Preparing for the SAT

The Writing Section
Approaches to the Writing Section

This section is composed of two major parts:

- **Essay question**: The essay section gives you 25 minutes to take a position on a broad topic and back it up with examples.

- **Multiple-choice questions**: The multiple-choice section is comprised of 35 minutes of questions on basic rules of proper grammar and language usage. They are broken down into three types:
  - Identifying Sentence Errors
  - Improving Sentences
  - Improving Paragraphs
Approaches to the Writing Section

The multiple choice sections measure your ability to:

- Communicate ideas clearly and effectively
- Improve a piece of writing through revision and editing
- Recognize and identify sentence-level errors
- Understand grammatical elements and structures and how they relate to one another in a sentence
- Recognize correctly formed grammatical structures
- Clearly express ideas through sentence combining and use of transitional words and phrases
- Improve coherence of ideas within and among paragraphs
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

Questions will ask you to identify and fix problems in individual sentences. Nearly every error will stem from one of seven grammatical mistakes.

1. **Pronouns:** Every pronoun you use must agree in number with noun for which it stands.
   - **Incorrect:** Every girl at the party tried to look their best.
   - **Correct:** Every girl at the party tried to look her best.

2. **Subject-verb agreement:** If a sentence has a singular subject, it must have a singular verb; if it has a plural subject, it **must** have a plural verb.
   - **Incorrect:** Of all the students in my class, nobody – not even me – are excited about the new teacher.
   - **Correct:** Of all the students in my class, nobody – not even me - is excited about the new teacher.
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

3. **Tenses: Illogical tense switches** – Tense must always remain consistent. It may shift over the course of a sentence, but only if it does so in a logical manner.
   - **Incorrect:** Last summer, the heat *will have brought* hundreds of people to the ocean.
   - **Correct:** Last summer, the heat *brought* hundreds of people to the ocean.

**Conditional tense** – Sentences that feature the conditional tense often contain the words “if . . . were . . . would.”
   - **Incorrect:** If I *was* to see a movie with Mom and Dad, I would risk my reputation.
   - **Correct:** If I *were* to see a movie with Mom and Dad, I would risk my reputation.
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

4. **Parallelism**: The components of a sentence should remain parallel, or consistent, throughout.
   - **Incorrect**: Jack never liked bathing the dog, feeding the llamas, or to ride the roller coaster.
   - **Correct**: Jack never liked bathing the dog, feeding the llamas, or riding the roller coaster.

5. **Adverb-adjective confusion**: Adverbs are words used to describe verbs or other adverbs and often end with the letters –ly: “I ate lunch quickly.” Adjectives are words used to describe nouns: “I ate my delicious lunch.” Many grammatical errors stem from confusion of adverbs and adjectives.

   Because the verb *ate* is being modified, it needs an adverb like *quickly*.
   - **Incorrect**: I ate my dinner quick.
   - **Correct**: I ate my dinner quickly.
5. **Adverb-adjective confusion:** (cont.)

*Well* is an adverb; *good* is an adjective. In order to describe the verb *going*, you need to use the adverb *well*.

- **Incorrect:** This paper’s going pretty *good*.
- **Correct:** This paper’s going pretty *well*.

In this sentence, the adjective *careful* is used improperly to describe the verb *drive*. Because the verb is being described, *careful* should be the adverb *carefully*.

- **Incorrect:** No matter how *careful* you drive, you still may have an accident.
- **Correct:** No matter how *carefully* you drive, you still may have an accident.
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

6. **Gerunds:** A gerund is a verb form that ends in -ing, such as *prancing*, *divulging*, or *stuffing*.

The Identifying Sentence Errors section may test your understanding of gerunds through questions that use the infinitive (“to _____”) form of a verb, such as *to prance*, *to divulge*, or *to stuff*.

- **Incorrect:** In my family, Thanksgiving dinner usually causes two or more family members to engage in a screening match, thus preventing the meal to be completed.

- **Correct:** In my family, Thanksgiving dinner usually causes two or more family members to engage in a screening match, thus preventing the meal from being completed.
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

7. **Idioms:** An idiom is a specific expression or structural or grammatical form that is peculiar to a certain language.

Some questions require a familiarity with standard idioms in American English. For example, the sentence below does not contain a grammatical error, but is incorrect because it does not follow standard usage:

- **Incorrect:** Emily moved to a new house *in* 12th Street.
- **Correct:** Emily moved to a new house *on* 12th Street.
Strategies for Identifying Sentence Errors

To identify sentence errors:

- Read the sentence and **try to hear the error**.
- **Eliminate underlined choices** that you know are correct.
- **Check for errors** among the remaining answer choices.
- If all else fails, go with answer **E, No error**.
Example 1

The other delegates and him immediately accepted the resolution drafted by the neutral states. No error.
Example 2

It is likely that the opening of the convention center, previously set for July 1, would be postponed because of the bricklayers’ strike.

