

SAT/ACT Grammar Review

The SAT and ACT do not expect you to know every nook and cranny of the English language. Instead, they assess your knowledge of a small subset of grammatical rules — and once you master them, you can master the Language Arts* sections of both tests. Below are the 16 most commonly tested grammatical rules, what they mean, and how to practice them.

**Note: The SAT’s language arts section is called “Writing and Language.” The ACT’s is called “English.” This guide does not have tips or techniques for the tests’ essay components.*

Rule No. 1: Subject–verb agreement

1. What it means:

Consider this simple sentence: “My mother works in a school.”

The subject is “mother” and the verb is “works.” In every sentence, the subject and the verb must “agree” — or take the same form. This sentence would not be grammatically correct if it read, “My mother work in a school.”

2. How the tests will try to trick you:

When the subject and verb are placed right next to each other, identifying them and their form is relatively easy (as in the example above). So the SAT and ACT will attempt to confuse you by separating them by several (often confusing or unnecessary) words.

For example, consider this sentence: “The collection of short stories — many of them written by authors in 19th-century England, including Jane Austen and C.S. Lewis — contain some of the preeminent works of fiction to date.”

Is there an error here? Ask yourself three questions: What is the subject, what is its verb, and do they agree? (Blue is subject; red is verb.)

*The **collection** of short stories — many of them written by authors in 19th-century England, including Jane Austen and C.S. Lewis — **contain** some of the preeminent works of fiction to date.*

The subject is “collection.” The verb is “contain.” These do not agree: The verb should be “contains” because “collection” is singular. Thus, there is an error in this sentence.

Be wary of the tests’ propensity to using singular subjects with plural verbs, or vice-versa. They love to try to trip you up with pairings like these. Don’t let them!

3. Other things to consider:

- “Each” is singular.
 - “Each of the boys is athletic.”
 - “Each teacher tests the same material.”
- Gerunds (words ending in “-ing”) are singular
 - “Running is my favorite sport.”
 - “The coach thought swimming was one of the most effective forms of exercise.”
- Collective nouns (the government, New York City, the town council) are singular.
 - “The town council votes on the bicycling ordinance this summer.”
 - “The chain of large businesses vows to stop poaching clients from smaller stores.”
- “Neither” and “nor” are singular.
 - “Neither the city nor its constituency has an answer to the problem.”
- Use context to decide whether to use singular or plural for words like “athletics,” “economics,” “statistics,” etc.

4. Tips/strategies:

- Underline the subject and its verb, and draw arrows to connect them. Determine if they agree, and if not, determine how to make them agree.
- Cross out any prepositional phrases and parenthetical clauses that separate the subject and its verb. Reread the sentence with the extraneous parts eliminated. Don’t get bogged down by unnecessarily verbose sentences; focus only on the essentials: the subject and verb in question.

5. Practice questions: For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.

- 1) After driving through five states in a span of 14 hours, Carmen, whose two best friends accompanied her on this journey up the East Coast — which was completed in a rundown sedan overpowered by the smell of two lemon air fresheners — were exhausted — physically and mentally drained.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. were exhausted to the point of being physically and mentally drained.
 - C. was exhausted — physically and mentally drained.
 - D. were physically and mentally exhausted.
- 2) Perhaps, the professor told his wide-eyed students on the first day of class, the best way to learn these complex math equations was not by mindless memorization, but by consistent practice until it was engrained into their brains. “Learning,” he loved to tell them, “is a time-consuming endeavor.”
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. until they were engrained into their brains.
 - C. until their brains were sufficiently engrained by the equations.
 - D. until it was, finally and wholly, engrained into their brains.
- 3) New York, a city with a rich sports history, house two baseball teams, two football teams (if, of course, you count the Giants, who play their home games in East Rutherford, New Jersey), two hockey teams, one basketball team, and now

two soccer teams — New York City F.C. recently arrived to the city’s sports scene.

- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. house two baseball teams;
 - C. house two teams that play baseball, including the Yankees and the Mets,
 - D. houses two baseball teams,
- 4) Each of the company’s 1,500 employees — a pool of workers that include the CEO, COO, and CFO — were qualified to earn a raise after a booming quarter of sales.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. that includes; was qualified to earn
 - C. NO CHANGE; was qualified to earn
 - D. that includes; NO CHANGE
- 5) When the coach asked her to select her favorite sport, she had trouble deciding. “Basketball and soccer have long been my primary interests,” she explained in a written note, “but recently cross country has jumped up the list.”
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. has long been my primary interest
 - C. has long been my primary interests
 - D. has interested me the most throughout my athletic career

Rule No. 2: Verb tense

1. **What it means:** All verbs in the sentence must carry the same tense. The tense of the verb must remain consistent throughout the whole sentence.

