the sentences in Paragraph 3?
- F.** 3, 2, 1, 4
G. 3, 1, 4, 2
H. 1, 4, 3, 2
J. 1, 4, 2, 3

Question 17 demonstrates the underline format on the English Test. In this example, the word “buy” is underlined and numbered 17, indicating that you can replace “buy” with answer choices B, C, or D, or keep it by selecting answer choice A (“NO CHANGE”). Decide which answer choice makes the sentence grammatically correct, and fill in the corresponding bubble on your answer sheet. (The correct answer is **B**.)

Question 18 is an example of a Rhetorical Skills question indicated by a boxed number. The boxed number indicates that the question will deal with a large section of the passage, not just a few words. This question asks you to reorganize the sentences of the paragraph in a logical manner. Once you’ve arrived at an answer, fill in the corresponding bubble on your answer sheet. (The correct answer to this question is **H**.)

Don’t worry about the answers to these questions now. We’ll deal with the specific question types and the grammar covered on the English Subject Test later on in this chapter.

The Content of the English Test

There are actually two types of content on the English Test: the content of the passages and the content of the questions. Question content is the more important of the two.

When we say “the content of the passages,” we mean the subjects covered by the five English Test passages. The passages usually cover a variety of subjects, ranging from historical discussions to personal narratives. Don’t worry about passage content for now; it is important when answering certain Rhetorical Skills questions, which we’ll discuss toward the end of this chapter, but the grammar of the passage is generally more important.

“The content of the questions” refers to the two kinds of material covered by the English Test: Usage/Mechanics and Rhetorical Skills. The majority of this section is devoted to explaining the question content on the English Test. For now, we’ll give you a brief summary of the material.

Usage/Mechanics Questions

The 40 Usage/Mechanics questions on the test deal with the proper use of standard written English. You can think of them as the “technical” aspect of the test because they ask you to apply the rules of standard English to sections of the passages. Questions covering usage and mechanics are almost always presented as underlined sections of the passages. Usage/Mechanics questions test your understanding of the following categories:

1. **Punctuation (10 questions):** Punctuation questions ask you to identify and correct any misplaced, misused, or missing punctuation marks. The punctuation marks most commonly tested on the ACT are, in order of decreasing frequency, commas, apostrophes, colons, and semicolons.
2. **Basic Grammar and Usage (12 questions):** Basic Grammar and Usage questions usually target a single incorrect word that violates the conventional rules of English grammar. These questions frequently test your knowledge of agreement issues and pronoun and verb forms and cases.
3. **Sentence Structure (18 questions):** Sentence Structure questions tend to deal with the sentence as a whole. They test you on clause relationships, parallelism, and placement of modifiers.

If some of these Usage/Mechanics issues sound unfamiliar or confusing to you, don't worry—later, in the “Usage/Mechanics Questions on the English Test” chapter, we'll review all of the material you need to know for these questions.

Rhetorical Skills Questions

The 35 Rhetorical Skills questions test your ability to refine written English. If the Usage/Mechanics questions are the technical aspect of the test, then the Rhetorical Skills questions are the intuitive aspect—but they require an intuition you can develop through practice. The boxes you encounter on the test will deal with Rhetorical Skills questions; some underlined sections may deal with Rhetorical Skills as well.

Rhetorical Skills questions break down into the following categories:

1. **Writing Strategy (12 questions):** Writing Strategy questions are concerned with a passage's effectiveness. These questions require that you understand the point, purpose, and tone of a passage. When answering these questions, you must decide the best way to support a point with evidence, to introduce and conclude paragraphs, to make a transition between paragraphs, or to phrase a statement.
2. **Organization (11 questions):** Organization questions can deal with individual sentences, individual paragraphs, or the passage as a whole. They will ask you either to restructure the passage or paragraph or to decide on the best placement of a word or phrase within a sentence.
3. **Style (12 questions):** Style questions focus on effective word choice. They will ask you to eliminate redundancy and to select the most appropriate word or phrase. In order to answer style questions correctly, you need to understand the tone of a passage, and you need to have a good eye for clear written English.

Because Rhetorical Skills questions require a sense of good English writing, they tend to be more difficult than Usage/Mechanics questions, which primarily require that you understand grammatical rules. This sense for good writing can be developed through review and practice. You'll have a chance for both in the “Rhetorical Skills Questions on the English Test” chapter.

Memorization and the Content of the English Test

The ACT writers emphasize that the English Test is not a test of memorization. It would be more accurate to say that the test does not *explicitly* test your memorization of rules of the English language.

You will not be tested on vocabulary on the English Test (unlike on the SAT Verbal, which is largely a vocabulary memorization test), but having a decent vocabulary is important in answering style and strategy questions. The questions often ask you to choose the most effective word or phrase. If you don't know what some of the words mean, you may not be able to make the right choice.

Technically, the test does not ask you to memorize grammar rules, but it should be obvious that doing well on the test requires that you know the conventional rules of grammar. You won't be asked to state the definition of a gerund, but you'll be in trouble if you can't make your subjects and verbs agree or if you think a comma splice is something tasty in your spice rack.

Obviously, you need to understand grammatical rules for the English Test. While knowing these rules does not explicitly require memorization, most people begin to learn grammar by memorizing its rules.

Strategies for the English Test

ALTHOUGH THE ENGLISH TEST IS relatively straightforward, you should use certain strategies to improve your speed and efficiency and to avoid any traps the ACT writers may have included. This section covers both broad strategies for approaching the English Test as well as specific tips for eliminating multiple-choice answers.

Skim the Entire Passage before Answering the Questions

Don't immediately jump to the questions. Instead, first read quickly through the passage you're working on; then begin answering the accompanying questions.

While reading the passage once through before getting to the questions may seem like extra work, it will prevent you from making unnecessary errors. The English Test instructions warn that you may need to read beyond a question in order to answer it correctly. By being familiar with the entire passage, you can avoid the problem of not having read far enough ahead. Reading the entire passage will also help you with Rhetorical Skills questions by giving you an understanding of the passage's purpose, argument, and tone.

If you need further convincing, the following sample English Test question demonstrates why reading beyond the underlined section is necessary:

her dogs has sleek, brown hair

14

14. F. No change

G. are

H. have

J. do not have

Seems pretty easy, doesn't it? "Ah, a simple subject-verb agreement problem," you're probably thinking. "The answer, obviously, is H." But what if we show you the whole sentence?

The girl walking her dogs has sleek, brown hair

14

14. F. No change

G. are

H. have

J. do not have

Reading the rest of the sentence reveals that the sleek, brown hair belongs to a girl rather than a pack of dogs. The question was about subject-verb agreement, but the words directly next to the underlined phrase misled you into thinking that the subject was "her dogs" and not "the girl." If you had read the passage first, you would have realized that the correct answer is F.

Admittedly, this example exaggerates the case for reading beyond the question, but it gets our point across. Ultimately, if you quickly read through the passage before tackling the questions, you'll avoid unnecessary mistakes without sacrificing much time.

Answer the Questions in the Order They Appear

Answer ACT English questions in the order in which they appear. This suggestion is really just common sense. After all, the questions appear in a certain order for a reason: a question at the beginning deals with the beginning of the passage, a question in the middle deals with the middle of the passage, and so on. An organization question in the middle of a passage won't ask you to reorganize the entire passage or a faraway section of the passage. It will ask you to reorganize the material directly to the left of the question. Rhetorical Skills questions on the passage as a whole appear at the end of the passage, and what better time to answer those questions that deal with the entire passage than at the end?

Organization of Usage/Mechanics and Rhetorical Skills Questions

Questions on the English Test do not appear in order of difficulty. On many passages, you tend to see easy Usage/Mechanics questions near the beginning and relatively difficult Rhetorical Skills questions at the end, but there is no set rule about the order of their appearance.

Guess

If you come to a question you can't answer, you can either draw a mark next to it so you can return later, or you can guess right away, leaving the question behind forever. On the English Test, and only on the English Test, we suggest guessing and moving on. As we stated earlier, the questions on the English Test assess what you already know rather than what you can figure out, so if you don't get the answer right off the bat (or a few seconds off the bat), you're not likely to get it by intense wriggling and head scratching. With that in mind, marking the question in order to come back later seems like a needless waste of time—you might as well take your shot right away and move on to more fruitful English territory.

Following this strategy, you should not move on to a new passage without answering all the questions from the previous one. Needless to say, if you follow our suggestion and guess when you don't know the answer, you won't encounter this problem. But if you do decide to return to a question you skipped, do so before moving on to the next passage; otherwise, you're likely to forget crucial details from the passage.

Eliminate Answer Choices

Educated guessing is always better than blind guessing. Whenever you guess, try first to eliminate some of the multiple-choice answers to improve your odds of guessing correctly. Take a look at these sample answers:

- A. When I swung the bat I knew, I had hit a home run.
- B. When I swung the bat, I knew I had hit a home run.
- C. When I swing the bat I will know I always hit a home run.
- D. When, I swung the bat I knew, I had hit a home run.

You can probably figure out from these answer choices that there is a comma placement error. Choices A, B, and D all give versions of the same sentence with different comma placement. Choice C, attempting to lure you off the right track, offers a comma-less version of the sentence with nonsensically altered verb tenses.

Can you eliminate any of these answer choices? Well, choice C looks like a prime candidate for elimination because it makes little sense. Choice D also looks like it can go because of the comma placed after “When,” which leaves the word dangling at the beginning of the sentence. If you can eliminate either or both of these, you greatly increase the chance that you’ll pick the correct answer, which is **B**.

Eliminating Answer Choices for Questions with Multiple Errors

Quite often, you will encounter questions that involve more than one error. While these questions may seem harder to answer than single-error questions, you can benefit from the multiple errors when trying to eliminate answer choices: if you can’t spot one error, you might spot the other. Instead of tackling all the errors at once, you’ll have an easier time picking them off one by one. Let’s use the following example:

- A.** Cathys’ friends left they’re bags in the room.
- B.** Cathy’s friends left there bags in the room.
- C.** Cathys friends left their bags in the room.
- D.** Cathy’s friends left their bags in the room.

