Identifying Sentence Errors: Common Grammar Mistakes

The SAT II Writing covers the same grammar from year to year. In fact, it tests the same grammar subsets on the different types of questions from year to year. For example, on Identifying Sentence Error questions, the test will cover your knowledge of pronoun errors, tense errors, subject-verb disagreement, and a handful of other errors. If you get a handle on how to find the following common errors, you’ll be in great shape. Below, we discuss common errors roughly by the frequency with which they appear in Identifying Sentence Error questions.

**Pronoun Errors**

Nouns, remember, are words for people, places, or things. Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns—words like *she, her, hers, he, him, his, they, their, it, its, that,*and*which.*Say you begin with this sentence:

|  |
| --- |
| Bernie felt better after going on a shopping spree. |

A pronoun is a word you could use to replace the noun *Bernie*:

|  |
| --- |
| *He* felt better after going on a shopping spree. |

Whenever you see an underlined pronoun (*she, he, it*) in an Identifying Sentence Error question, go on high alert. Pronoun errors are the most common error type on this section of the test.

“Hearing” pronoun problems might take a little practice, because we often use pronouns incorrectly in speech. Therefore, even if a particular pronoun sounds correct, double check to make sure it follows all the rules discussed below.

What follows is a discussion of the most common pronoun pitfalls, all of which are tested on the SAT II Writing. Of these problems, by far the most frequently tested is pronoun agreement.

**Pronoun Agreement**

Pronouns must agree in number with the noun they refer to. If the noun is plural, the pronoun must be plural; if the noun is singular, the pronoun must be singular. This sounds straightforward enough, but spotting errors in pronoun agreement on the test gets tricky, because we make errors of pronoun agreement so frequently in speech. We tend to say things like *someone lost their shoe* instead of *someone lost his shoe*because we don’t want to exclude women by saying *his*. And it’s cumbersome to write *someone lost his or her shoe*. People attempt to solve these problems with the brief and gender-neutral *their*. This tactic is okay in speech, but if you see it on the test, you’ll know it’s an error. *Their* might be gender-neutral, but it’s plural, and plural pronouns cannot replace singular nouns.

Because this error is so prevalent in common speech, and therefore *sounds* correct, you can be sure that you’ll see a few questions on this topic.

The sentence below is incorrect because the pronoun and the noun don’t agree in number:

|  |
| --- |
| Every student in the classroom pretended to forget their homework. |
|  |

When you start out with a singular noun (like *student, someone, anyone,* or *no one*), you can replace it or refer to it only with a singular pronoun (like *his* or *her*). This sentence begins with the singular noun *student*, so the pronoun must be singular too. *Their* is plural, and therefore wrong in this sentence.

As we know from studying actual SAT II Writing Tests, ETS will almost certainly give you a few questions with an incorrect usage of the word *their*. Sometimes, however, they test the opposite mistake. Look at the following sentence for an example of what we mean:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  | | --- | --- | | Even though | some possess the flexibility to change their | | A |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | opinions, most people | vary | in | his or her | willingness to | |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | listen | to reaso.n |  | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

In this sentence, the problem is with (C), the phrase *his or her*. The second clause in this sentence begins with the plural noun *people*; therefore, a plural pronoun must be used to refer to that plural noun. *His or her*is singular. This is a case in which *their* is correct, and *his or her* is incorrect.

Another kind of pronoun agreement question will essentially test to see if you’re paying attention. On such questions as the one below, you’ll get into trouble if you’re reading quickly and thus fail to make sure that the pronoun matches up with the noun it’s replacing.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  | | --- | --- | | For | the robber trying to decide between potential getaway | | A |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | cars, every car | up for | consideration poses | their |  | own | passel | |  | B |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | of problems. | No error | |  | E | | |

In this sentence, the pronoun *their* replaces the noun *car*. This is incorrect, because *car* is singular, and *their* is plural. If you were reading carelessly, however, you might assume that since the first part of the sentence contains the plural noun *cars*, the plural pronoun *their* is correct. Most students do fine on this kind of are-you-paying-attention pronoun agreement question; just make sure you’re inspecting each pronoun with an eagle eye.

**Pronoun Case**

The “case” of a word refers to the function that a word performs in a sentence. The most important thing for you to understand in reference to pronoun case is the subjective and objective case.

A word that is the subject of a sentence is the main noun that performs the verb. The object of a sentence is the noun toward which, or upon which, the verb is being directed. Look at this sentence:

|  |
| --- |
| Joe kissed Mary. |

Joe is the subject, since he performed the kiss, and Mary is the object, since she received the kiss.

When a pronoun replaces a noun, that pronoun must match the noun’s case. This is important because pronouns actually have different forms, depending on their cases.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Subjective Case Pronouns** | **Objective Case Pronouns** |
| I | Me |
| You | You |
| He, She, It | Him, Her, It |
| We | Us |
| They | Them |
| Who | Whom |

In the example sentence, you would replace the subject *Joe* with the subject pronoun *he* and the object *Mary* with the object pronoun *her*.

SAT II Writing will often test your knowledge of pronoun case in a tricky way. They’ll give you phrases like *her and her cats*, *him and his friends*, etc. These phrases seek to confuse you by including two pronouns, each of which is doing separate things. They want you to reason that if one pronoun is in a certain case, then the other pronoun should be in the same case:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Her | and | her family | like to stay in their hotel room and | | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | play | cards whenever | they take a trip | . | No error | |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

This sample has a plural subject: *Her and her family*. You know *her and her family* is the subject since they are the ones who do the liking in the sentence; they are the performers of the verb. This sentence is tricky because the *her* in *her family* acts as an adjective, not a pronoun. Since *family* is a perfectly acceptable subject noun, that underlined portion is correct. But the initial *her* is a pronoun, and it is wrong since it is in the objective case rather than the subjective.