Verb tenses:

- 1) Present
 - Simple present: “The team **runs** every day.”
 - Present progressive/continuous: “The team **is running** right now.”
 - Present perfect: “The team **has run** every day for the past month.”
- 2) Past
 - Simple past: “The team **ran** for one hour yesterday.”
 - Past progressive/continuous: “The team **was running** yesterday when the storm rolled in.”
 - Past perfect: “The team **had run** for one hour before the storm rolled in.”
- 3) Future
 - Simple future: “The team **will run** tomorrow.”
 - Future progressive/continuous: “The team **will be running** tomorrow around 8 a.m.”
 - Future perfect: “The team **will have run** by tomorrow at 9 a.m.”
- 4) Conditional: This tense usually describes something that *would* happen if a condition had been met. “The team **would run** tomorrow at 7 a.m. if the school were open that early.”
- 5) Gerund: “The team enjoys **running**.”
- 6) Infinitive: “The team enjoys **to run**.”

2. How the tests will try to trick you:

- Future (“will + verb”) vs. conditional (“would + verb”): The tests will attempt to confuse you on the distinctions between the future and conditional tenses. Use the conditional when there is an “if” condition that did not occur. (Answers are in **bold**, and conditions are in *italics*.)
 - a. The teacher [**will grade**/would grade] the papers later today.
 - b. The deli worker [will open/**would open**] his own shop *if he had the time*.
 - c. When the coach gets to the field, he [**will tell**/would tell] his players to warm up.
 - d. *If the friends were taking* a vacation to Europe, they [will visit/**would visit**] Spain.
- Gerund (“—ing”) vs. infinitive (“to + verb”): The tests will attempt to confuse you on the distinctions between gerunds and infinitives. Read the given form and then try the other to determine which is correct. The answer often depends on the word immediately preceding the gerund or infinitive. (Answers are in **bold**.)
 - a. The school’s primary strength is its ability [motivating/**to motivate**] teachers.
 - b. The deli worker said he wants [opening/**to open**] his own shop one day.
 - c. [**Working**/To work] with others is an important skill to develop.
- Simple past vs. past perfect (“had + verb”): The tests will attempt to confuse you on the distinctions between the *past* and *past perfect* tenses. In some cases, both tenses are correct, but the SAT/ACT will not test you on those. The most important thing to remember is that, in sentences with two events that occurred in the past, the *past perfect* is attached to the verb that occurred first. (Answers are in **bold**.)
 - a. They [ordered/**had ordered**] their food by the time Ron [**arrived**/had arrived] at the restaurant.
 - b. By the time Ron [**arrived**/had arrived] at the restaurant, they [ordered/**had ordered**] their food.
 - c. The couple already [bought/**had bought**] the house when the real estate market [**boomed**/had boomed].
 - d. When the real estate market [**boomed**/had boomed], the couple already [bought/**had bought**] the house.
- Present perfect (“has + verb”) vs. past perfect (“had + verb”): The tests will attempt to confuse you on the distinctions between the present perfect and past perfect tenses. Use the sentence’s context and other words to determine which is correct. (Answers are in **bold**.)
 - a. The teacher [has graded/**had graded**] all of the papers when the pizza arrived.
 - b. The midfielder [**has worked out**/had worked out] every day so far this month, including weekends.
 - c. All of the employees [**have met**/had met] their sales quota this quarter.
 - d. All of the employees [have met/**had met**] their sales quota before the branch moved offices.

3. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
- 1) After the boy had thrown the tennis ball to his dog for 15 consecutive minutes, a realization struck him: To play fetch is one of his dog’s favorite activities.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. To play fetching
 - C. Playing fetch
 - D. To fetch
 - 2) If the star player had arrived on time, his team probably will not have lost its most important game of the season.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. will have
 - C. would not have
 - D. would have
 - 3) When the CEO found out one of her employees has been shirking his sales calls, she became furious.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. had been shirking
 - C. has shirked
 - D. has been shirked
 - 4) When the chef finally got his own TV show last year, he had been cooking professionally for 15 years.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. has been cooking
 - C. has cooked
 - D. cooked
 - 5) Earlier today, the college-bound student bought a laptop, orders her textbook, and will figure out her class schedule.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. ordered; NO CHANGE
 - C. NO CHANGE; figured out
 - D. ordered; figured out

Rule No. 3: Antecedent–pronoun agreement

1. **What it means:** Consider this simple sentence: “When the **players** arrived at the gym, **they** began to practice free throws.”