These sentences contain two variations. If you focus on Cathy and her friends, you realize that you should eliminate choices A and C for incorrect apostrophe placement. Now you’ve narrowed your options to B and D, which respectively use “there” and “their” as possessive pronouns. If you don’t know the difference between the two, you have a 50 percent chance of guessing the right answer. If you do know the difference (and you will, after you read the Usage/Mechanics chapter), you know that “there bags” is incorrect and that the correct answer is therefore **D**.

Avoid Being Influenced by the Answer Choices

Be wary of answer choices that try to trick you into overcorrecting the problem. You shouldn’t be fooled into finding additional “errors” by an answer choice that has completely made over the original. The correct answer to a question is not necessarily the one that has changed the most elements of the underlined phrase.

Choose “NO CHANGE”

In fact, the correct answer to a question is not necessarily one that has changed anything at all. All Usage/Mechanics questions and some Rhetorical Skills questions offer you “NO CHANGE” as an answer choice. Do not overlook “NO CHANGE” as a possible answer to the problem. It is correct approximately 20 percent of the time it’s offered.

If your gut tells you there’s nothing wrong with the underlined phrase, don’t change the phrase.

If the Phrase Doesn’t Fit, You Must “OMIT”

You will often see the answer choice “OMIT the underlined portion.” By choosing it, you can remove the entire underlined portion from the passage.

When an answer choice allows you to “OMIT the underlined portion,” think hard about that option. “OMIT,” when it appears as an answer, is correct approximately 25 percent of the time. We don’t suggest that you go through the test ticking off “OMIT” for every possible question, but we do want you to consider it as an answer.

“OMIT” is an attractive (and often correct) answer because it eliminates redundant or irrelevant statements. (For more on redundancy, see the “Style” section under “Rhetorical Skills Questions on the English Test.”) For example,

The bag was free. I didn't have to pay for it.

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21. A. NO CHANGE
B. I paid five dollars for it.
C. I paid almost nothing for it.
D. Omit the underlined portion

The ACT writers want your edits to make the passage as concise as possible. A statement like the one above should strike you as redundant because you clearly don't need to pay for something that's free—so why say the same thing twice? If you choose choice A, you keep the redundant sentence in the passage and get the answer wrong. Choices B and C don't make much sense because they have you paying for the free bag. Choice **D** is the correct answer because it omits an unnecessary statement. Without the second sentence, a reader still understands that the free bag didn't cost anything.

When deciding whether to omit, read the passage or sentence without the underlined portion and see whether the new version of the sentence makes as much, if not more, sense to you as the original. If it does, go ahead and choose "OMIT." If the passage or sentence loses something in the omission, then turn to the other answer choices.

Usage/Mechanics Questions on the English Test

IN ORDER TO DO WELL ON THE ENGLISH Test, you need to know the basic rules of grammar. Specifically, you need to know the rules of grammar most often tested by the ACT. This section will teach you the grammar you need to know for the test. These Usage/Mechanics topics are:

1. Punctuation
2. Basic Grammar and Usage
3. Sentence Structure

Punctuation

Punctuation shows you how to read and understand sentences. For instance, the period at the end of the last sentence indicated that the sentence had come to an end and that the next sentence would begin a new thought. We could go on and on like this, but you get the point.

The ACT English Test requires that you know the rules for the following types of punctuation:

1. Commas
2. Apostrophes
3. Semicolons
4. Colons
5. Parentheses and Dashes
6. Periods, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points

Not all of these punctuation types are tested on every English Test. However, you can definitely expect to find questions dealing with the first four items of the list on the English Test you take.

Commas

Misplaced, misused, and missing commas are the most frequent punctuation offenders on the English Test. Commas can serve several functions within sentences:

Commas Separate Independent Clauses Joined by a Conjunction

An independent clause contains a subject and a verb (an independent clause can be as short as "I am" or "he read"), and it can function as a sentence on its own. When you see a conjunction (*and*,

but, for, or, nor, yet) joining independent clauses, a comma should precede the conjunction. For example,

An independent clause contains a subject and a verb, *and* it can function as a sentence on its own.

Lesley wanted to sit outside, *but* it was raining.

Henry could tie the shoe himself, *or* he could ask Amanda to tie his shoe.

In each example, the clauses on both sides of the comma could stand as sentences on their own. With the addition of the comma and conjunction, the two independent clauses become one sentence.

Commas Delineate a Series of Items

A series contains three or more items separated by commas. The items in a series can be either nouns (such as “dog”) or verb phrases (such as “get in the car”). Commas are essentially the structural backbone of a series. For example,

The hungry girl devoured *a chicken, two pounds of pasta, and a chocolate cake*.

When he learned his girlfriend was coming over, Nathaniel *took a shower, brushed his teeth, and cleaned his room*.

The comma follows all but the last item in the series. When using a conjunction, such as “and” or “or,” at the end of the series, remember to precede it with a comma (“ . . . brushed his teeth, *and* cleaned his room”).

Commas Separate Multiple Nonessential Adjectives Modifying a Noun

When two or more nonessential adjectives modify a noun, they should be separated by a comma. Of course, the key to figuring out whether there should be a comma separating two adjectives is being able to determine whether the adjectives are essential or nonessential. Luckily, there’s a simple rule that can help you: the order of nonessential adjectives is interchangeable. For example,

Rebecca’s new dog has *long, silky* hair.

The *loud, angry* protesters mobbed the building.

These two sentences would make equal sense if you switched the order of the adjectives: “Rebecca’s new dog has *silky, long* hair” and “The *angry, loud* protesters mobbed the building.”

The case is different if you have an essential adjective modifying the noun. Essential adjectives specify the nouns they modify; they are bound to the noun, so that the noun loses meaning if separated from its adjective. A noun modified by an essential adjective should be treated as a single noun. If you come across two adjectives modifying a noun, and one is essential, you should *not* use a comma between them. For example,

My mother hates *noisy electronic* music.

“Electronic music” functions as an indivisible noun; “electronic” specifies the type of music the mother hates. “Noisy” is a nonessential adjective modifying the noun “electronic music.” Changing the order of “noisy” and “electronic” (“My mother hates electronic noisy music”) would not make sense. If you can’t change the order of two adjectives preceding a noun, you know the adjective nearest the noun is essential, so you should not use a comma.

Commas Set Off Dependent Phrases and Clauses from the Main Clause of a Sentence

Unlike independent clauses, dependent phrases and clauses are not sentences in themselves; rather, they serve to explain or embellish the main clause of a sentence. When they appear at the beginning of a sentence, they should be set off from the main clause by a comma. For example,

Scared of monsters, Tina always checked under her bed before going to sleep.

After preparing an elaborate meal for herself, Anne was too tired to eat.

The first example shows a dependent clause (“Scared of monsters”) acting as an adjective modifying “Tina.” The second example shows a dependent clause acting as an adverb. Since the adverbial clause is at the beginning of the sentence, it needs to be set off from the main clause by a comma. Adverbial clauses should also be set off by commas if they appear in the middle of a sentence. However, if an adverbial clause appears at the end of a sentence, you do not need to use a comma. For example,

Anne was too tired to eat after preparing an elaborate meal for herself.

Commas Set Off Nonessential Phrases and Clauses

Nonessential phrases are like nonessential adjectives in that they embellish nouns without specifying them. Nonessential phrases should be set off from the rest of the sentence by commas. For example,

Everyone voted Carrie, *who is the most popular girl in our class*, prom queen.

The decrepit street sign, *which had stood in our town since 1799*, finally fell down.

When you use nonessential phrases like the two above, you assume that “Carrie” and “the decrepit street sign” do not need any further identification. If you remove the nonessential phrases, you should still be able to understand the sentences.

Restrictive phrases, on the other hand, are not set off by commas because they are necessary to understand the modified noun and the sentence as a whole. For example,

The girl *who is sick* missed three days of school.

The dog *that ate the rotten steak* fell down and died.

If you removed the restrictive phrases (“who is sick” and “that ate the rotten steak”) from these sentences, you would be left wondering “which girl?” and “which dog?” These restrictive phrases are used to identify exactly which girl missed school and exactly which dog died. Setting off “who is sick” in commas would assume that the girl’s identity is never in doubt; there is only one girl who possibly could have missed school. In this case, we know the identity of the girl only because the restrictive phrase specifies “the girl who is sick.”

Commas Set Off Appositives

Appositives are similar to nonessential phrases. An appositive is a phrase that renames or restates the modified noun, usually enhancing it with additional information. For example,

Everyone voted Carrie, *the most popular girl in school*, prom queen.

The dog, *a Yorkshire Terrier*, barked at all the neighbors.

In these two examples, “the most popular girl in school” and “a Yorkshire Terrier” are appositives used to explain the nouns they modify. You should be able to draw an imaginary equal sign between the noun and the appositive modifying it: Carrie = the most popular girl in school, the dog = a Yorkshire Terrier. Because they are equal, you should be able to swap them and retain the meaning of the sentence: “Everyone voted the most popular girl in school, Carrie, prom queen.”

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are the second most commonly tested punctuation mark on the English Test. Apostrophes primarily indicate possession, but they also take the place of omitted letters in contractions (for example, “was not” becomes “wasn’t” and “it is” becomes “it’s”). You will be tested chiefly on your knowledge of the apostrophe’s possessive function.

The Possessive and Singular Nouns

A singular noun (for example: Simon, the dog, the bottle) can be made possessive by adding an apostrophe followed by an “s”. For example,

Simon’s teacher was in the room.

My mom forgot the *dog’s* food.

We removed the *bottle’s* label.

The apostrophe follows directly after the noun. If you move the apostrophe after the “s” (for example, if you write “dogs” rather than “dog’s”), you will change the meaning of the sentence (see “The Possessive and Plural Nouns” below). If you forget the apostrophe altogether, you will render the sentence meaningless.

The Possessive and Plural Nouns

Most plural nouns (for example: the boys, the dogs, the bottles) can be made possessive by adding only an apostrophe. For example,

The *boys’* teacher was in the room.

My mom forgot the *dogs’* food.

We removed the *bottles’* labels.

The apostrophe directly follows plural nouns that end in “s” to make them possessive. But for plural nouns that do not end in “s” (for example, “women”), you should treat the plural form as a singular noun (i.e., add an apostrophe followed by an “s”). For example,

The *women’s* locker room needs to be cleaned.

The Possessive and Multiple Nouns

Sometimes you’ll want to indicate the possessive of more than one noun (Nick and Nora, Dan and Johann). The placement of the apostrophe depends on whether the possessors share the possession. For example,

Nick and Nora’s dog solves crimes.

