

Chapter 1

3 Strategies for Sentence Improvements

1.1 Warm-Up

Are you having trouble remembering what types of errors are tested in the SAT Writing section? Try this mnemonic device:

The most commonly tested and missed grammar points can be seen below. When you are answers sentence error or improvement questions, BE A CYCLOPS and always be keep one eye open for these most commonly missed grammar points. If you have already heard the BE A CYCLOPS mnemonic from another section, close your eyes and identify the grammar point that each letter refers to. Then, complete the exercise on the next page.

B is for being: The word being is commonly heard in speech but does not usually make for the best sentences.

E is for agrEEment: Identify the subject and the verb that is associated with the subject. The verb needs to match the subject in number and gender. This means that the subject and the main verb need to be both singular or both plural.

A is for awful verb tense: Check when the action is happening and then if the given verb tense can be used to describe the time period that the action is happening.

C is for clause (aka commas towards the beginning of the sentence): Clauses at the beginning of sentences have a description, then a comma, then more words. The description must be describing the first word after the comma.

Y is for you, me, and other pronouns: If you is not in the underlined section, then it must be paired with you in the underlined section. If one or someone is not in the underlined section, then it must be paired with you in the underlined section. Also, make sure that pronouns like it or they clearly refer to the subject of the sentence.

C if for contrasts and other conjunction/connectors: Words like and are used to add another idea, however, words like but are used to show differences between things.

L is for list: If there is a list, all of the words must be the same part of speech and the same verb tense.

O is for of and commas that might separate the subject and the verb: The verb ending is dependent on the singularity or plurality of the subject.

P is for preposition: Make sure the preposition matches the word before it. To combat this, learn your idioms!

S is for short: Is the sentence as short as it can be without changing the meaning?

Directions: Write 5 sentence error questions from any five different categories in the list above. At least one should have no error. Then, switch with someone in the class so that they can solve your questions.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

1.2 Sentence Improvement Multiple Choice Questions

Below is an example of a sentence improvement question:

1. The Boston Common is older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park.
 - (A) older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park
 - (B) older than Central Park but just as well-maintained.
 - (C) older than Central Park; it is just as well-maintained.
 - (D) older and it is just as well-maintained as Central Park.
 - (E) just as comfortable as Central Park and it is older than it.

Sentence Improvement Questions look extremely intimidating because the questions and the answer choices are relatively long. It looks like this would require a lot of reading; however, we are going to go through a strategy to decrease the amount of reading that you have to do but increase your accuracy and speed on the test.

1.3 How To Increase Your Score on Sentence Improvement Multiple Choice Questions

- (a) Know the directions. The directions for the sentence improvement questions are as follows:

The following sentences test correctness and effectiveness of expression. Part of each sentence or the entire sentence is underline; beneath each sentence are five ways of phrasing the underlined material. Choice A repeats the original phrasing; the other four choices are different. Select the choice that completes the sentence most effectively.

*In making your selection, **follow the requirements of standard written English**; that is, pay attention to grammar, choice of words, sentence construction, and punctuation. **Your selection should result in the most effective sentence**— clear and precise, without awkwardness or ambiguity.*

- (b) Know the topics most commonly tested in sentence improvement questions.
Grammar: Subject-Verb Agreement, Pronoun Reference, Run-ons, Modifiers, Parallelism, Shift in Point of View, You and Me Errors, Idioms, Hypothetical Statements, Punctuation
Phrasing: Redundancy, Conciseness, Sentence fragments
Note that these are slightly different from the sentence error questions and that a handful of topics, such as conciseness and punctuation, have been added.
- (c) Read the original sentence. Determine if the original sentence has a blatant error or not. If so, circle the error in the question and think of 1-2 possible ways that you could correct this error.

