Grammar : A Close Look

1. Clause

a clause is a set of words that contains a subject and a working verb.This is a cluase:

she applied for the job.

She is the subject because she is the one performing the action. Applied is the working verb because it describes what the subject did. For any sentence, you could ask, “Who (or what) did what?” and the (correct) answer will point to the subject and working verb.

Together, the subject and working verb create a complete, stand-alone sentence, or an independent clause. Independent clauses have, at the very least, a subject and a verb. Every correct sentence must have at least one independent clause. A dependent clause also contains a verb but cannot stand alone as a sentence.

2. Modifier

A modifier provides additional information in a sentence, beyond the core subject and verb. The simplest example is an adjective. For example, in the phrase the happy child, the word happy, an adjective, is a modifier.

Modifiers can also be more complex: The large dog, which has black fur, is a Labrador.

The modifier which has black fur is called a nonessential modifier. If you remove it from the sentence, the core of the sentence still makes sense: The large dog is a Labrador.

Compare that to this sentence: The job that she started last week is much harder than her previous job.

In this sentence, that she started last week is called an essential modifier. Why is this one essential? Look what happens when you remove it from the sentence:

The job is much harder than her previous job.

The job? What job? If you haven't already specified a particular job, then the meaning of the sentence is murky. This is the hallmark of an essential modifier: the modifier is necessary in order to understand the meaning of the sentence.

3. Sentence Core

The core of a sentence consists of any independent clauses along with some essential modifiers. This is the bare minimum needed in order to have a coherent sentence.

Any nonessential modifiers are stripped out of the sentence core. See more on sentence core in Chapter 4 of this guide.

4. Conjunction

Conjunctions are words that help to stick parts of sentences together. Here's an example: He worked hard, and a raise was his reward.

Coordinating conjunctions, such as and, can glue two independent clauses together. Both he worked hard and a raise was his reward are independent clauses. The most common coordinating conjunctions are the FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

Modifiers can be connected to independent clauses by subordinating conjunctions. You saw an example of this before: Although she didn't have much work experience, she was offered the job.

The word although is a subordinating conjunction. Other examples include because, while, though, unless, before, after, and if.

5. Marker

This one is not an official grammar term, but it's important. A marker is a flag or clue that a certain kind of issue is being tested. On occasion, this book will talk about certain kinds of markers. For example, the word unlike is a comparison marker; when you see unlike, you should think about comparisons.

Let's say you read an explanation and think, “Hmm, I didn't know that that word was a marker for that kind of grammar issue.” If this happens, immediately write that marker down! Keep a list, make flash cards, record it however you prefer— but do record (and study) the fact that this particular marker should have made you think about a certain grammar issue.

That's all to start. (Yes, technically, we did sneak more than five terms into that list. The terms are all related, though.)

If you run across other unfamiliar terms, you can look them up in the glossary at the end of this guide.

Meaning : A Closer Look

A clear sentence is transparent—the author's intended meaning shines through. On the GMAT, however, either the original sentence or its variations may muddy the waters. One of your tasks is to choose the answer choice that conveys a logical and clear meaning. Consider this sentence: Tomorrow, she bought some milk.

No grammar rule is violated in that sentence, but the sentence doesn't make any sense! Either she bought the milk in the past or she will buy the milk in the future. You know the sentence is wrong because the meaning is illogical.

If the meaning of the original sentence is clear, start looking for grammar issues.

If, however, the original sentence is confusing, you will need to discern the author's intent. Fortunately, this intent will not be buried too deeply. After all, the correct sentence has to be one of the five choices. Thus, the GMAT tends to make use of “small” errors in meaning that can be easy to overlook.

Most instances of meaning errors fall into one of three major categories: 1. Choose your words 2. Place your words 3. Match your words

Choose Your Words

Did the author pick the right words out of the dictionary? If a word has more than one meaning, is the author using that word correctly, to indicate the right meaning? The GMAT rarely tests you on pure vocabulary, but very occasionally, it tries to pull a trick on you by switching a particular word and its cousin. For example:

My decision to drive a hybrid car was motivated by ECONOMIC considerations.

ECONOMICAL considerations motivated my decision to drive a hybrid car.

The second sentence, which is shorter and punchier, may look preferable. Unfortunately, it is wrong! Economical means “thrifty, efficient.” Notice that this meaning is not too distant from what the author intends to say: he or she wants an efficient automobile. But the appropriate phrase is economic considerations—that is, monetary considerations.

Consider the following pairs of “cousin” words and expressions, together with their distinct meanings:

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aggravate (worsen) vs. aggravating (irritating)
known as (named) vs. known to be (acknowledged as)
loss of (no longer in possession of) vs. loss in (decline in value)
mandate (command) vs. have a mandate (have authority from
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voters)
native of (person from) vs. native to (species that originated in)
range of (variety of) vs. ranging (varying)
rate of (speed or frequency of) vs. rates for (prices for)
rise (general increase) vs. raise (a bet or a salary increase in American English)
try to do (seek to accomplish) vs. try doing (experiment with)

Big changes in meaning can be accomplished with switches of little words. Certain helping verbs, such as may, will, must, and should, provide another way for the GMAT to test meaning.