Dan’s and Johann’s socks are dirty.

In the example of Nick and Nora, the dog belongs to both of them, so you treat “Nick and Nora” as a single unit, followed by a single apostrophe and “s.” In the second example, both Dan and Johann have dirty socks, but they don’t share the same dirty socks, so you treat Dan and Johann as separate units, giving each an apostrophe and “s.”

The Possessive and Pronouns

Unlike nouns and proper nouns, the possessive case of pronouns does not use an apostrophe. The following chart gives you nominative pronouns (the ones you use as subjects) and the corresponding possessive pronouns:

Nominative Pronoun	Possessive Pronoun
I	my
you (<i>s.</i>)	your
she	her
he	his
we	our
you (<i>pl.</i>)	your
they	their
it	its
who	whose

For example,

The dog chewed on *its* tail.

You should give him *your* wallet.

Don't confuse the "its" and the "your" above with "it's" and "you're." This mistake is frequently tested on the English Test (see below).

ITS/IT'S, THEIR/THEY'RE

The ACT will test you on your ability to distinguish between "its" and "it's." "Its" is the possessive form of "it." "It's" is the contraction of "it is." This can be tricky to remember, since you are normally trained to associate apostrophes with possession. But when you're dealing with "its" versus "it's," the apostrophe signals a contraction. The same is true for "their/they're/there," "your/you're," and "whose/who's." Make sure you are aware of these exceptions to the apostrophe rule of possession.

Try the following practice problem:

Your face is red.

9

9. A. NO CHANGE

B. You're face

C. Your nose

D. OMIT the underlined portion.

You can eliminate choices C and D immediately: C changes the meaning of the sentence for no particular reason, and D leaves you without a complete sentence. The decision comes down to "Your" and "You're." If you don't know the correct answer, try replacing "You're" with "You are." The

resulting sentence is “You are face is red”—an odd remark. The correct answer is A, “NO CHANGE.” You can employ this replacement technique whenever you don’t know the answer to a possessive-or-contraction question. Once you replace the contraction with the full phrase, your ear will tell you which choice is right.

Semicolons

You’ll usually find several questions dealing with semicolons on the English Test. The main functions of a semicolon that you should know for the English Test are its ability to join related independent clauses and its use in a series.

The Semicolon and Two Independent Clauses

Semicolons are commonly used to separate two related but independent clauses. For example,

Julie ate five brownies; Eileen ate seven.

Josh needed to buy peas; he ran to the market.

In these cases, the semicolon functions as a “weak period.” It suggests a short pause before moving on to a related thought, whereas a period suggests a full stop before moving on to a less-related thought. Generally, a period between these independent clauses would work just as well as a semicolon, so the ACT won’t offer you a choice between period or semicolon on the English Test. But you may see the semicolon employed as a weak period in an answer choice; in that case, you should know that it is being used correctly.

Frequently, you will see two independent clauses joined by a semicolon and a transitional adverb (such as *consequently*, *however*, *furthermore*, *indeed*, *moreover*, *nevertheless*, *therefore*, and *thus*). For example,

Julie ate five brownies; *however*, Eileen ate seven.

Josh needed to buy peas; *thus* he ran to the market.

These sentences function similarly to those joined by a comma and a conjunction. Here, the semicolon replaces the comma, and the transitional adverb replaces the conjunction. Most transitional adverbs should be followed by a comma, but for short adverbs such as “thus,” the comma should be omitted.

The Semicolon and the Series: When the Comma’s Already Taken

The semicolon replaces the comma as the structural backbone of a series if the items already contain commas. For example,

The tennis tournament featured the surprise comeback player, Koch, who dropped out last year due to injuries; the up-and-coming star Popp, who dominated the junior tour; and the current favorite, Farrington, who won five of the last six tournaments.

If you used commas rather than semicolons in the above sentence, anyone reading the sentence would feel pretty confused. The semicolons in this example function exactly as commas do in a series, but they allow you to avoid overpopulating the sentence with commas.

Colons

You’ll probably be tested on your knowledge of colons a couple of times on the English Test. The ACT writers want to be sure that you know how colons introduce lists, explanations, and quotations.

The Colon and Expectation

Colons are used after complete sentences to introduce related information that usually comes in the form of a list, an explanation, or a quotation. When you see a colon, you should know to expect elaborating information. For example,

The wedding had all the elements to make it a classic: *the elegant bride, the weeping mother, and the fainting bridesmaids.*

In this example, the colon is used to introduce a list of classic wedding elements. Without the list following the colon, the sentence can stand alone (“The wedding had all the elements to make it a classic”). By naming the classic elements of a wedding, the list serves mainly to explain and expand upon the independent sentence that precedes it.

Check out this example of another way to use colons:

The wedding had all the elements to make it a classic: *the elegant bride beamed as her mother wept and as the bridesmaids fainted.*

Here, the clause following the colon also has an explanatory function. In this case, the colon joins two independent clauses, but the clause following the colon is used to explain and expand the first. Colons can also be used to introduce quotations. For example,

The mother’s exclamation best summed up the wedding: *“If only the bridesmaids hadn’t fainted!”*

Here, the colon is used to introduce the mother’s exclamation. Make sure the quotation following the colon is related to the sentence.

Colon Problems

You should learn the following rules in order to avoid erroneous colon use on the English Test:

A COLON SHOULD ALWAYS BE PRECEDED BY AN INDEPENDENT CLAUSE.

WRONG: The ingredients I need to make a cake: flour, butter, sugar, and icing.

RIGHT: I need several ingredients to make a cake: flour, butter, sugar, and icing.

In the “WRONG” example, a sentence fragment precedes the list of items. The sentence should be reworked to create an independent clause before the colon.

THERE SHOULD NEVER BE MORE THAN ONE COLON IN A SENTENCE.

WRONG: He brought many items on the camping trip: a tent, a sleeping bag, a full cooking set, warm clothes, and several pairs of shoes: sneakers, boots, and sandals.

RIGHT: He brought many items on the camping trip: a tent, a sleeping bag, a full cooking set, warm clothes, sneakers, boots, and sandals.

If you see a sentence that contains more than one colon, the sentence needs to be rephrased. Lists within lists or explanations within explanations do not work in standard written English.

Other ACT Punctuation

The English Test rarely tests punctuation marks other than the ones listed above. But in the odd case that the test writers do throw in some other punctuation errors, you should know what to expect. The

ACT officially states that it covers, in addition to the punctuation mentioned above, the following punctuation marks:

Parentheses and Dashes

Parentheses usually surround words or phrases that break a sentence's train of thought but provide explanatory information for it. For example,

Their road trip (*which they made in a convertible*) lasted three weeks and spanned fourteen states.

Similarly, parenthetical sentences can be inserted between other sentences, adding additional information to them without diverting their flow. For example,

Their road trip lasted three weeks and spanned fourteen states. (*The one they took two years ago lasted two weeks and covered ten states.*) When they got home, they were exhausted.

In this example, the parenthetical information about the previous road trip is interesting but not completely relevant to the other sentences. Note that when an entire sentence is enclosed within parentheses, the period should be inside them as well.

Dashes function similarly to parentheses. Dashes indicate either an abrupt break in thought or an insertion of additional, explanatory information.

He walked so slowly—*with his lame leg he couldn't go much faster*—that even his neighbor's toddler eventually overtook him.

I don't have the heart to refuse a friend's request for help—*do you?*

Periods, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points

These are the least common forms of punctuation tested by the ACT. The ACT writers probably realized that these sentence enders are easier to grasp than other forms of punctuation because they basically each have only one function:

The sentence ends here.

Does the sentence end here?

Hooray, the sentence ends here!

The period in the first example indicates that the sentence has ended. In the second example, the question mark indicates that a question is being asked. The third example is an exclamatory statement marked by an exclamation point. Exclamation points should be used sparingly to indicate statements made with great emotion (for example, anger, excitement, or agitation).

Basic Grammar and Usage

As you've probably already gathered, the English Test will never *explicitly* ask you to name a grammatical error. But in order to identify and fix errors, you should know what they are. While you'll often be able to rely on your ear to detect errors, many of the questions will ask you to fix phrases that are fine for spoken English but not for formal written English.

In the following section, we'll cover these grammar issues, which appear on the English Test:

1. Subject-Verb Agreement
2. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement
3. Pronoun Cases
4. Verb Tenses

5. Adverbs and Adjectives
6. Idioms
7. Comparative and Superlative Modifiers

Subject-Verb Agreement

Singular verbs must accompany singular subjects, and plural verbs must accompany plural subjects.

SINGULAR: The man wears four ties.

His favorite college is in Nebraska.

Matt, along with his friends, goes to Coney Island.

PLURAL: The men wear four ties each.

His favorite colleges are in Nebraska.

Matt and his friends go to Coney Island.

In the first example with Matt, the subject is singular because the phrase “along with his friends” is isolated in commas. But in the second example with Matt, his friends join the action; the subject becomes “Matt and his friends,” calling for the change to a plural verb.

Subject-verb agreement is a simple idea, but ACT writers will make it tricky. Often, they’ll put the subject at one end of the sentence and the verb a mile away. Try the following example:

An audience of thousands of expectant

people who have come from afar to listen

to live music in an outdoor setting seem

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terrifying to a nervous performer.

17. A. NO CHANGE

B. seems

C. have seemed

D. to seem

To solve this problem, cross out the junk in the middle that separates the subject, “an audience,” from the verb “seem.” Remember that the subject of a sentence can never be part of a phrase that begins with “of.” You’re left with:

An audience seem terrifying to a nervous performer.

Now you can see what the verb should be:

An audience seems terrifying to a nervous performer.

So the correct answer is **B**. Double-check by eliminating choices C and D because they are grammatically incorrect (and because they don’t make much sense in the sentence).

As long as you can isolate the subject and verb, handling subject-verb agreement is relatively simple. But certain cases of subject-verb agreement can be tricky. The ACT writers like to test you on several of these difficult types of subject-verb agreement.

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns (such as *committee, family, group, number, and team*) can be either singular or plural. The verb depends on whether the collective noun is being treated as a single unit or as divided individuals. For example:

SINGULAR: The number of people living in Florida varies from year to year.