“They” is the pronoun. “Players” is the **antecedent**, or the noun that the pronoun replaces. This sentence would sound strange if it read, “When the players arrived at the gym, the players began to practice free throws.”

The pronoun and antecedent must always match.

Here is a table with all of the pronouns:

	Singular pronouns	Plural pronouns
People	He or she	They
People, possessive	His or her	Their
Things	It	They
Things, possessive	Its (not It's)	Their

2. How the tests will try to trick you:

- “They” vs. “It”: Remember that singular proper nouns like “the city council,” “the government,” and “the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill” are replaced with “it” rather than “they.”
 - a. When the city council finally voted, **it** was worn out from hours of arguing.
 - b. When the city council members finally voted, **they** were worn out from hours of arguing.
- “One” and “You”: If the sentence has the pronoun “one” or “you” in the first half of the sentence, make sure to repeat it in the latter half.
 - a. If you run five miles every day, **you** will become fit.
 - b. If one goes to the movies, **one** will likely spend more than \$10.
- “Its” vs. “It’s”: “Its” is the plural form of the singular pronoun “it.” “It’s” means “It is.”
 - a. When the university opened **its** doors in the early 20th century, only 1,000 students were enrolled.
 - b. When you spend a long time at the beach, **it’s** imperative to wear sunscreen.
- Pronoun clarity: The tests will often give you a vague or ambiguous pronoun and ask you how to best fix the sentence. Consider the following sentence:

Joshua wanted to give Rob his computer later that day, but he was out of town.

To whom do the pronouns “his” and “he” refer? Joshua or Rob? The test will ask you how to best correct a sentence like this, and often the answer is to replace the pronouns with the noun:

Joshua wanted to give Rob Joshua’s computer later that day, but Rob was out of town.

That sentence, while perhaps a bit awkward, is more precise and tells the reader exactly whose computer it is.

- ## 3. Practice questions:
- For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.

- 1) When the Environmental Protection Agency investigated the company's data, they found several violations of emissions quotas.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. it
 - C. he
 - D. she
- 2) Once you cross the river, one will take a right onto the wooded path to find the marked trail.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. she
 - C. they
 - D. you
- 3) The president's administration wanted it's policies to be enacted immediately.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. it is
 - C. their
 - D. its
- 4) The school employed some of the district's best teachers, so its no wonder its students had the highest test scores in the state.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. it's; it's
 - C. it's; NO CHANGE
 - D. it's; it is
- 5) When Nicole told Summer that *Harry Potter* was her favorite book series, she offered to lend her the seventh book to read.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. Summer; Nicole
 - C. she; Summer
 - D. Nicole; her

Rule No. 4: Pronoun case

1. What it means:

This rule is simply about distinguishing between subjects and objects and their associated pronouns. A **subject** is the noun *performing* the action in a sentence. An **object** is the noun *receiving* the action in a sentence.

Consider the following sentence: "Joel gave his employees the day off on Friday."

The subject is Joel, the person doing the action. The object is "his employees," the people receiving the action.

Subjects and objects have different pronouns, both singular and plural:

Singular subject pronouns:

- I
- You
- He/She
- Who

Plural subject pronouns:

- We
- You
- They
- Who

Singular object pronouns:

- Me
- You
- Him/Her
- Whom

Plural object pronouns:

- Us
- You
- Them
- Whom

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:**

The tests will test your knowledge of the differences between the two types of pronouns. (Correct answers in **bold**.)

- I vs. me:
 - a. My dad and **I**/me went to the movies.
 - b. When we got to the movies, the attendant gave my dad and I/**me** tickets.
- We vs. us
 - a. Soon, **we**/us were watching the previews.
 - b. Before the movie began, the attendant gave the other moviegoers and **we/us** popcorn for free.
- He/she vs. him/her
 - a. Joshua and **she**/her met at the library.
 - b. The musician gave out a copy of his album to **he/him** and his friends.
- They vs. them
 - a. When the students found out the game was canceled, **they**/them retreated to their dorms.

- b. Soon, the students found out the refunds would be given to the season ticketholders and they/**them** in a couple of days.
- Who vs. whom: “Who” replaces I/you/he/she/they, while “whom” replaces me/you/him/her/them.
 - a. **Who**/whom wrote this book?
 - b. By who/**whom** was this book written?

3. Tips/strategies

- If you are confused about which pronoun to use, try to make all subjects and objects singular by crossing out the other noun attached to “and.”

~~My dad and I~~/me went to the movies.

When we got to the movies, the attendant gave ~~my dad and I~~me tickets.

~~Joshua and she~~/her met at the library.

The musician gave out a copy of his album to he/~~him and his~~friends.