No error.
Identifying Sentence Errors: Sample Questions

The following sentences test your ability to recognize grammar and usage errors. Each sentence contains either a single error or no error at all. No sentence contains more than one error. The error, if there is one, is underlined and lettered. If the sentence contains an error, select the one underlined part that must be changed to make the sentence correct. If the sentence is correct, select choice E. In choosing answers, follow the requirements of standard written English.
The bright fiberglass sculptures of Luis Jimenez has received critical acclaim not only in his home state, New Mexico, but also in New York. No error.
Even with a calculator, you must have a basic understanding of mathematics if one expects to solve complex problems correctly. No error.
Sample Question 3

People who dislike cats sometimes criticize them for being aloof and independent; people who are fond of cats often admire them for the same qualities. No error.
Sample Question 4

The decision that has just been agreed with by

A                      B

the committee members should serve as a basis

for their work in the years to come. No error.
Identifying Sentence Errors Recap

- Look for the one underlined part of the sentence that must be changed to make the sentence correct.
- Read each sentence quickly but carefully, and the error may become obvious.
- Examine the underlined choices A to D; then think of which correction may be needed for each.
- Develop the habit of looking for the most common mistakes people make in punctuation, grammar and other areas.
- Look for errors in idioms – that is, expressions whose meanings may not be clear from the individual words, but that mean something when used together.
Identifying Sentence Errors Recap

➢ Remember that some sentences have no error and that the correct answer may be (E), “No error.”

➢ Correct errors when you practice, even if you are asked only to identify the error.

➢ Move quickly through questions about Identifying Sentence Errors, because the questions about Improving Sentences and Improving Paragraphs will probably take more time.

➢ Mark questions in your test booklet that you’ve skipped so you can go back to them later.

Now Let’s Practice!
Improving Sentences
Multiple-Choice Questions: Improving Sentences

Questions will ask you to changes to existing sentences in order to make them more effective. Most of the sentences in Improving Sentences questions contain grammatical errors of one or more of the following types:

1. **Passive voice:** Although the passive voice technically is *not* grammatically incorrect, the active voice is strongly preferred in most instances.
   - **Incorrect:** A bunch of grass was eaten by my dog.
   - **Correct:** My dog ate a bunch of grass.

2. **Run-on sentences:**
   - **Incorrect:** I walked into the pet store and asked the clerk if she had any talking parrots, this made her roll her eyes.
   - **Correct:** I walked into the pet store and asked the clerk if she had any talking parrots. This made her roll her eyes.
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

3. **Misplaced modifiers:**
   - **Incorrect:** Eating six cheeseburgers and fries, nausea overwhelmed Matt.
   - **Correct:** Nausea overwhelmed Matt after he ate six cheeseburgers and fries.

4. **Parallelism:**
   - **Incorrect:** The restaurant on the corner is good for eating, drinking, and for a dance.
   - **Correct:** The restaurant on the corner is good for eating, drinking, and dancing.
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

5. **Wordiness:**
   - **Incorrect:** Pierre observed the diners and motels of Iowa, and these are sights depicted in his trendy paintings.
   - **Correct:** Pierre observed the diners and motels of Iowa and depicted these sights in his trendy paintings.

6. **Conjunctions:**
   - **Incorrect:** Abigail jumped off her horse but into a pool of deep water.
   - **Correct:** Abigail jumped off her horse and into a pool of deep water.

7. **Fragments:**
   - **Incorrect:** The hunchback vice principal growing at students in the main office.
   - **Correct:** The hunchback vice principal growls at students in the main office.
Multiple-Choice Questions:
Identifying Sentence Errors

8. **Coordination and subordination:**
   - **Incorrect:** John made shirts for the swim team but designed the logos himself.
   - **Correct:** John made shirts for the swim team and designed the logos himself.
Approaches to the Improving Sentences Section

Keep the following strategies in mind when answering Improving Sentences questions:

- Eliminate answer choices that change the meaning of the sentence.
- Eliminate answers that begin with gerunds (-ing words).
- When in doubt, go with the shortest answer.
- Don’t be afraid to choose answer A – some Improving Sentences questions contain no error.
Example Question 1

1. After Timmy dropped his filthy socks in the hamper, the offensive garment was washed by his long-suffering father.
   
a) the offensive garment was washed by his long-suffering father
   
b) his long-suffering father washed the offensive garment
   
c) the washing of the offensive garment took place by his long-suffering father
   
d) long-suffering, the offensive garment was washed by his father
   
e) he left the offensive garment for his long-suffering father who washed it
Example Question 2

1. The unlimited shopping spree allowed Rachel to raid the department store and she could eat everything in the café.

a) and she could eat
b) as well as eating
c) so she could eat
d) and a meal
e) and to eat
Sample Questions
Improving Sentences: Sample Questions

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. If you think the original phrasing produces a better sentence than any of the alternatives, select choice A; if not, select one of the other choices.