PLURAL: A number of people living in Florida wish they had voted for Gore.

SINGULAR: The committee decides on the annual program.

PLURAL: The committee have disagreed on the annual program.

You can often determine whether a collective noun is singular or plural by examining the article (“the” or “a”) that precedes it. As in the first example, “*The number*” is generally singular, while “*A number*” is generally plural. This difference is demonstrated in the first example above. “*The number*” of people in Florida is a single entity—even though it comprises multiple individuals—so it takes a singular verb, “varies.” “*A number*” of people, on the other hand, behave as multiple individuals—even though they wish for the same thing, they act independently of each other—so these people require a plural verb, “wish.”

Looking to the article preceding a noun is a useful trick when deciding whether the noun is singular or plural, but it doesn’t always work. In the second example, “*The committee*” can be both singular and plural. How the committee behaves (do they act together or apart?) decides whether the verb is singular or plural. If the committee does something as a unified whole (“*decides on the annual program*”), then the verb is singular. If the committee are divided in their actions (“*have disagreed on the annual program*”), then the verb is plural.

Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns refer to persons or things that have not been specified. Matching indefinite pronouns with the correct verb form can be tricky because some indefinite pronouns that seem to be plural are in fact singular. Questions dealing with singular indefinite pronouns are popular with ACT writers, so you’d be wise to memorize a few of these pronouns now. The following indefinite pronouns are always singular, and they tend to appear on the English Test:

Another	Everybody	Nobody
Anybody	Everyone	No one
Anyone	Everything	Somebody
Anything	Each	Someone

All the indefinite pronouns in the list above should be followed by singular verbs. For example, *Anyone over the age of 21 is eligible to vote in the United States.*

Each has its own patch of grass.

If you’re used to thinking these pronouns take plural verbs, these sentences probably sound weird to you. Your best bet is to memorize the list above (it’s not very long!) and to remember that those pronouns take singular verbs.

You should also be aware that not all indefinite pronouns are singular. Some (for example, *all*, *any*, *none*, and *some*) can be either singular or plural depending on the context of the sentence. Other indefinite pronouns (for example, *both*, *few*, *many*, and *several*) are always plural. The differences among these indefinite pronouns can be very confusing; determining what’s right often requires an astute sense of proper English (or good memorization). If you’re struggling to remember the different indefinite pronouns, take comfort in these two things:

1. The most commonly tested indefinite pronouns are the singular ones in the list we gave you.

2. You probably won't come across more than a couple of indefinite pronouns on the English Test you take.

Compound Subjects

Most compound subjects (subjects joined by “and”) should be plural:

Kerry and Vanessa live in Nantucket.

The blue bike and the red wagon need repairs.

The reasoning behind this rule is fairly simple: you have multiple subjects, so you need a plural noun. Thus “Kerry and Vanessa *live*” and the “bike and wagon *need*.”

“There Is” or “There Are”?

Whether to use “there is” or “there are” depends on the singularity or plurality of the noun that the phrase is pointing out. If you have five grapes, you should say: “There *are* five grapes.” If you have a cat, you should say: “There *is* a cat.” The “is” and the “are” in these sentences are the main verbs, so they must agree with the noun.

“Or” and “Nor”

If you have singular subjects joined by an “or” or “nor,” the sentence always takes a singular verb. For example,

Either Susannah or Caitlin is going to be in trouble.

If one of the subjects is plural and the other is singular, the verb agrees with the subject closer to it.

For example,

Neither the van nor the buses were operating today.

Either the dogs or the cat is responsible for the mess.

Both of these examples contain a singular and a plural subject. The main verb of the sentence is determined by the subject nearest it: in the first example, “buses” is closer to the verb, so the verb is plural, and in the second example, “cat” is closer to the verb, so the verb is singular.

Mathematics, News, Dollars, Physics

These and other words look plural but are singular in usage:

Today's news was full of tragic stories.

Trust your gut instinct with these words. You'll probably know they're singular from everyday usage.

“Dollars” is an exceptional case—it's singular when you're talking about an amount of money (“ninety dollars is a big chunk of change”) but plural when you're discussing a particular group of bills (“the dollars in my pocket are green”).

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

The ACT writers usually include several pronoun-antecedent agreement errors on the English Test. An antecedent is a word to which a later pronoun refers back. For example, in the sentence “Richard put on his shoes,” “Richard” is the antecedent to which “his” refers. When the pronoun does not agree in gender or number with its antecedent, there's an agreement error. For example:

WRONG: Already late for the show, Mary couldn't find their keys.

RIGHT: Already late for the show, Mary couldn't find her keys.

Unless another sentence states that the keys belong to other people, the possessive pronoun should agree in gender and number with “Mary.” As far as we can tell, Mary is a singular, feminine noun, so the pronoun should be too.

The example of Mary contained a fairly obvious example of incorrect agreement, but sometimes the agreement error isn't as obvious on the ACT. In everyday speech, we tend to say "someone lost *their* shoe" (wrong) rather than "someone lost *his* shoe" (correct) or "someone lost *her* shoe" (also correct) because we don't want to exclude either gender and because "someone lost *his* or *her* shoe" sounds cumbersome. The common solution? We attempt gender neutrality and brevity by using "their" instead of "his" or "her." In informal speech, such a slip is okay. But if you see it on the test, it's an error.

You will also run into agreement errors where the antecedent is unclear. In these cases, the pronoun is ambiguous. We use ambiguous pronouns all the time in everyday speech, but on the test (you guessed it) they're wrong.

WRONG: Trot told Ted that he should get the mauve pants from the sale rack.

This sentence is wrong because we don't know to whom "he" refers. Should Ted get the pants, or should Trot? Or should neither, because mauve pants are never a good idea? You should restate the original sentence so all the pertinent information is relayed without confusion or multiple meanings, such as "Trot told Ted that Ted should get the pants...."

Pronoun Cases

The ACT writers will definitely include some questions on pronoun cases. Pronoun case refers to the role of the pronoun in a sentence. There are three cases: nominative, objective, and possessive. You don't need to know the names of these cases, but you do need to know the differences between them (and knowing the names doesn't hurt). Here, we'll briefly describe each case.

The Nominative Case

The nominative case should be used when a pronoun is the subject of a sentence—for example, "*I* went to the store" and "*They* walked to the park." You should also use a nominative pronoun after any form of *to be*:

WRONG: It was me on the phone.

RIGHT: It was I on the phone.

The right sentence may sound awkward to you, but it's the correct use of the nominative. The people who laid down the rules of grammar considered *to be* a grammatical equal sign, so when you have a sentence like "It was I on the phone," you should be able to do this: "It" = "I." If that equation holds true, "I" should be able to take the place of "It" in the sentence: "I was on the phone."

PRONOUN COMPARISONS

The nominative also follows comparative clauses that usually begin with "as" or "than." When a pronoun is involved in a comparison, it must match the case of the other pronoun involved. For example,

WRONG: I'm fatter than her, so I'll probably win this sumo wrestling match.

RIGHT: I'm fatter than she, so I'll probably win this sumo wrestling match.

In this sentence, "I" is being compared to "her." Obviously, these two pronouns are in different cases, so one of them must be wrong. Since only "her" is in question, it must be wrong, and therefore "she" is the correct answer.

Another way to approach comparisons is to realize that comparisons usually omit words. For example, it's grammatically correct to say, "Alexis is stronger than Bill," but that's an abbreviated version of what you're really saying. The long version is, "Alexis is stronger than Bill is." That last "is" is invisible in the abbreviated version, but you must remember that it's there. Now let's go back to

the sumo sentence. As in our Alexis and Bill example, we don't see the word "is" in the comparison, but it's implied. If you see a comparison using a pronoun and you're not sure if the pronoun is correct, add the implied "is." In this case, adding "is" leaves us with "I'm fatter than her is." That sounds wrong, so we know that "she" is the correct pronoun in this case.

The Objective Case

As may be obvious from its name, the objective case should be used when the pronoun is the object of another part of speech, usually a preposition or a transitive verb (a verb that takes a direct object):

PREPOSITION: *She handed the presents to them.*

Olivia made a cake for Emily, Sarah, and me.

Between whom did you sit?

TRANSITIVE VERB: *Harry gave me the tickets.*

Call me!

Did you take him to the movies?

In the second preposition example, two names appear between "for" and "me." If this confuses you, eliminate "Emily, Sarah, and" to get "Olivia made a cake *for me.*" Then you'll see that "me" is the correct pronoun case, not "I" (as in "Olivia made a cake for I"). This strategy of crossing out intervening words also works in spotting the correct case for an object of a transitive verb.

In informal, spoken English, you will not hear "whom" used frequently, but in written English (particularly written ACT English), you must remember the all important "m." As in the third preposition example, "between whom" is correct; "between who" is not. A good way to figure out if you should use "who" or "whom" in a sentence is to see whether the sentence would use "he" or "him" (or "they" or "them") if it were rearranged a little. If the sentence takes "he" or "they," you should use "who"; if it takes "him" or "them," you should use "whom."

If you rearrange "Between whom did you sit?" you get:

Did you sit between them?

Now you can see that you need to use "whom" in the original sentence.

The Possessive Case

You already know to use the possessive case when indicating possession of an object (see "The Possessive and Pronouns" under "Apostrophes"):

My car

Her dress

Its tail

Whose wheelbarrow

You should also use the possessive case before a gerund, a verb form that usually ends with "ing" and is used as a noun. For example,

When it comes to *my studying* for the ACT, "concentration" is my middle name.

Despite hours of practice, *her playing* is really terrible.

You can think of gerunds as turncoat verbs that are now nouns, so they need to be preceded by the same possessive pronouns that precede noun objects.

The following chart shows you all the pronoun cases we've just discussed:

Nominative Case	Objective Case	Possessive Case
-----------------	----------------	-----------------

I	me	my
you (<i>s.</i>)	you	your
she	her	her
he	him	his
we	us	our
you (<i>pl.</i>)	you	your
they	them	their
it	it	its
who	whom	whose

Now that you know something about pronoun cases, try the following sample problem:

Me and Jesse went to Cosmic Bowling

4

Night at the Bowladrome.

4. **F.** NO CHANGE

G. Jesse and me

H. Jesse and I

J. I and Jesse

Knowing when to use “I” and when to use “me” can be difficult, especially within compound nouns. If you’re not sure which is correct, use the crossing-out trick: cross out “and Jesse” and see what you have left.