These helping verbs express various levels of certainty, obligation, and reality. Simply by swapping these verbs, the GMAT can completely change the meaning of the sentence.

Example 1

Absolutely Necessary: The court ruled that the plaintiff MUST pay full damages.

Morally Obliged: The court ruled that the plaintiff SHOULD pay full damages.

Notice that the second sentence cannot be correct. Why? The word should means "moral obligation"—something that a court cannot impose. On the other hand, the use of must in the first sentence indicates a legally binding obligation imposed upon the plaintiff. Thus, you should go with must, whether the original sentence used must or not. On the GMAT, should almost always indicates "moral obligation," not "likelihood." In everyday speech, you can say The train should arrive now to mean that the train is likely to arrive now, but the GMAT doesn't agree with this usage. #### Example 2 Actual: If Chris and Jad met, they DISCUSSED mathematics.

Hypothetical: If Chris and Jad met, they WOULD DISCUSS mathematics.

The first sentence could be said by someone who is unsure whether Chris and Jad have actually met: "If this did indeed happen, then that is the consequence." The second sentence, however, predicts the consequences of a hypothetical meeting of the two people: "If this were to happen, then that would be the consequence."

Pay attention to the original sentence's helping verbs—and only change them if the original sentence is obviously nonsensical.

For more on helping verbs see Chapter 8, "Verbs" of the guide.

Place Your Words

Beware of words that move from one position to another. The placement of a single word can alter the meaning of a sentence. For example:

ALL the children are covered in mud. The children are ALL covered in mud.

In these sentences, changing the placement of all shifts the intent from how many children (all of them) to how the children are covered in mud (all over). Consider another example:

ONLY the council votes on Thursdays. The council votes ONLY on Thursdays.

In the first sentence, only indicates that the council alone votes on Thursdays (as opposed to the board, perhaps, which can vote any other day, but not Thursdays). In the second sentence, only indicates that the council does not vote on any day but Thursday.

If a word changes its position in the answer choices, consider whether the change has an impact on the meaning of the sentence. Look out especially for short words (such as only and all) that quantify nouns or otherwise restrict meaning.

At a broader level, pay attention to overall word order. All the words in a sentence could be well-chosen, but the sentence could still be awkward or ambiguous. For example:

The council granted the right to make legal petitions TO CITY OFFICIALS.

What does the phrase to city of icials mean? Did the city officials receive the right to make legal petitions? Or did someone else receive the right to make petitions to the of icials? Either way, the correct sentence should resolve the ambiguity:

The council granted CITY OFFICIALS the right to make legal petitions.

OR

The right to make legal petitions TO CITY OFFICIALS was granted by the council.

Match Your Words

Sentences generally contain pairs of words or phrases that must match. As you saw in an example earlier in this chapter, a verb must match the time frame of the overall sentence.

These matches also have grammatical implications. What's wrong with the following comparison?

Unlike Alaska, where the winter is quite cold, the temperature in Florida rarely goes below freezing.

Though you know that the author is trying to say that Alaska and Florida are dissimilar, technically, the sentence says that Alaska and the temperature in Florida are dissimilar. It's illogical to compare a state to the temperature in another state.

A similar matching principle holds for other grammatical connections (e.g., pronouns and the nouns to which they refer). Future chapters will explore each type of connection in turn; for now, remember to test the meaning of any potential connection. Connected words must always make sense together.

Avoid Redundancy

Another aspect of meaning is redundancy. Each word in the correct choice must be necessary to the meaning of the sentence. If a word can be removed without subtracting from the meaning of the sentence, it should be eliminated. Redundancy goes beyond mere concision—redundancy confuses the meaning, causing the reader to ask: “Did I read that right?” No right answer on the GMAT will contain redundant words.

A common redundancy trap on the GMAT is the use of words with the same meaning:

Wrong: The value of the stock ROSE by a 10% INCREASE.

Right: The value of the stock INCREASED by 10%.

Right: The value of the stock ROSE by 10%.

Since rose and increase both imply growth, only one is needed.

Wrong: The three prices SUM to a TOTAL of $11.56.

Right: The three prices SUM to $11.56.

Right: The three prices TOTAL $11.56.

Since sum and total convey the same meaning, only one is needed. Consider this example:

Pay attention to expressions of time. It is easy to sneak two redundant time expressions into an answer choice (especially if one expression is in the nonunderlined part, or if the two expressions do not look like each other):

A sentence should include only one such expression. This does not mean that you can never repeat time expressions in a sentence; just be sure that you are doing so for a meaningful reason.

Also pay attention to transition words, such as contrast words. What is wrong with the sentence below?

Although she studied night and day for three months, yet she did not do well on her exam.

The word although already conveys the coming contrast; it is unnecessary to use the second contrast word, yet.