Now, all this might be a little too technical for you. If you already know--—or can grasp—this grammar, then you’re in great shape. But whether you know the grammar or not, there is a strategy that can help you decide if a pronoun is in the proper case. When you have a phrase like *her and her family*, just throw out each side of the phrase and try it out in the sentence (remembering to make the verb singular, since by throwing out one half of the subject you stopped it from being plural). Following this method, you would have two sentences, which would begin in the following two ways:

|  |
| --- |
| Her likes to stay . . .  Her family likes to stay . . . |

You should immediately be able to “hear” that the first sentence is wrong and the second one is right. Suddenly it seems obvious that the first part of the original sentence should read:

|  |
| --- |
| She and her family like to stay . . . |

SAT II Writing particularly likes to test you on phrases such as *Toto and me*, or *the wicked witch of the North and I*, because many people don’t know when to use *me* and when to use *I*. A misconception exists that it’s always more polite or proper to use *I*—but this is not true! Sometimes *me* is the right word to use. Look at the following sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | There is usually | an atmosphere of | heated competition surrounding | |  | A |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | Jesse and I | , especially when we | compete | Cosmic Bowling Night | |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | at the Bowladrome | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

If you saw right away that *Jesse and I* is the object in this sentence, good for you! You can confidently answer that (B) is incorrect, since it should read *Jesse and me*. If you didn’t know the grammar straight off, though, you still should have been suspicious when you saw *Jesse and I* as one of the underlined portions of the sentence. Then, performing the crossing out trick on *Jesse* leaves you with *There is usually an atmosphere of heated competition surrounding I*. That sounds wrong. On this section, of course, you don’t need to fix the errors, you just need to identify them, but if you were to fix this sentence you’d do it by substituting *me* for *I*. Plug that back in, and you get *There is usually an atmosphere of heated competition surrounding me.*That sounds much better.

It can also be tough trying to figure out whether *me* or *my* is the correct pronoun choice. Look at this sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | When it | comes to | me | studying for the SAT, “ | concentration | ” | | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | is my middle | name | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

Although it may sound right, *me* is actually incorrect in this sentence. If you use *me*, the phrase means *when it comes to me*, which isn’t right. You’re doing more than talking about yourself; you’re talking about you and studying. Using *my* allows you to say*when it comes to my studying*.

Pronoun Shift

A sentence should start, continue, and end with the same kind of pronouns. Pronoun shift occurs when the kind of pronouns used changes over the course of the sentence. If you begin with plural pronouns, for example, you must use plural pronouns throughout.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | When one | first begins | to play tennis, | it’s | important to | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | work on | your | serve, and to wield your racket | well | . | No error | |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

This sentence presents a pronoun shift problem. If you start talking about *one*, you have to keep talking about *one* for the duration of the sentence. The sentence could read*when one first begins to play tennis, it’s important to work on one’s serve*or*when you first begin to play tennis, it’s important to work on your serve,* but the sentence cannot combine *one* and *you*. (C) is the correct answer.

Ambiguous Pronouns

We call a pronoun ambiguous when it’s not absolutely clear to whom or what the pronoun refers. We use ambiguous pronouns all the time when we’re talking. In speech, you can make it clear, from context or gestures, what pronoun refers to what noun, but in writing you can’t do that. Even if awkwardness is the result, you must make sure it’s absolutely clear what the pronoun refers to. See if you can spot the ambiguous pronoun in the following sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Sarah told Emma that | she |  | had | a serious foot odor problem, | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | and that | medicated spray | might | help. | No error | |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

The pronoun *she* poses a problem in this sentence. Who has a problem with foot odor, Sarah or Emma? No one knows, because *she* is ambiguous. Grammatically and logically, *she* could refer to Sarah or Emma. Therefore, (A) is the correct answer.

Comparisons Using Pronouns

Your suspicions should rise when you see a comparison made using pronouns. When a pronoun is involved in a comparison, it must match the case of the other pronoun involved:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | I’m fatter than | her | , | which | is good, | because | it means | I’ll win |  | |  | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | this sumo wrestling match. | No error | |  | E | | |

In this sentence, *I* is being compared to *her*. These two pronouns are in different cases, so one of them must be wrong. Since only *her* is underlined, it must be wrong, and therefore the right 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 actually an abbreviated version of what you’re 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.

Take a look at this similar sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Pedro | is a | better | pitcher | than |  | them | . | No error | | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

Here the word *are* is implied (we use *are*, which is plural, because in this sentence the pronoun *them* is plural). Adding *are* leaves us with *Pedro is a better pitcher than them are*. Again, that sounds wrong, so we know that the sentence should read *Pedro is a better pitcher than they*, and that (D) is the right answer.

**Subject-Verb Agreement**

The basic rule about subjects and verbs is: if you have a singular subject, you must use a singular verb, and if you have a plural subject, you must use a plural verb. It sounds simple, and a lot of the time it is. For example, you know that it’s incorrect to say*candy are good*, or *concerts is fun*.

However, in a few instances, subject-verb agreement can get hairy. There are four varieties of subject-verb problems ETS loves to test. These varieties crop up when:

1. the verb comes after the subject
2. the subject and verb are separated from each other
3. you have an *either/or* or *neither/nor* construction
4. the subject seems plural.

Remember, it’s not necessary to remember the *name* of the problem—you certainly don’t have to memorize that list of subject-verb agreement varieties. It’s only necessary to check subjects and verbs carefully to see if they match up. Knowing the different ways subjects and verbs can go awry will help you check more efficiently.