In making your selection, follow the requirements of a 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.
Sample Question 1

1. Alice Walker, one of America’s best-known writers, she has published both poetry and prose.

   a) writers, she has published
   b) writers, has published
   c) writers, and publishing
   d) writers since publishing
   e) writers when she published
Sample Question 2

2. Consumers are beginning to take notice of electric cars because they are quiet, cause no air pollution, and gasoline is not used.

a) cause no air pollution, and gasoline is not used
b) air pollution is not caused, and gasoline is not used
c) cause no air pollution, and use no gasoline
d) causing no air pollution and using no gasoline
e) air pollution is not caused, and no gasoline is used
Sample Question 3

3. The convenience and availability of watercolor paint account for its popularity with amateur artists.

a) account for its popularity
b) account for their popularity
c) accounts for its popularity
d) is why it is popular
e) are a reason for its popularity
Improving Sentences Recap

- Read the entire sentence before you look at the choices.
- Remember that the right answer will result in the most effective sentence.
- Read each choice along with the entire sentence; don’t read the choices on their own.
- Look for common problem areas in sentences, such as noun/verb agreement, parallelism, placement of modifiers and the use of relative clauses.
- Read all five versions of the sentence aloud, if possible, while you’re practicing.
- Read more slowly than you normally do to help you pay closer attention.
Improving Sentences Recap (cont.)

- Read more slowly than you normally do to help you pay closer attention.
- Be sure that your subjects are verbs agree.
- Mark each question that you don’t answer in your test booklet, so you can easily return to it later.

Now Let’s Practice!
Improving Paragraphs
Multiple-Choice Questions: Improving Paragraphs

Questions will ask you to make changes to sample paragraphs in order to make them clearer and more effective.

1. **Sentence revision questions:**
   - Require you to change and improve an entire sentence, or a portion of one
   - Ask you to pick a word that should be added to clarify the meaning of a particular sentence
   - Ask you to choose a multiple-choice answer that would most effectively revise a flawed phrase
Multiple-Choice Questions: Identifying Sentence Errors

2. **Sentence addition questions:**
   - Ask you which sentences or phrases should be added to the passage in order to create a smoother transition or to clarify meaning
   - Require you to take into account the meaning of the overall passage and how the paragraphs transition into or relate to one another

3. **Sentence combination questions:**
   - Present you with two sentences and ask you to pick the best way to join them

4. **Essay analysis questions:**
   - Ask you to take a deeper, more critical look at the essay
   - Ask you to pick the sentence that best sums up the essay or to identify how a particular sentence functions within the essay as a whole
Approaches to the Improving Paragraphs Section

Use the following five steps to tackle Improving Paragraphs questions:

1. Read and **outline** the entire passage quickly.
2. Read the **question**.
3. Reread the **context sentences**.
4. Make your own **revision**.
5. **Read every answer** and pick the one that comes closest to your answer.
Sample Questions
Approaches to Improving Paragraphs Questions Recap

- Read the essay through to determine its overall meaning before you look at the questions.
- Read more slowly than you usually do, to help you pay closer attention.
- Make sure that your sentence revisions make sense in the context of the passage as a whole.
- Don’t reject a possible answer because the language is simple. Often, the simplest expression of an idea is the clearest and therefore the best answer.
- Try all the suggestions before you decide on your answer.
Approaches to Passage-based Reading Questions Recap (cont.)

- Make sure that the relationship between the two sentences is clear when you combine sentences.
- Remember that pronouns should always clearly refer back to a word or phrase.
- Keep in mind that adding materials to an essay can be an excellent revision technique but the new material must be relevant and develop the ideas of the essay.
- Use your test booklet to help you by marking each question that you don’t answer. Then you can easily find it later.
Now Let's Practice!
The Essay Question
The Four SAT Essay Ingredients

SAT essay scores (1-6) are based on:

1. **Positioning**: The strength and clarity of your position on the given topic

2. **Examples**: The relevance and development of the examples you use to support your argument

3. **Organization**: The organization of each of your paragraphs and of your essay overall

4. **Command of language**: Sentence construction, grammar, and word choice
Positioning

- Typical SAT essay topics address broad ideas or themes, such as “the concept of justice,” “the definition of success,” “the importance of learning from mistakes,” and so on.