- (d) Move to the answer choices. Eliminate the answer choices have the same error or that do not correct the error in the original sentence. (Usually “A” and 1-2 other answer choices.)
- (e) Regardless of whether or not you were able to find an error in the original sentence, eliminate any other answer choices that are grammatically incorrect.
- (f) This course of action will usually leave you with 1-2 answer choices that are grammatically correct. The directions for this section say “Your selection should result in the most effective sentence”, which means grammatically correct and also concise. When choosing between 2 grammatically correct sentences, the correct answer will be the more concise (shorter) answer choice that also preserves the meaning of the original sentence.

We will discuss these topics in more detail as the chapter progresses.

1.4 Punctuation

Punctuation is more heavily emphasized in the sentence improvement and paragraph improvement sections than the sentence error sections.

- When do you use a semi-colon on the SAT writing section? _____
- How can you determine if a comma or semi-colon should be used? _____
 - (a) Correct the following: Bob wanted to tip to the waiter, he could not do so because he had forgot his wallet at home.
- What are the ways to correct a run-on sentence? _____
- Correct the following original sentence in three different ways:
 - (a) She hid quietly behind the sofa, if she was not discovered, then she would win the game of hide-and-seek.
 - (b) She hid quietly behind the sofa, if she was not discovered, then she would win the game of hide-and-seek.
 - (c) She hid quietly behind the sofa, if she was not discovered, then she would win the game of hide-and-seek.

1.5 Strategy 1: Identify the Error or Errors in the Original Sentence

It is extremely advantageous if you can identify the error or errors in the original sentence before looking at the answer choices and then think of possible corrections. These can help you to 1) Eliminate answer choice “A” as the best sentence and 2) eliminate incorrect answer choices with the same error as the original sentence quickly.

Directions: Determine if the sentences below have an error in the underlined region and, if so, circle it. Write the type of error on the first line and a sample correction on the second line. If you don't think there is an error, write “No error” as the error type and move to the next sentence. The first question has been done for you.

- (a) The Boston Common is older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park.

Type of error(s): unclear pronoun, not concise

Sample correction: older than but still just as well-maintained as Central Park.

- (b) While most people detest high prices for food items, but organic food sells well despite the increased cost.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (c) With determination and dilligence, anyone can achieve a high score on the SAT test.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (d) The movie featured many well-respected actors and was winning many awards for acting, directing, producing, and writing.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (e) Many educators believe that technology of the sort that helps monitor student progress and deliever feedback to parents could be helpful in increasing test performance.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (f) After waiting an hour for her friend, the woman finally arrived in the theater donning a red dress.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (g) Overjoyed that he was accepted his first choice college, Stephen is currently being slightly ridiculous.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (h) Many people think that Americans take the right to vote for granted, and I think that it is the right of Americans to not exercise their right to vote.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (i) The bank robbers threatened the tellers by waving their guns, one of the criminals held a teller hostage until the police arrived.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (j) After a major political event such as September 11th, the president will address the nation, with his purpose being to inform and comfort the public.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

- (k) Mary's secret, the whereabouts of the items that had been missing for weeks, were more compelling than Jeff's.

Type of error(s): _____

Sample correction: _____

1.6 Strategy 2: Eliminating the Grammatically Incorrect Answer Choices

On sentence improvements, the correct answer will be grammatically correct. Therefore, before you see if an answer choice makes sense in the original sentence, determine if it is grammatically correct. If not, then you can eliminate this right away.

Directions: Eliminate the answer choices that are grammatically incorrect for the following sentences. After you have eliminated an answer choice, write why it was incorrect on the line. The first one has been done for you.

- (a) The Boston Common is older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park.
- (A) older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park **Eliminate because of ambiguous pronoun**
- (B) older than Central Park but just as well-maintained. _____
- (C) older than Central Park; it is just as well-maintained. **Eliminate because of ambiguous pronoun**
- (D) older and it is just as well-maintained as Central Park. _____
- (E) just as comfortable as Central Park and it is older than it. **Eliminate because of ambiguous pronoun**

We now have two grammatically correct statements. Leave those alone— we will choose the correct answer choice as part of the next exercise.