**Subject Comes After Verb**

In most sentences, the subject comes before the verb. ETS will try to throw you off by giving you a sentence or two in which the subject comes *after* the verb, and the subject-verb match-up is incorrect.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Even though | Esther created a petition to protest the | crowning |  | | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | of a Prom Queen, | there is | many people who refused to sign, | |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | saying they support the | 1950s-era | tradition. | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

The SAT II Writing Test frequently uses this exact formulation, so be wary if you see a comma followed by the word *there*. It’s tempting to assume that just because the word*there* comes before the verb *is, there* is the subject—but it’s not. Notice that in this sentence the subject is *people*. Here we see that since *people* is the subject, and *people*is plural, the matching verb must be plural. *Is* is a singular verb, and therefore incorrect in this sentence.

Even when you don’t see the red flag of *there is,* don’t just assume that the subject always comes before the verb. Look at the following sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Atop | my sundae, a | mass | of | whipped | and sprinkles, | sits | two | | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | maraschino cherries. | No error | |  | E | | |

Tricky! The answer is (D), *sits*. Because we’re talking about two maraschino cherries (plural subject) we need to use *sit* (plural verb). The sentence should read *Atop my sundae, a mass of whipped cream and sprinkles, sit two maraschino cherries.*Why is this tricky? The subject, *maraschino cherries,*comes after the verb, *sits*. With all the singular stuff floating around—one sundae, one mass of whipped cream—it’s easy to assume that the verb should be singular, too. Look out for those backwards constructions.

**Subject and Verb Are Separated**

One of ETS’s best-loved tricks is putting the subject here and the verb *waaaaay* over there. They hope that by the time you get to the verb, you’ll have no memory of the subject.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Sundaes with whipped cream and cherries, | while | good | if consumed |  | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | in moderation, | is sickening | if eaten | for breakfast, | lunch, | |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | and dinner. | No error | |  | E | | |

In this sentence, they’ve put the subject (*sundaes*) at the beginning of the sentence, and the verb (*is*) miles away. Sometimes it helps to bracket prepositional phrases so you can see what’s really going on. A prepositional phrase is a phrase that begins with a preposition like *while, although, which,* etc., which does not change the essential meaning of the sentence if removed. Prepositional phrases are often set off by commas. If you get rid of the prepositional phrase here (*while good if consumed in moderation*), you’re left with *sundaes is sickening*. That sounds plain old wrong. (C) is the right answer.

**Neither/Nor, Either/Or**

In *neither/nor* and *either/or*constructions, if the nouns are singular, the verb must be singular, too. This can be confusing; in *neither/nor* constructions, you’re always talking about two things, so it’s tempting to assume that you always need a plural verb. But if the two things being discussed are singular, you need a singular verb. For example, it’s correct to say, *Neither baseball nor football is fun to watch*, because if you broke the components of the sentence in two, you would get *baseball is fun to watch* and *football is fun to watch*. It’s incorrect to say, *Neither baseball nor football are fun to watch*, because if you break that sentence into its components, you get *baseball are fun to watch* and *football are fun to watch*.

It can be hard to hear this error, so be sure to check subject-verb match-ups carefully when you see a sentence like this one:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Neither | rummy | nor | solitaire | measure | up to | hearts | . | No error | | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

Even though there are two card games being discussed, both of those card games are singular nouns (one game of rummy, one game of solitaire), and therefore the verb must be singular. *Measure* is a plural verb, when it should be a singular one, so (C) is the answer.

**Singular Subject That Looks Plural**

There are several confusing subjects that look plural, but are actually singular. Of course, ETS hopes that you will see singular subjects and mistakenly match them with plural verbs. Such confusing subjects to watch out for are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Anybody | Either |
| Anyone | Group |
| America | Number |
| Amount | Neither |
| Audience | Nobody |
| Each | None |
| Everybody | No one |
| Everyone | One |

In this sentence, for example, the subject looks plural:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Nobody | , not | even me | , | are | excited about | the weekend | . | No error | | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

*Nobody* is one of those subjects that sounds plural, but is actually singular. It needs to be matched with a singular verb. Look carefully at all seemingly plural subjects; make sure they’re not singular subjects masquerading as plural ones. In this sentence, the answer is (C). The sentence should read *Nobody, not even me, is excited about the weekend*.

Be particularly careful with phrases like *as well as*, *along with*, and *in addition to*. Like the *neither/nor* construction, these phrases can trick you into thinking you need a plural verb. But look at the following sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | The leadoff hitter, | as well as | the cleanup hitter, | are | getting | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | some | good | hacks | tonight | . | No error | |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

The actual subject here is *leadoff hitter*. Since *leadoff hitter* is a singular subject, the verb must be singular, too. The presence of the phrase *as well as* does not make the subject plural. Even though there are two hitters doing well, the leadoff hitter is the only subject of this sentence. (B) is the answer; the sentence should read *the leadoff hitter, as well as the cleanup hitter, is getting some good hacks tonight.*If the sentence read, *The leadoff hitter and the cleanup hitter are getting some good hacks tonight, are*would be correct. It’s that *as well as* construction that changes things.

**Tense Errors**

Identifying Sentence Error questions will test your knowledge of three common causes of tense errors: annoying verbs, illogical tense switches, and the conditional. Most tense errors will be pretty easy to spot; we don’t make tense errors very often in speech, so 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.