*Soon, the students found out the refunds would be given to ~~the season ticketholders and they~~/**them** in a couple of days.*

- If you have a preposition (to, toward, between, about), then always use an object pronoun.

4. Practice questions: For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.

- 1) Although the store’s new policy would allow she and her friends to buy a laptop at fifty percent of it’s original cost, she still didn’t have enough money.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. NO CHANGE; its; NO CHANGE
 - C. her and her friends; its; NO CHANGE
 - D. her and her friends; NO CHANGE; they
- 2) The actors’ question of whom was at the center of the movie’s plot was the biggest mystery entering production; indeed, the director had given they and their coworkers little clue who was going to be the star.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. NO CHANGE; NO CHANGE; whom
 - C. who; them and their coworkers; whom
 - D. who; them and their coworkers; NO CHANGE
- 3) When we arrived for the museum tour, Joshua, our guide, offered the others and us headphones for more information that he said him and his co-guide would not be using.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. others and we; he and his co-guide

- C. NO CHANGE; he and his co-guide
 D. others and we; NO CHANGE
- 4) The restaurant said it would give a \$15 gift card to my mom and me if we won trivia that night.
 A. NO CHANGE
 B. my mom and I
 C. my mom and us
 D. we
- 5) The celebrity and him met at a ritzy party in Chicago.
 A. NO CHANGE
 B. they
 C. celebrity and friends
 D. celebrity and he

Rule No. 5: Noun agreement

1. **What it means:** This rule is simply about making sure the noun(s) in the first half of the sentence agree with the noun(s) in the second half. They must have the same number; singular with singular and plural with plural. For example:

Tim and Jim want to be teachers.

“Teachers” is plural because it is referring to two people, Tim and Jim. This sentence would not be correct if it read, “Tim and Jim want to be a teacher.”

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** Mostly, they will try to trip you up with noun pairings that do not agree.

After they graduated, Evan, Lincoln, and Joseph became a businessman.

This should instead read, “After they graduated, Evan, Lincoln, and Joseph became businessmen.”

Meanwhile, Ethan continued to pursue his dream to become lawyers.

This should instead read, “Meanwhile, Ethan continued to pursue his dream to become a lawyer.”

3. **Tips/strategies:** Circle the nouns and determine whether they agree.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
- 1) Since their childhood, the girls wanted to, more than anything, make it big as a businesswoman.
 A. NO CHANGE
 B. as a woman in business

- C. as businesswomen
 - D. as a business women
- 2) When the brothers got to college, they pursued different career paths: One wanted to become doctors, while the other studied engineering.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. to become a doctor
 - C. to become physicians
 - D. to earn degrees in biology
- 3) As the founder of the nascent company, Tricia and her college roommate owned 100 percent of their stock.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. NO CHANGE; its
 - C. founders; NO CHANGE
 - D. founders; its

Rule No. 6: Parallel structure

1. **What it means:** Parallel structure is a sentence structure characterized by all words or groups of words following the same pattern. It ensures that words or groups of words have equal importance and that the sentence reads smoothly and clearly. The sentence below follows parallel structure:

Joshua likes to bike, to swim, and to eat.

The sentence below does not follow parallel structure:

Joshua likes to bike, to swim, and eating.

For a sentence to follow parallel structure (and all sentences need to), all words or groups of words must follow the same pattern. In the first sentence, they do: “to bike,” “to swim,” and “to eat” are all infinitives. In the second sentence, they do not: “to bike” and “to swim” are infinitives, while “eating” is a gerund.

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests love parallel structure questions. The two main types of parallel structure questions involve lists and conjunctions/word pairs.
- Lists: The tests will give you a sentence that contains a list with an error (or not) with parallel structure.

Professor Smith, the biology instructor, has said that to succeed in his course, students must attend every class, must remain attentive during lectures, and take strong notes.

This sentence does not follow parallel structure. The “must” in front of “remain” should be eliminated, or a “must” should be added in front of “take,” to make it parallel.

The high school student, like many around her age, enjoys playing sports, going to the beach, and she enjoys reading and writing.

This sentence does not follow parallel structure. “She enjoys” should be eliminated from the final part of the list.

- **Conjunctions/word pairs:** The tests will give you a conjunction (and, but, or, yet, so, for, etc.) or word pair, and your mission is to make sure that the words on either side of the conjunction/word pair follow parallel structure. Some common word pairs are:

Neither X nor Y

Both X and Y

Not only X but also Y

Either X or Y

The surfing lessons, taken daily with a qualified instructor, will increase your confidence in the ocean and improvement will be observed in your skills on the board.

The second half of the sentence—the part after “and”—does not follow parallel structure. It should read, “improve your skills on the board.”