- (b) While most people detest high prices for food items, but organic food sells well despite the increased cost.
- (A) _____
- (B) _____
- (C) _____
- (D) _____
- (E) _____
- (c) With determination and dilligence, anyone can achieve a high score on the SAT test.
- (A) _____
- (B) _____
- (C) _____

- (D) _____
- (E) _____

(d) The movie featured many well-respected actors and was winning many awards for acting, directing, producing, and writing.

- (A) _____
- (B) _____
- (C) _____
- (D) _____
- (E) _____

(e) Many educators believe that technology of the sort that helps monitor student progress and deliver feedback to parents could be helpful in increasing test performance.

- (A) _____
- (B) _____
- (C) _____
- (D) _____
- (E) _____

(f) After waiting an hour for her friend, the woman finally arrived in the theater donning a red dress.

- (A) _____
- (B) _____
- (C) _____
- (D) _____
- (E) _____

(g) Overjoyed that he was accepted his first choice college, Stephen is currently being slightly ridiculous.

- (A) _____
- (B) _____
- (C) _____
- (D) _____
- (E) _____

- (h) Many people think that Americans take the right to vote for granted, and I think that it is the right of Americans to not exercise their right to vote.

(A) _____
(B) _____
(C) _____
(D) _____
(E) _____

- (i) The bank robbers threatened the tellers by waving their guns, one of the criminals held a teller hostage until the police arrived.

(A) _____
(B) _____
(C) _____
(D) _____
(E) _____

- (j) After a major political event such as September 11th, the president will address the nation, with his purpose being to inform and comfort the public.

(A) _____
(B) _____
(C) _____
(D) _____
(E) _____

- (k) Mary's secret, the whereabouts of the items that had been missing for weeks, were more compelling than Jeff's.

(A) _____
(B) _____
(C) _____
(D) _____
(E) _____

1.7 Strategy 3: Picking the Most Clear and Concise Sentence

In SAT sentence improvement problems, you should try to eliminate the 2-3 answer choices that are grammatically incorrect so that you are left with 2-3 other answer choices. The SAT sentence improvement section is looking for the "best" sentence, one that is concise and precise. In SAT world, this translates to the sentence that is not only grammatically correct AND concise. How does the SAT measure "conciseness"? By length.

Therefore, the answer choice that you are looking for is grammatically correct and short without changing the meaning of the original sentence. The latter part means that it can not be so short that it is missing a key part of the original sentence, but this is not usually an issue on sentence improvement problems.

Directions: Go back to the previous exercise and look at the answer choices that you haven't yet eliminated. Find the shortest answer. Then, check if it preserves the original meaning of the sentence by reading this answer choice in place of the underlined part of the original sentence. If so, this answer choice is the correct answer, so you should mark it. The first sentence is done as an example.

- (a) The Boston Common is older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park.
- (A) older than it but still just as well-maintained as Central Park Eliminate because of ambiguous pronoun
- (B) older than Central Park but just as well-maintained. **Correct. It is grammatically correct and the most concise.**
- (C) older than Central Park; it is just as well-maintained. Eliminate because of ambiguous pronoun
- (D) older and it is just as well-maintained as Central Park. **Grammatically correct but not as concise as (B).**
- (E) just as comfortable as Central Park and it is older than it. Eliminate because of ambiguous pronoun

1.8 Practice with Sentence Improvement Multiple Choice Questions

Directions: The following sentences test correctness and effectiveness of expression. Part of each sentence or the entire sentence is underlined; beneath each sentence are five ways of phrasing the underlined material. Choice A repeats the original phrasing; the other four choices are different. Select the choice that completes the sentence most effectively.

*In making your selection, follow the requirements of standard written English; that is, pay attention to grammar, choice of words, sentence construction, and punctuation. Your selection should result in the most effective sentence—clear and precise, without awkwardness or ambiguity. **After you have selected the correct answer choice, you need to mark why the other four answer choices are incorrect, just like in strategies 1-3.***

- (a) When asked why she became a journalist, the woman responded that she wanted to help tell peoples stories and loved to be on camera.

- (A) _____
(B) _____
(C) _____
(D) _____
(E) _____