Me went to Cosmic Bowling Night at the Bowladrome.

Unless you’re doing your Ralph Wiggum imitation, that sentence sounds (and is) wrong. The correct sentence?

Jesse and I went to Cosmic Bowling Night at the Bowladrome.

So the answer to the problem is **H**. Choice J, which also contains the correct pronoun “I,” is wrong because the conventional rules of grammar require that you show a little deference in forming sentences involving yourself. “I” should always come after the other people involved in the activity.

Verb Tenses

Most verb tense errors on the English Test will be pretty easy to spot, since we don’t often make tense errors in everyday speech. When you read a tense error on the test, it will most likely sound wrong to you. Your ear is your most reliable way of spotting tense errors.

Different Verb Tenses in One Sentence

Nowhere is it written that you must use the same tense throughout a sentence. For example, you can say, “I used to eat chocolate bars exclusively, but after going through a conversion experience last year, I have broadened my range and now eat gummy candy too.” That sentence has tense switches galore, but they are logical: the sentence uses past tense when it talks about the past, and present tense when it talks about the present, and the progression from past to present makes sense. Another acceptable example:

They *are* the best team in baseball, and I think they *will* triumph over what could *could have been* devastating injuries.

But you can’t throw in different tenses willy-nilly. They have to make sense. You can’t say:

Next year, I *was* on an ocean voyage.

“Next year” refers to the future, and “was” refers to the past. The sentence doesn’t make any sense unless you’re doing some time travel. Your most powerful weapon against tense switch questions is logic. We could prattle on for paragraph after paragraph about present tense, simple past, general present, and present perfect, but remembering the millions of different tense forms, and when to use which, is both difficult and unnecessary. For the English Test, if you don’t hear an error the first time you read a sentence, and you don’t see a pronoun problem, check out the tenses and figure out whether they’re OK.

Tricky Verbs You’re Likely to See on the ACT

By tricky verbs, we mean those verbs that never sound quite right in any tense—like “to lie,” or “to swim.” When do you lay and when do you lie? When do you swim and when have you swum? Unfortunately, there’s no easy memory trick to help you remember when to use which verb form. The only solution is to learn and remember.

You LIE down for a nap.

You LAY something down on the table.

You LAY down yesterday.

You SWIM across the English Channel.

You SWAM across the Atlantic Ocean.

You HAD SWUM across the bathtub as a child.

“To lie” and “to swim” aren’t the only two difficult verbs. Below, you’ll find a table of difficult verbs in their infinitive, simple past, and past participle forms. You don’t have to memorize all of these forms; you’ll probably only see one tricky-verb question. Still, it is well worth your time to read the list below carefully, and especially to make sure you understand those verbs that you’ve found confusing before.

Infinitive	Simple Past	Past Participle	Infinitive	Simple Past	Past Participle
Arise	Arose	Arisen	Lead	Led	Led
Become	Became	Become	Lie (<i>to recline</i>)	Lay	Lain
Begin	Began	Begun	Lie (<i>tell fibs</i>)	Lied	Lied

Blow	Blew	Blown	Put	Put	Put
Break	Broke	Broken	Ride	Rode	Ridden
Choose	Chose	Chosen	Ring	Rang	Rung
Come	Came	Come	Rise	Rose	Risen
Dive	Dived/dove	Dived	Run	Ran	Run
Do	Did	Done	See	Saw	Seen
Draw	Drew	Drawn	Set	Set	Set
Drink	Drank	Drunk	Shake	Shook	Shaken
Drive	Drove	Driven	Shine	Shone	Shone
Drown	Drowned	Drowned	Shrink	Shrank	Shrunk
Dwell	Dwelt/dwelled	Dwelt/dwelled	Shut	Shut	Shut
Eat	Ate	Eaten	Sing	Sang	Sung
Fall	Fell	Fallen	Sink	Sank	Sunk
Fight	Fought	Fought	Sit	Sat	Sat
Flee	Fled	Fled	Speak	Spoke	Spoken
Fling	Flung	Flung	Spring	Sprang	Sprung
Fly	Flew	Flown	Sting	Stung	Stung
Forget	Forgot	Forgotten	Strive	Strove/strived	Striven/strived
Freeze	Froze	Frozen	Swear	Swore	Sworn
Get	Got	Gotten	Swim	Swam	Swum
Give	Gave	Given	Swing	Swung	Swung
Go	Went	Gone	Take	Took	Taken

Grow	Grew	Grown	Tear	Tore	Torn
Hang (<i>a thing</i>)	Hung	Hung	Throw	Threw	Thrown
Hang (<i>a person</i>)	Hanged	Hanged	Wake	Woke	Woke/awoken
Know	Knew	Known	Wear	Wore	Worn
Lay	Laid	Laid	Write	Wrote	Written

The ACT writers are going to get a little sneaky and use the tenses we *do* get wrong when we talk. One notoriously annoying trick is the difference between “lie” and “lay” and all their variations. Here are the rules:

LIE: to recline or to disguise the truth

RIGHT: We *lie* down on the hammocks when we want to relax.

I *lie* to my mother about eating the cookies.

LAY: to place

RIGHT: Just *lay* down that air hockey table over there.

I *lay* the book on the table.

The tricky part is that the past tense of “lie” is “lay.”

She *lay* down yesterday, and today she’ll *lie* down again.

The past tense of “lay” is “laid.”

She *laid* down the law with an iron fist.

The Conditional

Another thorny tense issue arises with something called the conditional. The conditional is the verb form we use to describe something uncertain, something that’s conditional upon something else. You can memorize the conditional formula; it goes “If . . . were . . . would.” Look at this sentence:

WRONG: If I were running for president, my slogan *will be* “I’ll Fight for Your Right to Party.”

The use of “will be” in this sentence is wrong because you’re not certain you’re going to run for president (as suggested by “If I were”); consequently, the word “will” is too strong. “Will” implies you’re definitely going to campaign for president. You should use “would” instead—the conditional form of “will”—to indicate that running is still only a possibility.

RIGHT: If I were running for president, my slogan *would be* “I’ll Fight for Your Right to Party.”

Notice also that the correct form is “If I *were*” not “If I *was*.” You’ll often hear people use “was” incorrectly in “If . . .” phrases like this, but now you’ll know better. Sentences beginning with “If . . .” call for the subjunctive form of the verb. In English, the subjunctive is often the same as the regular past tense verb, but in certain cases, notably *to be*, the forms are irregular:

If I were, you were, s/he were, we were, they were, who were, it were

Adverbs and Adjectives

The ACT writers will test you once or twice on your ability to use adjectives and adverbs correctly in sentences. To describe a noun, you use an adjective. To describe a verb, adjective, or adverb, you use an adverb. Look at the following example:

WRONG: My mom made a *well* dinner.

RIGHT: My mom made a *good* dinner.

Since “dinner” is a noun, the descriptive word modifying it should be an adjective. Now look at this example:

WRONG: My mom made dinner *good*.

RIGHT: My mom made dinner *well*.

Here, the word modified is “made,” a verb, so the descriptive word modifying it should be an adverb. Don’t let the placement of the adverb fool you: just because it’s next to the noun “dinner” doesn’t mean that “dinner” is the word modified. Often, though, you *will* find the modifier next to the modified word:

WRONG: I didn’t do *good* in the game last night.

RIGHT: I didn’t do *well* in the game last night.

In the example above, how the athlete did (a verb) is being described, so you need an adverb (“well”) rather than an adjective (“good”).

Adverb/adjective errors are pretty common in everyday speech, so don’t rely entirely on your ear.

WRONG: She shut him up *quick*.

RIGHT: She shut him up *quickly*.

WRONG: I got an A *easy*.

RIGHT: I got an A *easily*.

The wrong examples above may sound familiar to you from everyday speech, but they are incorrect in written English.

Idioms

You *should* trust your ear when you’re being tested on idioms. Idioms are expressions and phrasings that are peculiar to a certain language—in the ACT’s case, the English language. They include odd expressions like “through the grapevine” and “rain check” as well as simple ones like “bring up” (meaning “raise”). Idiom questions on the English Test will often ask you to identify the correct prepositions used in certain expressions. This task is difficult because there are no laws governing idioms. You have to be able to read a sentence and think, “That sounds plain old wrong.”

Fortunately, you probably won’t encounter more than a few idiom errors on the English Test you take. Take a look at this idiom error:

WRONG: We spent days *wading into* the thousands of pages of reports.

“Wading into” sounds wrong. Instead, we say:

RIGHT: We spent days *wading through* the thousands of pages of reports.

Why do we use some prepositions instead of others? That's just the way it is. The following is a list of proper idiomatic usage:

He can't <i>abide by</i> the no-spitting rule.	It's terrible to <i>discriminate against</i> parakeets.
She <i>accused me of</i> stealing.	I have a plan to <i>escape from</i> this prison.
I <i>agreed to</i> eat the broccoli.	There's no <i>excuse for</i> your behavior.
I <i>apologized for</i> losing the hamsters.	You can't <i>hide from</i> your past.
She <i>applied for</i> a credit card.	It was all he'd <i>hoped for</i> .
She pretends to <i>approve of</i> my boyfriend.	I must <i>insist upon</i> it.
She <i>argued with</i> the bouncer.	It's impossible to <i>object to</i> her arguments.
I <i>arrived at</i> work at noon.	I refuse to <i>participate in</i> this discussion.
You <i>believe in</i> ghosts.	<i>Pray for</i> me.
I can't be <i>blamed for</i> your neuroses.	<i>Protect me from</i> evil.
Do you <i>care about</i> me?	<i>Provide me with</i> plenty of Skittles.
He's <i>in charge of</i> grocery shopping.	She stayed home to <i>recover from</i> the flu.
Nothing <i>compares to</i> you.	I <i>rely on</i> myself.
What is there to <i>complain about</i> ?	She <i>stared at</i> his chest.
He can always <i>count on</i> money from his mommy.	He <i>subscribes to</i> several trashy magazines.
Ice cream <i>consists of</i> milk, fat, and sugar.	I <i>succeeded in</i> fooling him.
I <i>depend on</i> no one.	<i>Wait for</i> me!
That's where cats <i>differ from</i> dogs.	<i>Work with me,</i> people!