Annoying Verbs

By annoying 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 last year.  You HAD SWUM across the bathtub as a child. |

You’ll probably see one question that will test your knowledge of a confusing verb like*to lie.* Look at this sentence, for example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | On | Saturday afternoon, I | laid | in the sun | for an hour | , working | | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | on my | tan | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

(B) is the correct answer here, because *laid* is not the correct tense in the context of this sentence. The past tense of *to lie* is *lay,* so the sentence should read *I lay in the sun.*

*To lie* and *to swim* aren’t the only two difficult verbs. Below, you’ll see 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 carefully the list below and to make sure you understand especially those verbs that you’ve found confusing before.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Infinitive** | **Simple Past** | **Past Participle** |
| Arise | Arose | Arisen |
| Become | Became | Become |
| Begin | Began | Begun |
| Blow | Blew | Blown |
| Break | Broke | Broken |
| Choose | Chose | Chosen |
| Come | Came | Come |
| Dive | Dived/Dove | Dived |
| Do | Did | Done |
| Draw | Drew | Drawn |
| Drink | Drank | Drunk |
| Drive | Drove | Driven |
| Drown | Drowned | Drowned |
| Dwell | Dwelt/dwelled | Dwelt/dwelled |
| Eat | Ate | Eaten |
| Fall | Fell | Fallen |
| Fight | Fought | Fought |
| Flee | Fled | Fled |
| Fling | Flung | Flung |
| Fly | Flew | Flown |
| Forget | Forgot | Forgotten |
| Freeze | Froze | Frozen |
| Get | Got | Gotten |
| Give | Gave | Given |
| Go | Went | Gone |
| Grow | Grew | Grown |
| Hang (a thing) | Hung | Hung |
| Hang (a person) | Hanged | Hanged |
| Know | Knew | Known |
| Lay | Laid | Laid |
| Lead | Led | Led |
| Lie (to recline) | Lay | Lain |
| Lie (tell fibs) | Lied | Lied |
| Put | Put | Put |
| Ride | Rode | Ridden |
| Ring | Rang | Rung |
| Rise | Rose | Risen |
| Run | Ran | Run |
| See | Saw | Seen |
| Set | Set | Set |
| Shine | Shone | Shone |
| Shake | Shook | Shaken |
| Shrink | Shrank | Shrunk |
| Shut | Shut | Shut |
| Sing | Sang | Sung |
| Sink | Sank | Sunk |
| Sit | Sat | Sat |
| Speak | Spoke | Spoken |
| Spring | Sprang | Sprung |
| Sting | Stung | Stung |
| Strive | Strove/strived | Striven/strived |
| Swear | Swore | Swore |
| Swim | Swam | Swum |
| Swing | Swung | Swung |
| Take | Took | Taken |
| Tear | Tore | Torn |
| Throw | Threw | Thrown |
| Wake | Woke/waken | Waked/woken |
| Wear | Wore | Worn |
| Write | Wrote | Written |

**Tense Switch**

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 were logical: the sentence used past tense when it was talking about the past and present tense when it was talking about the present, and the progression from past to present made sense.

ETS will give you a sentence or two with bad tense switches. 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 what, is both difficult and unnecessary. For the SAT II Writing, simply remember: if you don’t hear an error the first time you read a sentence, and if you don’t see a pronoun problem, check out the tenses and figure out if they’re okay. Look at the following example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | At swimming pools | last summer, the heat | will have brought |  | | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | hundreds and even | thousands of people | to bathe in | tepid |  | |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | chlorine. | No error | |  | E | | |

This sentence begins by talking about the past (*last summer*), but then uses the phrase*will have brought*, which is not the past tense. We’re talking about a phenomenon of last summer that is now over and done with, and firmly in the past. The phrase *will have brought*doesn’t fit because it suggests an ongoing phenomenon. Therefore, (B) is the correct answer.

Just look at the meaning of the sentence on these iffy tense questions, and you’ll be fine.

The Conditional

The conditional is the verb form we use to describe something uncertain, something that’s conditional on something else. You can memorize the conditional formula. It goes, “If . . . were . . . would.” Look at this sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | If I | was | queen, I | would | never | have to |  | study for | a standardized | |  | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | test. | No error | |  | E | | |

*Was* may sound right to you on first reading this sentence, but when in doubt, remember the formula. *Was* violates the formula and therefore is incorrect. The sentence should read, *If I were queen, I would never have to study for a standardized test.*(A) is the right answer.

Parallelism

Parallelism means making sure the different components of a sentence start, continue, and end in the same way. It’s especially common to find errors of parallelism in sentences that list actions or items. In the question below, for example, the activities are not presented in the same format, which means there is an error of parallelism.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Porter never liked | drinking wine | , | eatting cheese | , or | to go |  | |  | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | to a cocktail | party | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

When you see a list like this, be on the alert for an error in parallelism. In this case, the list starts out with two gerunds (*drinking, eating*) and then switches to an infinitive (*to go*). Because the list starts out with gerunds, it has to use gerunds all the way through. (C) is the correct answer.

Not all parallelism errors occur at the beginning of phrases; some occur at the end. The sentence below is incorrect because its two halves don’t end in a similar way.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | The steak | is definitely | the best entree | on the menu | , and | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | the clam chowder | is the | best appetizer | . | No error | |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

The best appetizer where? In the nation?In the world? Because the first part of the sentence specifies *on the menu*, the second part of the sentence must also be specific. In corrected form, this sentence would read, *The steak is definitely the best entrée on the menu, and the clam chowder is the best appetizer in the world.*

Double Negative

A double negative is a phrase that uses two negative words instead of one. Double negatives are the province of television gangsters and airheads, who say things like, “I don’t take no garbage.” You’ll probably be adept at spotting double negatives such as “I don’t take no garbage,” but ETS will try to trick you into missing a double negative by using words that are negative but don’t sound it, like *hardly, barely,* or *scarcely.*If you see any of those three words, you should probably smell a rat.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Katie | can’t scarcely | stand to wear her | gymnastics | leotard | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | without | underwear | underneath | . | No error | |  | C |  | D |  | E | | |

*Can’t* is a fairly obvious negative word, but *scarcely* is also negative, so the two cannot be used together. (A) is the correct answer.

Adverb Errors

Adverbs present problems when they’re confused with adjectives and when they’re used in comparisons.