The iPhone can not only recognize your fingerprint to unlock the home screen but also it can be used to look up that day’s weather.

This sentence does not follow parallel structure, because the words on each side of the word pair (not only...but also) do not follow the same structure. It should read, “The iPhone can not only recognize your fingerprint to unlock the home screen but also look up that day’s weather.”

3. **Tips/strategies:** Find out what type of pattern the sentence follows and make sure all parts of the sentence follow that same pattern. Find where the pattern begins (for the above example it began after “The surfing lessons will”) and read each part separately.
 - “The surfing lessons will increase your confidence in the ocean.”
 - “The surfing lessons will improvement will be observed in your skills on the board.”
 - When separated, it is even more clear that the second part of the sentence does not follow parallel structure.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
 - 1) The instructor showed us how to sketch the face, add in shading, and the use of perspective was also demonstrated.
 - A. NO CHANGE

- B. use perspective
 - C. the demonstration of perspective was also used
 - D. she also demonstrated the use of perspective
- 2) The confident coach told the media that not only would his players win their next game, but also that the game wouldn't even be close: He predicted a 20-point blowout.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. but also that the closeness of the game wouldn't be in question
 - C. but also that his players wouldn't even be close
 - D. but also that the media predicted a 20-point blowout
- 3) Of all of his hobbies—among them, playing basketball, to fish, and watching TV with friends and family—it was clear he had a favorite.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. among them, to playing basketball, to fish, and to watch TV with friends and family
 - C. among them, playing basketball, fishing, and watching TV with friends and family
 - D. among them, to play basketball, fishing, and to watch TV with friends and family
- 4) Both working from home and commuting to the office have benefits.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. to work from home and commuting to the office
 - C. working from home and to go on a commute to the office
 - D. working from home but not to commute to the office
- 5) In many classic novels, the main character undergoes some major change, engages in witty dialogue throughout the story, and he or she learns a lesson by the end.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. he and/or she learns a lesson by the end
 - C. by the end he or she learns a lesson
 - D. learns a lesson by the end

Rule No. 7: Commas and conjunctions

1. **What it means:** Two independent clauses must be joined by a comma and conjunction. An independent clause is a complete thought with a subject and verb that could stand alone as a sentence. Take, for instance, the following sentence:

The desert is hot in the day, it is cold at night.

This sentence is not grammatically correct. The two clauses (“The desert is hot in the day” and “It is cold at night”) are both independent, so they must be joined by a comma and conjunction. The comma in this sentence is known as a “comma splice” because it is not accompanied by a conjunction. To fix this sentence, simply add a conjunction:

The desert is hot in the day, but it is cold at night.

There are two types of conjunctions: coordinating and subordinating.

- 1) **Coordinating** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so): join independent clauses
 - remember FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so
 - The desert is hot in the day, **but** it is cold at night.
 - 2) **Subordinating** (before, after, because, since, when, while, although, until): join independent clauses by making one of them dependent
 - A sentence with a subordinating conjunction requires a comma if the dependent clause comes first.
 - **Because** the desert is so hot, it has few traditional plants.
 - A sentence with a subordinating conjunction does not require a comma if the independent clause comes first.
 - The desert has few traditional plants **because** it is so hot.
2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will give you sentences with comma splices that require conjunctions, or they will give you an incorrect conjunction that you must change.
- Comma splice: Soccer is a fun sport, it is filled with action.
 - The sentence needs a conjunction. In this case, “because” would join the two clauses by making the second one dependent. The corrected sentence would read: “Soccer is a fun sport because it is filled with action.” Notice that the comma disappears because the independent clause comes first.
 - Incorrect conjunction: Soccer is a fun sport, but it is filled with action.
 - This sentence has the incorrect conjunction “but,” which denotes that the clauses contrast; in this case, however, the clauses do not contrast, so another conjunction (like “because”) is necessary.
3. **Tips/strategies:**
- To determine whether a clause is dependent or independent, read it by itself and see if it can stand alone as its own sentence.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
- 1) Some people prefer natural peanut butter, the kind you have to stir to mix the oil and peanuts, others like store-bought Jif.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. peanuts, but others
 - C. peanuts others
 - D. peanuts, so others
 - 2) The final exam, which was administered on the last day of class, was extremely difficult, and surprisingly the average score was an A.
 - A. NO CHANGE

- B. difficult, while
 - C. difficult because
 - D. difficult, but
- 3) Because the professor forgot to make enough copies of the exam she had to improvise a plan at the last second.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. exam, but she had
 - C. exam, she had
 - D. exam, while she had
- 4) The team missed its flight to the first away game of the season, because the tickets had the wrong time on them.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. season, and because
 - C. season because
 - D. season, or because
- 5) The new dress code was universally dubbed too rigid by students, although many administrators did not share this sentiment.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. students, and
 - C. students, for
 - D. students because

Rule No. 8: Dangling participles

1. **What it means:** A dangling participle is a phrase at the beginning of a sentence that does not correctly modify the subject. Take, for example, the following sentence:

While walking down the road, the big red truck caught the boy's eye.