Comparative and Superlative Modifiers

Comparative modifiers compare one thing to another, while superlative modifiers tell you how one thing compares to everything else. For example:

COMPARATIVE: My boyfriend is *hotter* than yours.

That purple-and-orange spotted dog is *weirder* than the blue cat.

Dan paints *better* than the other students.

SUPERLATIVE: My boyfriend is the *hottest* boy in the world.

That purple-and-orange spotted dog is the *weirdest* pet on the block.

Of all the students, Dan paints *best*.

You will probably see only one or two comparative and superlative modifier questions on the English Test, and they will likely ask you to distinguish between the two types of modifiers. Remember that comparative modifiers are used in relative statements; in other words, they compare one thing to another. Just because my boyfriend is *hotter* than yours, it doesn't mean that my boyfriend is hotter than Sue's. However, if I used the superlative and told you that my boyfriend is the *hottest* boy in the world, then there's no way that Sue's boyfriend is hotter than mine, unless, as is probably the case, I'm exaggerating.

Comparative statements always require a comparison with something else. Simply saying "my boyfriend is hotter" may get your meaning across in a heated dispute with your friends, but in proper English you need to finish that sentence with a "than" phrase: "my boyfriend is hotter *than Jude Law*" or "my boyfriend is hotter *than your dog*."

Sentence Structure

Sentence structure is the Big Deal when it comes to Usage/Mechanics problems. Of the 40 Usage/Mechanics questions, almost half of them (18 to be exact) will test you on your knowledge of sentence structure, the topics of which include:

1. Connecting and Transitional Words
2. Subordinate or Dependent Clauses
3. Sentence Fragments
4. Comma Splices
5. Run-on Sentences
6. Misplaced Modifiers
7. Parallelism

Connecting and Transitional Words

We've already mentioned coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, for, etc.*) and transitional adverbs (*however, nevertheless, moreover, etc.*) in "Punctuation." Here you'll learn more about these and other transitional words.

Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, or, nor, for, yet*) connect words, phrases, and independent clauses of equal importance in a sentence.

WORDS: You can hand the bottle to Seamus *or* Bea.

Liz *and* Amanda got down on the dance floor.

PHRASES: To get there, you must drive over a bridge *and* through a farm.

We walked by the park *but* not by the river.

CLAUSES: Tim can go to the store, *or* Jen can go instead.

It's only ten o'clock, *yet* I feel really sleepy.

When joining two words or phrases, you should not use a comma, but (as demonstrated in “Commas”) if you have a list of more than two words or phrases, commas should separate them and precede the conjunction. A comma also needs to precede the coordinating conjunction when it joins two independent clauses, as in the sentence “Tim can go to the store, or Jen can go instead,” above.

Transitional Adverbs

Like coordinating conjunctions, these adverbs (*however, also, consequently, nevertheless, thus, moreover, furthermore, etc.*) can join independent clauses. When they do, they should be preceded by a semicolon (see “Semicolons”) and followed, most of the time, by a comma. Short adverbs, such as “thus,” do not need a comma. Here are some examples of transitional adverbs in action:

Joe always raves about soccer; *however*, he always refuses to watch a match.

If you can't go to the prom with me, let me know as soon as possible; *otherwise*, I'll resent you and your inability to communicate for the rest of my life.

You need to remember that transitional adverbs must be accompanied by semicolons. If you see a transitional adverb on its own or preceded by a comma on the English Test, you should immediately know there's an error.

Subordinating Conjunctions

When you have two independent clauses, but you feel that one is more important than the other, you can use a subordinating conjunction to connect them. In other words, you use a subordinating conjunction (*because, when, since, after, until, although, before, etc.*) to make one clause dependent on the other. By subordinating one clause, you show the reader the relationship between the two clauses. For example, take the following two sentences:

I ate a rotten egg.

I became violently ill.

It seems likely that eating the rotten egg caused the violent illness. To make that relationship grammatically clear, you can rephrase the sentences as:

Because I ate a rotten egg, I became violently ill.

Let's try another example:

I found out my dog was really a rat.

I called the exterminator.

Put them through the subordinating conjunction transformation machine:

After I found out my dog was really a rat, I called the exterminator.

I called the exterminator *after* I found out my dog was really a rat.

In these examples, “I found out my dog was really a rat” becomes subordinate to “I called the exterminator.” You can base your decision on which clause to subordinate by determining the relationship between the clauses. In the example above, the discovery about the “dog” leads to the call; in other words, the discovery is the cause and calling the exterminator the result. Subordinating the cause to the result often makes the most sense when forming these sentences. For further discussion of this topic, move on to the next section.

Subordinate or Dependent Clauses

When you're tested on subordinate conjunctions, you'll need to select the most appropriate conjunction and place it correctly within the sentence. When you're tested on subordinate and dependent clauses, you'll need to decide how to form the whole sentence correctly. As touched upon above, not all clauses deserve the same emphasis in a sentence. Equality is a good thing, but in the writing world you've got to give preference to some clauses over others.

You can run into problems if you're too liberal with your coordinating conjunctions and transitional adverbs (the adverbs that link independent clauses). These adverbs assume that the clauses being connected deserve equal weight in a sentence. Take a look at this sentence:

Everyone regards Ginger as the most promising student in the class, and she gets the highest grades; also, she is the president of the student council.

This sentence doesn't read very well. Subordinating some of the clauses will improve the flow of the sentence:

Everyone regards Ginger as the most promising student in the class *because* she gets the highest grades and is the president of the student council.

This new sentence explains why Ginger is "the most promising student" by subordinating the clauses that cite her high grades and student council presidency.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences that tend to look like this on the English Test:

We didn't go outside. *Even though the rain had stopped.*

Tommy could not pay for his lunch. *Having spent his last dollars on sunglasses.*

Always a bit shy. She found herself unable to talk to the other kids.

The sentence fragments above are not sentences on their own. They can be attached to the independent clauses next to them to form complete sentences:

We didn't go outside, *even though the rain had stopped.*

Having spent his last dollars on sunglasses, Tommy could not pay for his lunch.

Always a bit shy, she found herself unable to talk to the other kids.

The answer choices on English Test questions will often make clear whether you should incorporate a fragment into a neighboring sentence. For example:

We didn't go outside. Even though the rain

17

had stopped.

17. A. NO CHANGE

B. outside;

C. outside; even

D. outside, even

Notice how choices B, C, and D all give you the option of combining two sentences into one. That should give you a good clue as to what's required. The variation between the last three choices occurs in punctuation. If you agree that A is incorrect, you can rely on your punctuation skills to decipher the correct answer. The answer, by the way, is **D** because B and C, with their use of the semicolon, continue to isolate the sentence fragment from the sentence.

Other sentence fragment questions on the English Test will ask you to turn a fragment into its own full sentence rather than simply to incorporate it into a different sentence. Again, you'll be able to tell from the answer choices what the ACT writers want:

- We didn't go outside. While the rain continued
18
18. **F.** NO CHANGE
G. Although the
H. The
J. Since the
- to fall.

Answers F, G, and J don't solve the sentence fragment problem. By choosing those, you still end up with a subordinate clause posing as a sentence (G and J simply replace one subordinating conjunction with another). But by getting rid of the subordinating conjunction altogether, you form a real sentence: "The rain continued to fall." The correct answer is **H**.

Most sentence fragments on the English Test will be subordinate or dependent clauses trying to be complete sentences. By studying your subordinate and dependent clauses and learning what they look like, you'll be able to catch them committing sentence fragment crime.

Comma Splices

The ACT writers may test your ability to weed out illegal comma splices. A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined together by a comma with no intervening conjunction. For example,

Bowen walked to the *park*, *Leah* followed behind.

The comma between "park" and "Leah" forms a comma splice. Although the sentence may sound correct because the comma demands a short pause between the two related clauses, the structure is wrong in written English. Instead, two sentences are necessary:

Bowen walked to the *park*. *Leah* followed behind.

Or, if you explicitly want to show the relationship between the clauses, you can write:

Bowen walked to the *park*, *while* *Leah* followed behind.

OR

Bowen walked to the *park*, *and* *Leah* followed behind.

Inserting "while" subordinates the "Leah" clause to the "Bowen" clause. In the second sentence, the "and" joins the two clauses on equal footing.

Think about the comma splice in construction terms: the comma (a wimpy nail) is too weak a punctuation mark to join together two independent clauses (two big heavies). In order to join them, you have to add a conjunction (super glue) to the comma or use a period (a bolt) instead.

Run-on Sentences

You can think of run-on sentences as comma splices minus the commas. For example:

Joan runs every day she is preparing for a marathon.
John likes to walk his dog through the park Kevin doesn't.

To fix run-on sentences, you need to identify where they should be split. The first example should be broken into two parts: “Joan runs every day” and “she is preparing for a marathon.” These are two independent clauses that can stand on their own as sentences:

Joan runs every day. She is preparing for a marathon.

Alternatively, you may choose to show the relationship between these sentences by subordinating one to the other:

Joan runs every day *because* she is preparing for a marathon.

The second example, when split, becomes: “John likes to walk his dog through the park” and “Kevin doesn’t.” The following sentences are correct alternatives to the original run-on:

John likes to walk his dog through the park. Kevin doesn’t.

John likes to walk his dog through the park, *but* Kevin doesn’t.

John likes to walk his dog through the park; *however*, Kevin doesn’t.

These are just a few ways you can join the two clauses. We could go on and on, showing different relationships between the two clauses (but we won’t).

Misplaced Modifiers

Does the following sentence sound odd to you?

Having eaten six corn dogs, nausea overwhelmed Jane.

Nausea didn’t eat six corn dogs. Gluttonous Jane did. However, the sentence above says that nausea was the one “having eaten six corn dogs.” This is a case of a misplaced modifier. When you have a modifier like “having eaten six corn dogs,” it must come either directly before or directly after the word that it is modifying.

Having eaten six corn dogs, Jane was overwhelmed by nausea.

Jane, *having eaten six corn dogs*, was overwhelmed by nausea.

