

SAT Grammar Cheat Sheet

Standard English Conventions

Think of SAT Grammar not as “reading” but as **Math**. Every punctuation mark is a variable that must fit a specific formula.

1 The Legends (Definitions)

Before applying formulas, you must identify the pieces:

The Components

- **IC (Independent Clause)**: A complete sentence. It has a **Subject**, a **Verb**, and expresses a **Complete Thought**.
 - *Test*: Can it stand alone as a sentence? (e.g., *The dog ran.*)
- **DC (Dependent Clause/Phrase)**: A fragment. It is missing a subject, a verb, or starts with a “subordinating word” (like *because*, *although*, *when*, *which*).
 - *Test*: Does it leave you hanging? (e.g., *Because the dog ran...*)

2 The Punctuation Formulas

1. Separating Two Sentences (IC + IC)

You generally cannot join two complete sentences with just a comma. That is a **Comma Splice** (a major error).

- **The Period**: **IC.IC**
- **The Semicolon**: **IC;IC**

Note: On the SAT, a period and a semicolon are grammatically **identical**. If Choice A uses a period and Choice B uses a semicolon (and the words are the same), **both are wrong**.

- **Comma + FANBOYS**: **IC, (for/and/nor/but/or/yet/so)IC**
- **The Colon**: **IC : IC** (Only if the second explains the first).

2. Connecting Dependent & Independent (IC + DC)

- **Introductory Phrase**: **DC, IC**
- **Trailing Phrase**: **IC, DC**
- **Essential Phrase (Restrictive)**: **ICDC** (No punctuation)

Example: The boy **who runs** is fast.

3. The “Sandwich” Rule (Parenthetical Information)

If you insert extra information in the middle of a sentence, you need two pieces of punctuation (book-ends). You must **match** them.

- **Commas:** ... word, [extra info], word ...
- **Dashes:** ... word — [extra info] — word ...
- **Parentheses:** ... word ([extra info]) word ...

TRAP: Do not mix and match (e.g., *word, extra info — word* is WRONG).

Strategy: Look at the punctuation *before* the blank. If you see an opening dash earlier, the answer must have a closing dash.

4. The Colon (:) Rule

Formula: **IC** : [List, Explanation, or Definition]

- **The Rule:** The **Left Side** must be a complete sentence. The **Right Side** can be anything (a sentence, a fragment, a single word).
- **Usage:** Use it when the second part “defines” or “illustrates” the first part.

5. The Dash (—) Rule

- **Emphasis:** Acts like a colon but with more drama. **IC** — Definition
- **Interruption:** Acts like parentheses. **IC** — [interruption] — **IC**

3 Specific SAT Traps & Patterns

1. The “So... That...” Rule

Correlative conjunctions are teams. They don’t like to be separated by commas.

- **Pattern:** So [adjective] that [result]
- **Rule:** NO comma before “that.”
- **✓ Correct:** It was so cold that I froze.
- **55 Incorrect:** It was so cold, that I froze.

2. Restrictive Appositives (Names & Titles)

When you have a category followed by a specific name, ask: **Is the name essential?**

- **Essential (Generic Category):** The poet [Name]
 - **Rule:** No commas.
 - *Example:* The poet **Maya Angelou** wrote this. (There are many poets; we need her name).
- **Non-Essential (Specific Category):** My mother, [Name],
 - **Rule:** Use commas.
 - *Example:* My mother, **Susan**, is here. (I only have one mother; the name is extra info).
- **SAT Shortcut:** If the choice is *Compound Name* (no commas), it is usually right.

3. Lists and “AND”

- **List of 3+ items:** A, B, and C (Use commas).
- **List of 2 items:** A and B (No commas).
- **TRAP:** The researchers determined [Item 1] and [Item 2]. Do not put a comma before “and” here.
- **TRAP:** Because of [Noun 1] and [Noun 2]. No commas.

4. Dangling Modifiers

If a sentence starts with a descriptive phrase (**DC, IC**), the very next word **must** be the thing being described.

- **55 Incorrect:** Walking down the street, the trees looked beautiful. (The trees were walking?)
- **✓ Correct:** Walking down the street, I thought the trees looked beautiful.
- **Trailing Modifier:** **IC**, [verb]-ing... The action in the “-ing” phrase refers to the **Subject** of the main sentence.

5. “It’s” vs. “Its”

- **It’s = It is.** (Contains a Verb. Creates an Independent Clause).
- **Its = Possessive.** (Adjective. Does not create a clause).
- **TRAP:** *The car is fast; **it’s** engine is loud.* (Correct, because “it’s” = “it is”, making two sentences. Use a semicolon).

6. Transition Words (However, Therefore, Thus)

Placement matters.

- **Beginning of sentence:** **IC**. However, **IC**.
- **Middle of sentence (Sandwich):** **IC**, however, is...
- **The Logic Trap:** Sometimes “however” belongs to the **first** sentence.
 - *Example:* **IC**, however; **IC**
 - *Meaning:* “That is true, however. On the other hand, this is also true.”
 - **Test:** Read the sentences separately to see which one “owns” the transition word.

7. “That” vs. “Which”

- **That:** Essential info. No commas. (*The bike **that** I broke.*)
- **Which:** Extra info. Needs commas. (*The bike, **which** I broke, is red.*)
- **TRAP:** You virtually **NEVER** put a comma after the word “that” (e.g., ...*the fact that, the water...* is WRONG).

4 Final Strategy Checklist

Strategy Protocol

1. **Read the whole sentence.** Don’t just look at the blank. You need to find the subject and main verb of the *entire* text to know if you are dealing with a fragment or a sentence.
2. **Process of Elimination:**
 - If *Answer A* = Period and *Answer B* = Semicolon, **Cross them both out.**
 - If *Answer A* creates a sentence fragment (missing verb), cross it out.
3. **The “Removal Test”:**
 - If you think an answer choice is creating a parenthetical sandwich (commas or dashes), cross out the text between the punctuation. Does the remaining sentence make sense?
 - **Yes?** The punctuation is correct.
 - **No?** The punctuation is wrong.
4. **Check for “Comma Splices”:** This is the most common wrong answer. Always check if you are connecting two complete sentences with a weak comma.