At first glance, it may not seem this sentence contains an error. In fact, in normal conversation you probably hear several dangling participles every day. But the SAT and ACT love these types of questions, so let's take a closer look.

The participle—which is essentially a phrase that describes or modifies a subject—is “While walking down the road.” The subject it modifies is “the big red truck.” Is this correct?

No. The “big red truck” was, of course, not walking down the road; the boy was. So in this sentence, the participle is dangling because it does not modify the correct subject. To fix the sentence, we should write:

While walking down the road, the boy saw the big red truck.

In this sentence, the participle (“While walking down the road”) modifies the correct subject (“the boy”).

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will attach a variety of dangling participles to a variety of subjects.
3. **Tips/strategies:** Identify the participle and the subject it modifies in the given sentence (underlining or circling them might help). Is the participle modifying the correct subject? If not, determine how to best fix the sentence.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
 - 1) Being one of the new kids at school, the teacher allowed Joseph to sit wherever he wanted in the classroom.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. As one of the new kids at school, Joseph was allowed to sit wherever he wanted in the classroom.
 - C. Being one of the new kids at school, Joseph and the teacher were allowed to sit wherever they wanted in the classroom.
 - D. The teacher, being one of the new kids at school, allowed Joseph to sit wherever he wanted in the classroom.
 - 2) As one of the leading causes of lung cancer, an op-ed in the newspaper argued that smoking should be outlawed.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. smoking should be outlawed, argued an op-ed in the newspaper.
 - C. an op-ed in the newspaper argued for the outlawing of smoking.
 - D. the newspaper argued in an op-ed that smoking should be outlawed.
 - 3) Running on the beach, the dolphin jumping out of the ocean captured the woman's attention.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. the dolphin, capturing the woman's attention, jumped out of the ocean.
 - C. the woman's attention was captured by the dolphin jumping out of the ocean.
 - D. the woman saw a dolphin jump out of the ocean.
 - 4) Studying for their final exam, the time passed quickly for the two students.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. Studying for their final exam, the time, for the two students, passed quickly.
 - C. Studying for their final exam, the two students realized time was passing quickly.
 - D. Studying for their final exam, the two students' time passed quickly.
 - 5) Not wanting to ostracize any voters in her constituency, the politician chose to temper the emotion and language in her forthcoming speech.
 - A. NO CHANGE

- B. the politician's speech would contain tempered emotion and language.
- C. the politician chose her speech to be more tempered in terms of emotion and language.
- D. the speech, of which the politician would be tempering the language and emotion, was forthcoming.

Rule No. 9: Relative pronouns

1. **What it means:** Relative pronouns are used to join two clauses or connect a clause or phrase to a noun or pronoun. Consider the following sentence:

The title game, which was attended by thousands of people, drew record ratings on television.

The relative pronoun in this sentence is “which.” It takes the place of “game” and allows the writer to include more information about the game without adding another sentence. (“The title game drew record ratings on television. The title game was attended by thousands of people.”)

The relative pronouns you need to know for the SAT are:

- which
- that
- who
- whom
- when
- where

Here are some rules about them to remember:

- Which vs. that: “Which” is preceded by a comma or dash and typically includes nonessential but instructive information. “That” is not preceded by a comma and is often used to help describe something. Consider the following sentences:

The tool, which had helped me finish the project, was now missing.
The tool that had helped me finish the project was now missing.

In the first sentence, you could remove the part offset by commas and the sentence would still make sense. The second sentence, though, refers to a specific tool. When you are unsure whether to use “which” or “that,” ask yourself if the phrase attached to it is preceded by a comma or a dash and is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

- Who vs. whom: “Who” replaces I/you/he/she/they, while “whom” replaces me/you/him/her/them.

Who is your teacher? He is my teacher.

To whom will you report in the morning? I will report to him.

- When vs. where: “When” is used for time, while “where” is used for place. In everyday language, these are often misused:

We live in an era where it’s possible to access information quickly.

This sentence is incorrect. “Where” should be replaced by “when” because “era” refers to a time period.