Confusing Adverbs with Adjectives

Adverbs are words used to describe verbs or other adverbs. Adverbs often end in *–ly*(*breathlessly, hardily, angrily*). For example, if you’re describing how you ate your spaghetti dinner, you’re describing a verb (eating), so you need to use an adverb. You could say something like, “I ate my dinner *quickly*.”

Adjectives are words used to describe nouns. Again, take the spaghetti example—but this time, suppose that instead of describing the process of eating, you’re describing the actual dinner. Since you’re describing a noun (dinner), you need to use an adjective. You could say something like, “My spaghetti dinner was *delicious*.”

People often confuse adverbs with adjectives, especially in speech. We say things like, “I ate my dinner quick.” That, however, is incorrect. Because you’re describing an action, an adverb like *quickly* is required.

One frequently confused adjective/adverb pair is *well* and *good*. *Well* is an adverb, and*good* is an adjective, so one cannot be substituted for the other. Look at the following sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | This | paper’s | going pretty | good | , although I’m not sure | I’ll |  | |  | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | be done | on time | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

A paper can’t go pretty good; it can only go pretty well. In order to describe the verb*going*, we must use an adverb like *well*, instead of the adjective *good*.

ETS will usually test adverb/adjective confusion by giving you a sentence that uses an adjective when it should use an adverb. See if you can spot the incorrect adjective use in this sentence:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | No matter | how | careful | kites are flown, they | often |  | get tangled |  | | A |  | B |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | in trees. | No error | |  | E | | |

In this sentence, the adjective *careful* is used improperly to describe the verb *flown.*Because a verb is being described, *careful* should be *carefully*. The following sentence has a similar problem:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | The fascinating TV | special |  | shows | how | quick | the hungry tiger | |  | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | can devour | her prey. | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

This sentence uses the adjective *quick* to describe the verb *devour*; the adverb *quickly* is the right word to use. Notice that in this sentence, the adjective, *quick*, is separated from the verb, *devour*, by three words. Sniffing out the improper use of an adjective can be difficult when the verb being described is not right next to the adjective. If you see an adjective you’re not sure about, don’t be fooled by distracting phrases like *the hungry tiger*. Just check to see what the adjective is describing. If it’s describing a verb, you’ll know it’s an error.

Adverb or Adjective Misuse in Comparisons

When you see a comparison or an implied comparison, check to make sure all of the adverbs and adjectives are used as they should be. How should they be used? Well, if you’re comparing two items, you need to use what’s known as a comparative modifier. Don’t worry—you don’t need to remember the phrase “comparative modifier,” you just need to remember that when comparing two items, use a word that ends in *–er,* like*better, sexier, shinier,* etc. Only when comparing three or more things can you use a superlative modifier like *best, sexiest,*or*shiniest.*

ETS will probably test your knowledge of this rule by giving you a question in which a superlative modifier is used incorrectly. Look at the following example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Of | the two cars | I drive | , | I like | the Ferrari Testarossa | | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | best | . | No error | | D |  | E | | |

This sentence implies a comparison between two cars. Because only two things are being compared, *best* is the wrong word. Only when comparing three or more things can you use words like *best*. You could figure this out by phrasing the comparison in a different way. You wouldn’t say, *I like my Testarossa best than my Civic*, you’d say, *I like my Testarossa better than my Civic*. This rephrasing also works if you’re puzzling over a sentence that compares three or more items. You wouldn’t say, *After trying skydiving, hula-dancing, and pineapple-eating, I decided that I liked hula-dancing less*, because that sentence does not explain if you liked hula-dancing less than you liked skydiving, or less than you liked pineapple-eating, or less than you liked both. What you would say is, *After trying skydiving, hula-dancing, and pineapple eating, I decided that I liked hula-dancing least*. The superlative modifier *least* makes it clear that hula-dancing was the most disagreeable of all three activities.

Gerund Errors

A gerund is a word that ends in –*ing*, such as *prancing, divulging, stuffing,* etc. The infinitive form of a verb is the verb in its unconjugated form: *to prance, to divulge, to stuff,* etc. Your understanding of gerunds will usually be tested by questions that use the infinitive when they should use gerunds.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  | | --- | --- | | In my family | , Scrabble usually causes two or more family | | A |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | members | to engage in | a screaming match, | thus preventing |  | |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | the game | to be completed | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

Your ear will help you on gerund questions. The phrase *preventing the game to be completed*might sound funny to you. This phrase should read *thus preventing the game from being completed,*changing the infinitive *to be*to the conjugated form, *being*.

Idiom Errors

We’ve been talking on and on about how tough it is to spot the errors tested on this exam, because sometimes grammatical errors sound right. Well, this should make you happy: idiom errors are easy to spot because they sound wrong. In fact, there’s no rule about idiom errors. You have to be able to read a sentence and think, “That sounds plain old wrong.” Usually it’s a prepositional phrase that’s off.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Melissa | recently moved | to a | brand-new | apartment | in | 108th | |  | A |  | B |  | C |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | street | . | No error | |  | D |  | E | | |

Here, the answer is (C), because we say, “I live *on* this street,” rather than, “I live *in*this street.” There is no specific rule that explains why we use the word *on*; it’s just something you probably know from years of English-speaking.

The following is a list of *proper*idiomatic usage.

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

Occasionally, the idiomatic association between words can affect the entire sentence. Take the following example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | While the | principal | of the high school | is | mild-mannered, | |  | A |  | B |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | the vice principal | is often | accused | to be | too harsh with | |  | C |  | D |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | the students. | No error | |  | E | | |

The answer to this questions is (D) because the word *accused* must take the preposition*of* rather than *to*. This means that the use of the verb *to be* is incorrect. Instead, the sentence must use *of*, and the preposition *of*must take a gerund. For this sentence to be correct, it should read:

|  |
| --- |
| While the principal of the high school is mild-mannered, the vice principal is often accused of being too harsh with the students. |

**Wrong Word**

You might see one or two wrong-word questions in Identifying Sentence Error questions. There are tons of frequently confused words, and while it’s impossible to predict which ones ETS will throw at you, it *is* possible to learn the difference between these pairs of words, even those words you always get wrong in your own writing.