These two sentences make it clear that Jane was the one wolfing down the corn dogs. Modifiers are not necessarily phrases like the one above. They can be adverbial phrases, adverbial clauses, or single-word adverb modifiers. You’ve already seen how adverbial-phrase modifiers work in the example above. The simple rule for phrase modifiers is to *make sure phrase modifiers are next to the word(s) they modify*. The same rule applies to clause modifiers. Misplaced clause modifiers look like this:

Bill packed his favorite clothes in his suitcase, *which he planned to wear on vacation*.

Now do you really think this guy is planning to wear his suitcase on vacation? Well, that’s what the sentence says. It’ll be a pretty heavy outfit too, since the suitcase is packed with clothes. If Bill decides to wear his clothes instead of his suitcase, you should say:

Bill packed his favorite clothes, *which he planned to wear on vacation*, in his suitcase.

Of course, he’ll be a slightly more conventional dresser, but the clothes will probably fit better than the suitcase.

The placement of single-word adverbs is slightly trickier than that of clause and phrase modifiers. You need to make sure that adverb modifiers (such as *just*, *almost*, *barely*, *even*, and *nearly*) are

modifying the word you intend them to modify. If they aren't, the sentence will probably still make sense, but it will have a different meaning than you intended.

Take the sentence "Jay walked a half hour to the grocery store." Now add to that sentence the adverbial modifier "only." The placement of "only" within the sentence will alter the meaning of the sentence:

Only Jay walked a half hour to the grocery store.

The sentence above means that no one but Jay made the walk.

Jay *only walked* a half hour to the grocery store.

Here, "only" modifies the verb "walked," and the sentence means that Jay did nothing but walk—he didn't run, and he didn't swim—to the store.

Jay walked *only a half hour* to the grocery store.

Hey, the walk to the grocery store isn't too bad. According to the sentence above, it took Jay only a half hour to get there.

Jay walked a half hour to *only the grocery store*.

Now we find out that Jay's single destination was the grocery store (and we were about to accuse him of having ulterior motives for taking that walk).

Parallelism

When you see a list underlined on the English Test, look for a parallelism error. Parallelism errors occur when items in a list are mismatched. For example, if you have a list of verbs, then all items in the list must be verbs of the same tense. For example,

WRONG: In the pool area, there is no *spitting*, no *running*, and *don't throw* your cigarette butts in the water.

The first two forbidden activities end in "ing" (they're called gerunds, though that doesn't really matter), and because of that, the third activity must also end in "ing".

RIGHT: In the pool area, there is no *spitting*, no *running*, and no *throwing* your cigarette butts in the water.

By simply converting the final verb to gerund form, you have parallel structure. Parallelism is also important when you have expressions linked by the verb *to be*. Because you should think of *to be* as an equal sign, the words on either side of the sign must be parallel. For example:

WRONG: *To grow* tired of London is *growing* tired of life.

RIGHT: *To grow* tired of London is *to grow* tired of life.

WRONG: *Growing* tired of London is *to grow* tired of life.

RIGHT: *Growing* tired of London is *growing* tired of life.

The examples above are not parallel when the verb forms are different on either side of "is." You can make them parallel by simply changing the form of one verb to the form of the other.

If you have a list of nouns, you must also maintain parallel construction. For example,

The personal ad said that she likes "*books*, *good food*, and *to take* long walks on the beach."

She apparently *doesn't* like parallelism. “Books” and “food” are nouns, but “to take” is a verb infinitive. If she’s hoping to get a call from the grammarian of her dreams, she should rewrite her ad to look like this:

The personal ad said that she likes “*books, good food, and long walks on the beach.*”

Now that’s one grammatically correct lady.

Rhetorical Skills Questions on the English Test

THE ACT WRITERS BREAK RHETORICAL Skills questions into three categories:

1. Writing Strategy
2. Organization
3. Style

Some people may find these questions more challenging than the Usage/Mechanics questions because there are no rules that strictly determine the Rhetorical Skills answers. Others may find them easier for that very reason—there’s little to memorize. In any case, to answer Rhetorical Skills questions correctly you must develop an intuitive sense for good English writing. We’ll show you how below.

Read the Whole Passage

Yes, we already gave you this advice in the “Strategies” section earlier in the book. But we think it’s such good advice that we’ll give it again: you should read (or at least skim) the whole passage. You may want to underline key phrases or transitions that help you decode the passage and that help you understand how its parts fit together. This strategy is particularly important for answering Rhetorical Skills questions. Quite a few Rhetorical Skills questions demand that you have a good understanding of the passage’s content, tone, and purpose. You won’t have that understanding if you haven’t read (or at least skimmed) the entire passage.

Writing Strategy Questions

Writing strategy involves improving the effectiveness of a passage through careful revision and editing. Frequently, strategy questions will ask you to choose the most appropriate topic or transitional sentence for a paragraph. Almost as frequently, you will have to choose the best option for strengthening an argument by adding information or evidence. In other questions, you may also have to choose which sections of an argument can be deleted. You will also have to identify the purpose of a passage—its audience or its message—in other strategy questions.

The following strategy topics are covered in this section:

1. Transitions and Topic Sentences
2. Additional Detail and Evidence
3. Big Picture Purpose

Transitions and Topic Sentences

These questions ask you to figure out the best way to open or conclude paragraphs within a passage. Here’s an example of a strategy question:

[2]

Victorian novelists were often concerned with issues of character, plot, and the Victorian social world. Dickens's novels, for example, were several-hundred-page-long works documenting the elaborate interweaving of his characters.

[3]

47 Their "modernist" novels tended

47. The writer wishes to begin Paragraph 3 with a sentence that strengthens the focus of the paragraph, while providing a transition from Paragraph 2. Which of the following would be the best choice?
- A. In the early twentieth century, novelists began to reject the Victorian emphasis on social context and look for a new focus for the novel.
 - B. Victorian novels ended with the Victorian era.
 - C. In the early twentieth century, novelists further

developed this emphasis on characters' inner lives.

- D.** World War I significantly affected British culture in the twentieth century.

to focus on the characters' inner lives,

which they depicted through a stylistic

technique called "stream of

consciousness." Several of the best-

known modernist novels were written

in this stream-of-consciousness

style. **48**

Question 47 asks you to choose a sentence that will simultaneously serve as a topic sentence ("a sentence that strengthens the focus of the paragraph") for Paragraph 3 and as a transition sentence between the two paragraphs ("while providing a transition from Paragraph 2"). In order to answer this question correctly, you need to understand what the two paragraphs are saying. We suggest that you reread Paragraph 3 first. By developing a good sense of what that paragraph says, you can eliminate answer choices that clearly do not work as topic sentences. After you've eliminated any choices, make sure that you understand Paragraph 2. From the remaining choices, you can identify the best transition sentence.

Done that? We hope that you immediately eliminated choices B and D from your list of possible topic sentences. Choice B talks exclusively about the Victorian novel, making it an inappropriate topic sentence for a paragraph on modernist novels. Choice D doesn't talk specifically about novels at all. Its focus is World War I, which is not mentioned elsewhere in the paragraph. So now you've narrowed the selection down to A and C. These sentences have similar constructions, but they say radically different things: choice A claims that twentieth-century novelists rejected Victorian ideas, while choice C claims that they embraced and developed Victorian ideas. In order to figure out which one of these claims is true, you need to have read Paragraph 2 in addition to Paragraph 3. Paragraph 2 tells you that Victorian novelists were primarily concerned with the social world. In Paragraph 3, you discover that modernist novelists were primarily concerned with characters' thoughts and inner lives. Thus Paragraph 3 describes a *change* in novel writing that occurred between the Victorian era and the early twentieth century. The correct answer to the question is **A**.

The example above is fairly typical of transition and topic sentence questions you will encounter on the English Test. Sometimes you'll be asked to select only a topic sentence or only a transition sentence from the answer choices. Those questions are usually less complex than the example above because you have to perform one fewer step. You may also be asked to choose a concluding sentence

for a paragraph. These questions are similar to transition questions because a good concluding sentence tends to be one that easily and sensibly makes the transition to the next paragraph.

Additional Detail and Evidence

These questions ask you to flesh out a paragraph by selecting the answer choice that provides the best additional detail or evidence. For example,

[3]

47 Their “modernist” novels tended

to focus on the characters’ inner lives,

which they depicted through a stylistic

technique called “stream of

consciousness.” Several of the best-

known modernist novels were written

in this stream-of-consciousness

style. 48

48. The writer wishes to add information here that will further support the point made in the preceding sentence. Which of the following sentences will do that best?
- F. Today, this style is not as popular as it once was.
 - G. However, there are many famous early twentieth-century works not written in this style.
 - H. Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, was written in this style, and

it is widely considered one of
the most important books of
the century.

- J.** Ford's *The Good Soldier*,
although less read today, is a
great example of this style.

This question asks for additional information to support the point of the preceding sentence (“Several of the best-known modernist novels were written in this stream-of-consciousness style”). To answer this question correctly, you need to understand the point being made, so read the sentence carefully. You should be able to eliminate choices F and G immediately. Choice F talks about the popularity of this style among contemporary authors—an issue that the preceding sentence does not address. You can eliminate choice G almost immediately because it starts with “however,” which indicates that it is going to make a statement that attempts to contradict, not support, the previous point. Now you’ve successfully limited the answer choices to H and J. Both would provide the paragraph with an example of a stream-of-consciousness work. The key to deciding which of these sentences is correct lies in the preceding sentence, which talks about the “best-known modernist novels.” On the one hand, choice J tells you that *The Good Soldier* is “less read today” and also, presumably, less well known. On the other hand, choice H tells you that *Ulysses* is “widely considered one of the most important books of the century.” This statement suggests that the novel is famous, so choice **H** is the best answer to the question.

Big Picture Purpose

On each English Test, you’ll probably encounter a few Big Picture Purpose questions. These questions always come at the end of a passage. We call them Big Picture Purpose questions because they ask you to look at the big picture and identify a passage’s main point, intended purpose, or intended audience.

These questions in many ways resemble some of the questions on the Reading Test. BPP questions do, after all, test your comprehension of the passage—and comprehension is also what the Reading Test assesses. Because these questions test your overall comprehension, they are difficult to prepare for outside the context of a whole passage. Therefore, we suggest you prepare for these questions by studying our Reading Test chapter.

Before you start flipping through the book, we’ll give you an idea of how these questions look on the English Test. They will often be phrased like this:

Suppose the writer has been assigned to write an essay explaining the development of the British novel from 1799 to 1945. Would this essay successfully fulfill the assignment?