- A solid position on an SAT topic:
  - Is simple.
  - Redefines the broad topic in slightly less broad terms. To achieve this, rephrase the topic in your own words and agree with it or disagree.
Examples

Two things make the examples in an excellent SAT essay stand out:

- **Specific examples**: Mention specific dates, people, locations, and so on.

- **Variety of examples**: Select a broad range of examples from different areas (history, current events, personal experience, and so on). Make sure that all examples work to prove your argument.
Organization

- The organization of SAT essays should always be the same.
- A good SAT essay has three parts:
  1. The Introduction
  2. Three Example Paragraphs
  3. The Conclusion
The Introduction

Your introduction must:

1. Contain 3 – 4 sentences

2. Introduce a thesis statement that states your position on the topic.

3. Explain your position on the topic clearly and concisely. Lay out the three examples you will use to support your thesis statement.
The Thesis Statement

- Your thesis statement should restate the question, while giving your viewpoint on the topic.

- If you have trouble focusing on the main point, try completing this sentence:
  “When people finish reading my essay, I want them to understand that ___________________________
  ____________________________________________
  ____________________________________________.”

- The words you used to fill in the blank might well become part of your thesis statement.
Three Example Paragraphs

Each of the three example paragraphs should:

1. **Contain 4 – 5 sentences**

2. **Begin with a topic sentence** that explains your example and places it within the context of your argument. Your topic sentence serves as the thesis statement of each paragraph.

3. **Develop your example** in the next 3 – 4 sentences. You must show, through specific, concrete discussion of facts, how your example supports your thesis statement.
The Conclusion

The conclusion of your essay should:

- Contain 3 – 4 sentences
- Recap your argument while broadening it to wider fields like politics, business, and art.
- Push a little further. Look to the future and think about your position being applied on a broader scale.
Command of Language

- Your command of language is what will make your essay exceptional.

- To impress the SAT grader with your command of language, pay close attention to these three facets of your essay:
  - Variation in sentence structure
  - Word choice
  - Grammar and spelling
Sentence Structure

Vary sentence length and sentence structure.

- Too many short sentences in a row will make your writing choppy.
- Too many long sentences in a row will make your writing tedious and hard to follow.
Sentence Structure (cont.)

Transitions are helpful in varying sentence structure. Transitions are used to:

1. **Show contrast** (e.g., *In contrast*, *However, Nevertheless, But, Yet, or Despite*)

2. **Elaborate** (e.g., *Moreover, Furthermore, Also, or In addition*)

3. **Provide an example** (e.g., *For example, For instance, Such as, or Specifically*)

4. **Show results** (e.g., *As a result, Consequently, For this reason, Accordingly, Therefore, or Hence*)

5. **Show sequence** (e.g., *Soon after, Next, or Then*)
Word Choice

Be certain that your word choice reflects words that you are able to use appropriately and effectively.

- Don’t go for the big word every time. Instead, you should go for the proper word, the best word, the word that makes your essay as clear as possible.

- If you’re straining to put a fancy word into your essay, you’re likely to misuse it – and misusing a sophisticated word is worse than not using one at all.
Grammar and Spelling Errors

Occasional grammar and spelling errors will not destroy your score. Graders are instructed to look out for patterns of grammar and spelling errors.

See the examples of commonly misused words, grammatical errors, and misspellings in the handout.
Writing Your SAT Essay

- You will have **25 minutes** to write your SAT essay. To use this limited time effectively, spend it as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Understand the topic and take a position</td>
<td>1 MINUTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brainstorm examples</td>
<td>2 – 3 MINUTES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Create an outline</td>
<td>3 – 4 MINUTES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Write the essay</td>
<td>15 MINUTES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Proof the essay</td>
<td>2 MINUTES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Approaches to the Essay

- Read the prompt carefully, and make sure you write on the topic given. Essays not on topic will receive a zero.

- Decide your viewpoint on the topic. Brainstorm examples by category.
  1. Which examples can you be most specific about?
  2. Which examples will give your essay the broadest range?
  3. Which examples are not controversial?
Approaches to the Essay

- *Spend a couple of minutes on planning.* Create an outline and stick to it!

1. Your outline should contain all the essential raw material of your essay.
2. Put your strongest example first, followed by the second strongest, and then least strong.

- *Vary the sentence structure in your writing.*

- *Use clear, precise and appropriate vocabulary.*

- *Leave time to review what you have written.* Correct rough writing, bad transitions, grammatical errors, repetitive sentence structure, and all other errors.