We’ve broken down wrong words into categories: words that sound the same but mean different things (like *allusion* and *illusion*), made-up words and phrases (like *should of*), tricky contractions (like *its* and *it’s*), and words commonly and incorrectly used as synonyms (like *disinterested* and *uninterested*).

Words That Sound the Same but Mean Different Things

In the following list, you’ll find homonyms—words that sound the same or similar when spoken aloud, but that are spelled differently and have different meanings—*dying*and *dyeing*, for example. Because the word *die* sounds exactly the same as the word*dye*, it can be hard to remember which spelling means *expire* and which means *color*. Here is a handy list of commonly confused words, and their definitions:

allusion/illusion

An*allusion*is a reference to something.

|  |
| --- |
| Isolde’s essay was littered with conspicuous *allusions* to Shakespeare and Spenser. |

An *illusion* is a deception or unreal image.

|  |
| --- |
| By clever use of his napkin, Jason created the *illusion* that he’d eaten his quiche. |

alternate/alternative

An *alternate* is a substitute.

|  |
| --- |
| When Cherry was ousted after the voting scandal, the *alternate* took her place on the student council. |

An *alternative* is a choice between two or more things.

|  |
| --- |
| The Simpsons provides an *alternative* to mindless, poorly written sitcoms. |

appraise/apprise

To*appraise* is to figure out the value of something.

|  |
| --- |
| After *appraising* the drawing, Richard informed Cynthia that she was the owner of a Picasso sketch. |

To *apprise* is to give someone information.

|  |
| --- |
| In an urgent undertone, Donald *apprised* me of the worrisome situation. |

breath/breathe

*Breath* and *breathe* cannot be used interchangeably. *Breath* is a noun, and *breathe* is a verb. That little *e* on the end makes all the difference. A *breath* (noun) is the lungful of air you inhale every few seconds.

|  |
| --- |
| Elena took a deep *breath* and jumped off the diving board. |

To *breathe* (verb) is the act of taking in that lungful.

|  |
| --- |
| “I can’t *breathe*!” gasped Mario, clutching at his throat. |

conscience/conscious/conscientious

A *conscience* is a sense of right and wrong.

|  |
| --- |
| After he robbed the store, Pinocchio’s *conscience* started to bother him. |

To be *conscious* is to be awake and alert.

|  |
| --- |
| Suddenly, Marie became *conscious* that she was not alone in the room. |

To be *conscientious* is to be dutiful and hardworking.

|  |
| --- |
| *Conscientious* Cedric completed his chores and then did his homework. |

desert/dessert

A *desert* is a place with sand and camels.

|  |
| --- |
| The cartoon figure pulled himself across the *desert*, calling out for water. |

A *dessert* is something sweet that you eat after dinner.

|  |
| --- |
| My favorite *dessert* is mint chocolate chip ice cream. |

effect/affect

There’s a good chance you’ll see this pair on the test, because ETS knows that differentiating between *effect* and *affect* drives students crazy. *Effect* is usually a noun. The *effect* is the result of something.

|  |
| --- |
| Studying had a profound *effect* on my score. |

*Affect* is usually a verb. To *affect* something is to change it or influence it.

|  |
| --- |
| My high score positively *affected* the outcome of my college applications. |

eminent/imminent

An *eminent* person is one who is well known and highly regarded.

|  |
| --- |
| The *eminent* author disguised himself with a beret and dark glasses. |

An *imminent* event is one that is just about to happen.

|  |
| --- |
| When the paparazzi’s arrival seemed *imminent*, the author ducked out the back entrance. |

lose/loose

To *lose* something is to misplace it or shake it off.

|  |
| --- |
| Michael tried to *lose* the hideous shirt his girlfriend had given him for Christmas. |

*Loose* means movable, unfastened, or promiscuous.

|  |
| --- |
| The *loose* chair leg snapped off, and the chair’s occupant fell to the floor. |

principal/principle

The *principal* is the person who calls the shots in your high school.

|  |
| --- |
| *Principal* Skinner rules Springfield Elementary School with an iron fist, yet he still lives with his mother. |

A *principle* is a value, or standard.

|  |
| --- |
| Edward, a boy of *principle*, refused to participate in the looting. |

stationary/stationery

*Stationary* means immobile.

|  |
| --- |
| Nadine used her *stationary* bike as a place to hang her clothes. |

*Stationery* is the paper you get for Christmas from your aunt.

|  |
| --- |
| Nathaniel wrote thank-you notes on his humorous Snoopy *stationery*. |

Made-Up Words and Phrases

Here is a list of some of the words and phrases that don’t actually exist, although people still incorrectly use them in their writing. These misspellings and concoctions exist mainly because they are the phonetic spellings of words and phrases we use in speech. For example, the phrase *should of* (a grammatically incorrect phrase) sounds like the way we pronounce *should have* or *should’ve*, which is why it creeps into people’s writing.

a lot/alot

Despite widespread usage, the word *alot* does not exist. It is a made-up word that is never grammatically correct. Always use the phrase *a lot* instead.

|  |
| --- |
| Henri ate *a lot* of brie with his bread. |

could’ve/could of

*Could’ve* is the contraction of *could have*. People sometimes write *could of* when they mean *could’ve* or *could have*. Unfortunately, like *alot, could of* is an imaginary phrase. Never use it.