The answer choices to these questions come in two parts: the first part will respond either “No” or “Yes” to the question, and the second part will give an explanation for this answer. For example,

- A.** No, because the essay restricts its focus to the American novel from 1850 to 1945.
B. No, because the essay omits mention of famous poets.
C. Yes, because the essay focuses on the novel’s birth in the eighteenth century.
D. Yes, because the essay describes changes in novel writing from the end of the French Revolution to the end of World War II.

Without reading the entire passage, you’re probably unable to answer a definite “No” or “Yes” to this question, but you can eliminate an incorrect answer or two because of irrelevant or nonsensical explanations. In this example, you can immediately cross off choice B because the explanation calls

for a discussion of famous poets in the essay. Famous poets, however, do not necessarily belong in an essay on the novel's development. You can also cross off choice C. It claims that the passage *successfully* fulfills the essay requirements because it discusses the novel's birth in the eighteenth century. However, the assignment calls for a discussion of the novel starting in 1799 (the end of the eighteenth century), so choice C cannot be correct. By reading and understanding the passage, you'll be able to choose from the two remaining answers. If the passage indeed focuses on the American novel, choice A is correct, and the essay does not succeed; if the essay describes the novel from the end of the French Revolution (1799) to the end of the World War II (1945), choice D is correct, and the essay does succeed.

Organization

Organization questions deal with the logical structuring of the passage on the level of the sentence, the paragraph, and the passage as a whole. These questions ask you to organize sections to maximize their coherence, order, and unity by asking three types of questions:

1. Sentence Reorganization
2. Paragraph Reorganization
3. Passage Reorganization

Sentence Reorganization

Sentence reorganization questions often involve the placement of a modifier within a sentence. Your ability to reorder a sentence correctly will depend on how well you have absorbed your grammar lessons above—specifically the “Misplaced Modifiers” section. For example,

Austen wrote about a society of manners, in

which love triumphs over a rigid social hierarchy

despite confinement to her drawing room.

43

43. A. NO CHANGE

B. (Place after *love*)

C. (Place after *Austen*)

D. (Place after *society*)

You probably guessed that the underlined phrase does not modify “hierarchy,” “love,” or “society.” The pronoun “her” in the underlined phrase should tip you off that “Austen” is being modified. If you read “Misplaced Modifiers” in the previous chapter, you should already know the cardinal rule of placing the modifier next to the modified word. So the correct answer is C because the underlined part modifies “Austen.”

Approximately half of the organization questions on the English Test will ask you to reorder sentences. All of these sentence reorganization problems will look similar to the one above. Study up on your modifier placement in order to get them right.

Paragraph Reorganization

A couple of questions will ask you to reorder sentences within a paragraph. They will look much like this:

[1] In April, I'm usually in a bad mood because

of my debilitating pollen allergies. [2] In

November, despite the graying trees and the

short days, I'm elated because I can

celebrate both Thanksgiving and my birthday.

[3] My mood changes with the months.

[4] In the summer months I feel happy

from days spent in the sun. 61

61. Which of the following provides the most logical ordering of the sentences in the preceding paragraph?

- A.** 1, 4, 3, 2
- B.** 3, 4, 2, 1
- C.** 3, 1, 4, 2
- D.** 2, 1, 4, 3

The best way to approach these questions is to decide which sentence should come first, and then to eliminate incompatible answer choices. Ask yourself: which sentence logically comes first in this sequence? Sentence 3 makes a good topic sentence because it provides a general argument that can be followed and supported by examples. By deciding that Sentence 3 should come first, you can immediately eliminate choices A and D because they do not begin with Sentence 3. Now you can move on to arranging the rest of the paragraph. Each of the remaining sentences talks about a different time of year: April, summer, and November. The three sentences should fall in that chronological order (April, summer, November), as this is the most logical arrangement in this example. Therefore, the correct answer is **C**.

If you are totally lost on a paragraph reorganization question, you can often look to the answer choices for clues. You can look at the first sentences given to you by the answer choices and see whether any of them sound like topic sentences. If you can identify a topic sentence, you're well on your way to getting the correct answer.

Passage Reorganization

These appear at the end of passages. They will ask you either to insert a sentence where it best belongs in the passage or to move a paragraph to a different location in the passage. Questions that ask you to insert a sentence will generally look like this:

- 72.** The writer wishes to include the following sentence in the essay: “That summer, I spent so much time on the beach that I could smell only a combination of sand and seaweed when I finally returned to school.” That sentence will fit most smoothly and logically into Paragraph:
- F.** 2, before the first sentence.
 - G.** 3, after the last sentence.
 - H.** 4, before the first sentence.
 - J.** 5, after the last sentence.

This question is basically a strategy question disguised as an organization question. It asks you to identify the sentence provided as an appropriate topic or concluding sentence for Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, or 5. When the answer choice calls for the sentence to be placed “before the first sentence,” then it would become the topic sentence of the paragraph. When the answer choice calls for the sentence to be placed “after the last sentence,” then it would become the concluding sentence. Questions that ask you to relocate a paragraph will generally look like this:

- 74.** For the sake of the unity and coherence of this essay, Paragraph 4 should be placed:
- F.** where it is now.
 - G.** after Paragraph 1.
 - H.** after Paragraph 2.
 - J.** after Paragraph 5.

To answer this question, look at (and perhaps underline) the topic sentences of each paragraph. These topic sentences, removed from the passage, should follow a logical chain of thought. For example, look at these topic sentences:

Topic Sentence 1:	Seasonal variations affect many aspects of my life.
Topic Sentence 2:	This April, the sight of leaves and the sounds of returning birds cheered me so much that I hugged a tree.

Topic Sentence 3:	The return of the warm weather also meant that I got some much-needed exercise after being stuck indoors all winter.
Topic Sentence 4:	My mood changes with the months.
Topic Sentence 5:	The weather's effect on my mood and my fitness always reminds me of the undeniable connection between people and nature.

Even without reading the whole passage, you can take an educated stab at the correct answer. Consider the logical organization of an essay: introduction, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion. According to this structure, Topic Sentence 1 should present the passage's argument, and it should be followed by three paragraphs supporting the argument and a final paragraph presenting a conclusion.

Now take a look at Topic Sentence 4. It makes a general argument about the weather's effect on the author's mood. Ask yourself where the paragraph best fits into the passage: is it a supporting paragraph or a conclusion? It's unlikely that Paragraph 4 is a conclusion because it narrows the focus of the essay to talk about the author's mood, while other paragraphs in the essay discuss the author's physical condition. If it's a supporting paragraph, then where does it belong? Eliminating choice J (which would make it the conclusion) leaves you with three options for a supporting paragraph. Your next step should be to take a look at the remaining Topic Sentences. Topic Sentence 2 also discusses the weather's effect on the author's mood, but it deals specifically with April weather. Topic Sentence 3 discusses the weather's effects on the author's physical health. If you choose Choice F and keep Paragraph 4 where it is, the passage will be ordered like this: introduction, weather/mood, weather/health, weather/mood, conclusion. This order doesn't make much sense because it inexplicably divides the weather/mood discussions. Choices G and H place the weather/mood paragraphs side by side. Choice G puts Paragraph 4 (general weather/mood) before Paragraph 2 (April weather/mood), while choice H puts 2 before 4. When writing an essay, moving from the general to the specific makes more sense than moving in the opposite direction because you want to support your claims with specific evidence. So by using good writing strategy, you will arrive at the correct answer: **G**.

Style

Style questions generally concern effective word choice. They often ask you to choose the most appropriate word for a sentence in terms of its tone and clarity. Other times, they'll ask you to eliminate redundant words or phrases. In the next section, we discuss the following style topics:

1. Redundancy
2. Appropriate Word Choice and Identifying Tone

Redundancy

The ACT writers will test you on your ability to spot redundant statements. Redundant statements say the same thing twice, and you should always avoid redundancy on the English Test (in life too, if possible). For example,

WRONG: The diner closes at 3 a.m. in the morning.

RIGHT: The diner closes at 3 a.m.

“In the morning” is redundant because it is implied in “a.m.” Here’s another example of a redundant statement:

WRONG: In my opinion, I think we should go get some food.

“I think” and “In my opinion” mean the same thing, so you can eliminate one of the phrases from the sentence:

RIGHT: In my opinion, we should go get some food.

ALSO RIGHT: I think we should go get some food.

Either one of those phrases gets the point across; using both merely makes the sentence cumbersome.

Redundancy questions almost always give you the option to “OMIT the underlined portion.” If you spot a phrase or word that means the same thing as the underlined portion, then you should always choose to “OMIT.” (For more on “OMIT,” refer to “If the Phrase Doesn’t Fit, You Must ‘OMIT’” on p. .)

Appropriate Word Choice and Identifying Tone

Identifying the appropriate word choice can be as simple as figuring out whether a sentence should use the word “their,” “there,” or “they’re.” But word choice can also be more complicated, involving many words working together to create a tone. For example, the sentence “Lloyd George rocks!” probably does not belong in an essay on World War I. It doesn’t fit because it’s written in a casual, slangy tone, and history essays are generally neither casual nor slangy. The sentence might belong, however, in a passage on your awesome new friend, Lloyd George.

The content of a passage will generally give you a clue about the appropriate tone. Essays on history and culture will probably be written in a fairly formal style—a style that omits youthful slang, casual contractions, and familiar personal pronouns (such as “I” and “you”). A personal essay on your experiences driving a bulldozer, on your great-grandmother, or on your new skateboard calls for a relatively informal style of writing. These personal essays can exhibit varying degrees of informality. An essay by a young writer may be more colloquial and relaxed than an essay by a mature writer recalling past experiences.

Tone is one of the most important elements in correctly answering word choice questions. You will encounter quite a few questions that look like this:

During the Great War, the British Public believed

that Lloyd George rocks! He was widely admired

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for his ability to unify the government and thus

- 7. A. NO CHANGE
- B. rocked!
- C. was an effective political leader.
- D. had the ability to unify the government and thus to unify Britain.

to unify Britain.

Because we already told you that informality does not belong in a history essay, you can immediately eliminate choices A and B, even though B correctly changes the verb tense. If you read the section above, you should also be able to eliminate D because it is redundant—it repeats the information given in the next sentence. That leaves the correct answer, **C**.