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will mostly try to trip you up on which vs. that, who vs. whom, and where vs. when. Follow the guidelines above to make sure you know which to use.
3. **Tips/strategies:**
 - For which vs. that, ask yourself two questions: Is the phrase offset by a comma or a dash? Is the phrase essential to the meaning of the sentence? Try reading the sentence without the phrase and then with it to determine which relative pronoun to use.
 - For who vs. whom, ask yourself if the relative pronoun should be replaced by I/you/he/she/they (who) or me/you/him/her/them (whom).
 - For when vs. where, ask yourself if the noun refers to a time (when) or place (where).
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
 - 1) The CEO, with whom most people were very friendly, was suddenly and inexplicably fired last week.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. with who most people
 - C. whom with most people
 - D. whom most people with
 - 2) For the upcoming exam, Sam made sure to bring his newly dubbed lucky pencil, that had helped him earn an A on his last test.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. that helped him
 - C. which had helped him
 - D. that which helped him
 - 3) In North Carolina, when the changing of the seasons is noticeable and borderline tangible, the leaves begin to change colors and fall right as the final days of summer wind down.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. where the changing
 - C. which the changing
 - D. which has the changing

- 4) The students made sure to never forget their agendas which their teacher had gifted them on the first day of school.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. , that their teacher
 - C. that their teacher
 - D. when their teacher
- 5) The notebook—that had been missing for several weeks—finally turned up after a thorough search of the classroom.
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. that'd been
 - C. that which had been
 - D. which had been

Rule No. 10: Adjective-adverb confusion

1. **What it means:** Adjectives modify nouns and pronouns. Adverbs—words that usually end in “-ly”—modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Consider the following sentence:

Sarah plays softball fearless.

This sentence is grammatically incorrect. The sentence is describing the way Sarah plays softball—or modifying the verb “plays.” Thus, it requires an adverb rather than an adjective. The correct sentence is:

Sarah plays softball fearlessly.

You could also modify the sentence by describing what type of softball player Sarah is—or modifying the noun “softball player.” That sentence would be:

Sarah is a fearless softball player.

Ask yourself: What word is the adjective/adverb describing? If it’s a noun or pronoun, use an adjective. If it’s a verb, adjective, or other adverb, use an adverb.

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will use an adverb where an adjective should be used, and vice-versa.
3. **Tips/strategies:** Ask yourself: What word is the adjective/adverb describing? If it’s a noun or pronoun, use an adjective. If it’s a verb, adjective, or other adverb, use an adverb.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.

- 1) Juan wanted to take the typing class as an elective because he knew for a career in software engineering he'd have to be able to type quick.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. typing quick
 - C. type quickly
 - D. typing quickly
- 2) The incredibly taxing soccer practice left many players out of breath.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. incredible taxing
 - C. incredible and taxing
 - D. incredibly taxingly
- 3) The rapid approaching deadline had many students scrambling to finish their projects that they'd put off for months.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. rapidly approaching
 - C. rapidly approach
 - D. rapid approach
- 4) The presentations—that constituted half of the students' final grades—were supposed to be casual and overwhelmingly improvisational.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. NO CHANGE; casually and overwhelmingly improvisational
 - C. which constituted; casually and overwhelmingly improvisational
 - D. which constituted; NO CHANGE
- 5) The department store was offering a surprising consumer-friendly sale on watches.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. surprisingly
 - C. surprise
 - D. surprisingly and

Rule No. 11: Erroneous comparisons

1. **What it means:** Compare like objects. Consider the following sentence:

*Da Vinci's **paintings** were more three-dimensional than **painters** before him.*

This sentence is grammatically incorrect because it is comparing “Da Vinci’s paintings” to “painters.” A correct sentence would be:

Da Vinci's paintings were more three-dimensional than those of painters before him.

or

Da Vinci's paintings were more three-dimensional than paintings of artists before him.

On the tests, make sure you are comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges.

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will mostly try to confuse you on people-to-people comparisons and thing-to-thing comparisons.
3. **Tips/strategies:** Find the two things that the sentence is comparing and make sure they are the same object.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
 - 1) The company's water bottle was much more durable than the only competing brand.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. than the competing brands'.
 - C. than the competing brand's.
 - D. than the competing water bottle brands.
 - 2) The old phone's exterior designs were just as elaborate as the new phone, but still people opted to buy the fresher option.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. as that of the new phone
 - C. as the new phone's
 - D. as the new phones exterior designs
 - 3) The car's gas mileage was as efficient as any other small coupe on the market.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. as that of any other small coupe
 - C. as those of any other small coupe
 - D. as any other small coupes'
 - 4) The soccer players were just as strong as the football team.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. as strong as the football players.
 - C. as strong as those teams that played football.
 - D. as strong as that on the football team.
 - 5) The textbook was as informative and well-written as any book the class had read.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. as that of any book
 - C. as any book of texts
 - D. as books

Rule No. 12: Comparatives and superlatives

1. **What it means:** Use the correct adjective form when comparing things. When comparing two things, use “more” or the adjective ending in “-er.” When comparing two or more things, use “most” or the adjective ending in “-est.” Consider the sentence:

After taking the math and science exams, students determined that the math was the longer but the science was the hardest.