|  |
| --- |
| Matilda *could have* gone on the date, but she claimed to have a prior engagement. |

should’ve/should of

*Should of* does not exist.

|  |
| --- |
| Chadwick *should have* done his Spanish homework. |

supposed to/suppose to

*Suppose to* falls in the category of made-up phrases. It’s often used in place of*supposed to* because when we’re talking, we say *suppose to* instead of the grammatically correct *supposed to*.

|  |
| --- |
| According to the vet, Yolanda is *supposed to* brush her pit bull’s teeth once a month. |

used to/use to

*Use to* (you guessed it) is made-up. The correct spelling is *used to*.

|  |
| --- |
| Opie *used to* play Monopoly with Anthony, but now he has put aside childish things. |

Contraction Confusion

Look into your heart. Do you write *its* sometimes and *it’s* at other times, with little regard for which *its/it’s* is which? If you do, cut it out.

Contractions can be confusing. Check out the following list and get them straight.

its/it’s

*Its* and *it’s* are often used interchangeably—but they are very different beasts. *Its*signals possession. *It’s* is a contraction of *it is*.

It is understandable, though, why people confuse the two words. The most common way to show possession is to add an apostrophe and an *s* (*Dorothy’s braids, the tornado’s wrath, Toto’s bark*) which is perhaps the reason why people frequently write*it’s* when they should write *its—*they know they want to show possession, so they pick the word with the apostrophe and the *s*. To avoid making a mistake, when you see the word *it’s*, check to make sure that if you substituted *it is* for the *it’s*, the sentence would still make sense.

To sum up:

* *Its* signals possession.

|  |
| --- |
| This day-old soda has lost *its* fizz. |

* *It’s* is a contraction of *it is*.

|  |
| --- |
| *It’s* a shame that this glass of soda was left out overnight. |

their/they’re/there

*Their, they’re,* and *there* are often used willy-nilly, as if they are interchangeable, which they are not. *Their* is possessive.

|  |
| --- |
| They lost *their* hearts in Massachusetts. |

*They’re* is the contraction of *they are*.

|  |
| --- |
| *They’re* the ugliest couple in all of Boston. |

*There* means over yonder.

|  |
| --- |
| Look! *There* they go! |

whose/who’s

*Whose* is possessive.

|  |
| --- |
| Wanda, *whose* California roll I just ate, is looking at me with hatred. |

*Who’s*is a contraction of *who is*.

|  |
| --- |
| *Who’s* responsible for the theft and ingestion of my California roll? |

your/you’re

*Your* is possessive.

|  |
| --- |
| *Your* fly is unzipped. |

*You’re* is a contraction of *you are*.

|  |
| --- |
| *You’re* getting sleepy. |

When to Use What Word?

Below is a list of words we often—incorrectly—use interchangeably.

aggravate/irritate

When screaming in frustration, we often say things like, “That’s so aggravating!” However, this is incorrect usage. *Aggravate* is not synonymous with *irritate*. *To aggravate*is to make a condition worse.

|  |
| --- |
| Betty’s skin condition was *aggravated* by her constant sunbathing. |

To*irritate* is to annoy.

|  |
| --- |
| Ambika enjoys *irritating* her sister by jabbing her in the leg during long car rides. |

number/amount

Use *number* when referring to a group of things that can be counted.

|  |
| --- |
| Caroline concealed a *number* of gummy bears in various pockets of her jeans. |

Use *amount* when referring to something that cannot be counted.

|  |
| --- |
| Caroline drank a certain *amount* of soda every day. |

fewer/less

Use *fewer* when referring to items that can be counted.

|  |
| --- |
| Yanni complained vociferously that he had received *fewer* presents than his sister did. |

Use *less* when referring to items that cannot be counted.

|  |
| --- |
| Yanni’s parents explained that because they loved him *less* than they loved his sister, they gave him fewer presents. |

famous/infamous

As you might know, a *famous* person is someone like Julia Roberts.

|  |
| --- |
| The *famous* young actor made his way up the red carpet as flashbulbs popped and girls shrieked. |

An *infamous* person or thing, however, is something different. *Infamous* means notorious—famous, yes, but famous in a bad way.

|  |
| --- |
| The *infamous* pirate was known the world over for his cruel escapades. |

disinterested/uninterested

Even reputable daily newspapers occasionally confuse *disinterested* with *uninterested*.*Disinterest* suggests impartiality.

|  |
| --- |
| Nadine and Nora need a *disinterested* third party to referee their argument. |

In contrast, an *uninterested* person is one who is bored.

|  |
| --- |
| Nora is completely *uninterested*in hearing Nadine’s opinions.  Below are the answers and the explanations to the Grammar and Correct Usage Practice Test 1. The incorrect word or phrase in the sentence is highlighted red, while the correct word or phrase is highlighted green.  1. The inventor stood to **except** the award.  Correct Sentence: The inventor stood to accept the award.  Explanation: Accept means “to receive”, except means “to exclude.”  2**. Between** the three of us, I think I am the slowest runner.  Correct Sentence: Among the three of us, I think I am the slowest runner.  Explanation: Among is used to refer to 3 or more members of the group, while between is used to refer to two member of the group.  3. There **are scarcely no** more birds in this city.  Correct sentence: There are scarcely any birds in this city.  Explanation: Double negative. Scarcely and no more are both negative word/phrase.  4. This fruit contains **fewer sugar.**  Correct sentence: This fruit contains less sugar.  Explanation: Fewer is used to describe plural nouns (how many) while less is used to describe singular nouns (how much). Sugar is singular.  5. **I have never seen nothing as beautiful as this city.**  Correct sentence: I have never seen anything as beautiful as this city.  Explanation: Double negative. Never seen and nothing are both negative word/phrase.  6. **Place the mirror on the wall to give you an allusion of bigger room.**  Correct sentence: Place the mirror on the wall to give you an illusion of bigger room.  Explanation: Allusion means “a passing or casual reference,” while illusion means “something that deceives by producing a false or misleading impression of reality.”  7. We were lucky we didn’t have typhoon this month. (No Error)  8. My favorite vegetable **are** peas.  Correct sentence: May favorite vegetable is peas.  Explanation: The subject is favorite is singular, therefore the verb are should be is.  9. Either James or John **are**going to lead the choir in the **recital tommorow.**  Correct sentence: Either James or John is going to lead the choir in their recital tomorrow.  Explanation: In either or statements, the verb considers the subject after the or statement. The subject John is singular, so the verb should be is. The correct spelling is tomorrow.  10. The additional supplies that we need to bring **are:** band aids, cottons, alcohol, and gauze.  Correct sentences:  The additional supplies that we need to bring are band aids, cottons, alcohol, and gauze. (The colon was deleted).  The additional supplies that we need to bring are the following: band aids, cottons, alcohol, and gauze.  Explanation: The colon is used before a list of items especially after expressions like the following and as follows. Do not use a colon before a verb or a preposition.  11. All the **students has finished** their report.  Correct sentence: All the students have finished their report.  Explanation: In this sentence, “all” refers to many students, therefore “have” is the correct verb.  12. He was **a** honorable man.  Correct sentence: He was an honorable man.  Explanation: A is used before words beginning with a consonant sound (a car, a pencil), while an is used to before words beginning with vowel sounds (an ant, an egg). An is also used to before words beginning with the consonant h when h is not pronounced (such as honorable).  13. The recently heavy **flooding effected** the crops of farmers.  Correct sentence: The recently heavy flooding affected the crops of farmers.  Explanation: Affect means “to influence” while effect means “the result of some actions.”  14. Emmanuel **could of** passed the examinations if he had studied hard enough.  Correct sentence: Emmanuel could have passed the examinations if he studied hard enough.  Explanation: The word “of” is not used after the verb could.  15. I believe that **were** going to have a prosperous new year. |

Correct sentence: I believe that we’re going to have a prosperous new year.

Explanation: The word were is the past tense of was while we’re is the contraction of we are.

1. Paul Erdos was a mathematician who **writes** a lot of research papers in collaboration with other mathematicians.

**PART 2**

Correct Sentence: Paul Erdos was a mathematician who wrote a lot of research papers in collaboration with other mathematicians

Explanation: The tense of the verbs in a sentence must be consistent unless there is a reason to change. The verb was is past tense, so the verb writes must be changed to wrote.

2. **Anna lay her** books on the table before opening her laptop.

Correct Sentence: Anna laid her books on the table before opening her laptop.

Explanation: Laid is the past tense of lay (to put). Note that lay is also be the past tense of lie (to rest).

3. **Please seat here**, Mr. Reyes. I’ll just call the doctor.

Correct: Please sit here, Mr. Reyes. I’ll just call the doctor.

Explanation: Seat is a noun (a place on or which one sits), while sit is a verb (to rest the body supported by the buttocks). Another correct sentence would be “Please be seated here… ”

4. Which constellation do you **see most often**, Leo Minor or Pegasus?

Correct Sentence: Which constellation do you see more often, Leo Minor or Pegasus?

Explanation: Only two constellations are compared, so the more should be used. Most is used to compare more than two things.

5. He is the one which called earlier.

Correct Sentence: He is the one **who called earlier**.

Explanation: The pronoun which refers only to things, while who refers to persons.

6. I am **taking japanese** class next semester.

Correct Sentence: I am taking Japanese class next semester.

Explanation: Japanese is a proper noun, so the first letter must be capitalized.

7. Marie and Pierre **Curie invented radium**.

Correct Sentence: Marie and Pierre Curie discovered radium.

Explanation: The word invent means “to be the first to make or do something,” while the word discover means “to find or see something that already exists.”

8. Her powerful speech regarding the abolition of pork barrel really affected the audience. (No Error)

9. We were lucky we didn’t have **no** earthquake this year.

Correct Sentence: We were lucky we didn’t have earthquake this year.

Explanation: Double negative. The word didn’t is negative, so there is no need to add no.

10. Running in the last marathon was a fun, challenging, **exhausting, experience.**

Correct: Running in the last marathon was a fun, challenging, exhausting experience. (The comma before experience was omitted).

Explanation: Commas must be used to separate two or more adjectives preceding a noun (experience) but not after the last adjective before the noun.

11. **Anna the quiz blower of the class bagged another** medal in a declamation contest.

Correct Sentence: Anna, the quiz blower of the class, bagged another medal in a declamation contest. (commas separate the quiz blower of the class)

12. I think **that bolder** must be removed from the street to avoid accident.

Correct Sentence: I think that boulder must be removed from the street to avoid accident.

Explanation: Boulder means “rock,” while the noun “bold” means “courageous and daring.”

13. The movie **was censured because** of its many violent scenes.

Correct Sentence: The movie was censored because of its many violent scenes.

Explanation: Censure means “to criticize strongly” while censor means “disallow.”

14. In betting a lottery you can win from one million to **Php200 000 000.**

Correct Sentence: In betting a lottery you can win from one million to two hundred million pesos.

Explanation: As a general rule, rounded numbers are usually spelled out. In addition, be consistent within a sentence. In writing large numbers, if you used symbols, use symbols all throughout. For example, another correct sentence would be “In betting a lottery you can win from Php 1 000 000 to two Php 200 000 000.”

15. I wish you **would; oh never mind.**

Correct Sentence: I wish you would – oh never mind.

Explanation: In a sentence with an abrupt change in thought, emdash (long dash) should be used.