Since the sentence is comparing two things—a math and science exam—the adjectives should take the “-er” form. The first one—“longer”—does; but the second one—“hardest”—does not. To correct this error, simply change it to “harder.”

*After taking the math and science exams, students determined that the math was the **longer** but the science was the **harder**.*

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will use incorrect adjective forms based on the number of things the sentence is comparing.
3. **Tips/strategies:** When comparing two things, use “more” or the adjective ending in “-er.” When comparing two or more things, use “most” or the adjective ending in “-est.”
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
 - 1) When she was deciding which type of car to buy, Sam read customer reviews that said the Toyota SUV was the roomier but the Honda Accord was the most economical.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. NO CHANGE; more economical
 - C. most roomy; NO CHANGE
 - D. more roomy; NO CHANGE
 - 2) Of the three flavors of ice cream, vanilla was the safest, rocky road the sweetest, and mint chocolate chip the better.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. safer; sweeter; NO CHANGE
 - C. NO CHANGE; NO CHANGE; best
 - D. more safe; sweeter; NO CHANGE
 - 3) The newspapers varied significantly in style: the national paper was the more encompassing, the regional paper was the most prolific, and the small town paper was the better local source.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. most encompassing; NO CHANGE; NO CHANGE

- C. NO CHANGE; more prolific; best
- D. most encompassing; NO CHANGE; best

Rule No. 13: Word pairs

1. **What it means:** There are several pairs of words that nearly always accompany each other:

- Either...or: *I would like either ice cream or cake at the birthday party.*
- Neither...nor: *Neither the teacher nor the principal was amused by the student's behavior.*
- Both...and...: *Both Joshua and his employee love to kayak.*
- Between...and ...: *Between basketball and soccer, the latter is my favorite sport.*
- Not only...but also...: *The new car came with not only a sleek speaker system but also a GPS.*
- As...as: *The movies was as inspiring as the book.*
- More/less...than: *More than 50,000 people attended the football game.*
- Such/so...that: *The new rules were designed such that game flow would be enhanced.*

Important note: When deciding whether to use “less than” or “fewer than,” determine what those phrases are referring to. If it’s a singular or abstract noun, use “less than.” If it’s a plural noun, use “fewer than.”

*Joseph had **less than** one mile to go on his 15-mile run.*

*The teacher had **fewer than** five pencils after her students left for the day.*

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will pair the wrong words with each other.
3. **Tips/strategies:** Become familiar with the word pairs and read the sentence to yourself to see if it makes sense and sounds correct. These word pairs are so engrained into our vocabulary that more often than not you will be able to spot an error right away.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
 - 1) Neither the coach or the player was enthused about talking to reporters after the game they had just narrowly lost.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. Either; nor

- C. NO CHANGE; nor
D. Either; NO CHANGE
- 2) The new TV show, which aired during primetime hours, still attracted less viewers than analysts expected.
- A. NO CHANGE
B. fewer viewers than
C. less watchers than
D. the most viewers
- 3) The new company decided to go public so that investors would take notice.
- A. NO CHANGE
B. such that

Rule No. 14: Usage errors

1. **What it means:** Even though it's rarely tested, this usage error is important to know:
- Circumvent vs. circumnavigate

*The company **circumvented** the regulations by using a little-known rule.*

*The couple **circumnavigated** the globe on their trip.*

Rule No. 15: Redundancy and wordiness

1. **What it means:** Avoid being redundant and too wordy. Always choose the shortest sentence that is still grammatically correct.
2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** The tests will use redundant phrases and complicate sentences with an overflow of words.
3. **Tips/strategies:** Always choose the simplest, clearest sentence that is grammatically correct.
4. **Practice questions:** For the following questions, determine if there is an error in the underlined portion(s); if there is, choose the answer that best fixes it.
- 1) In spite of being a leader in the community, the company's CEO was caught illegally trespassing last week.
- A. NO CHANGE
B. NO CHANGE; trespassing
C. Although he was; NO CHANGE
D. Although he was; trespassing

- 2) The scientists, being that they were researchers at heart, published the study with the purpose of educating the public.
- NO CHANGE
 - who; NO CHANGE
 - who; to educate
 - NO CHANGE; to educate
- 3) The two sides, despite their past history, decided to jointly cooperate at the project work site, which was in close proximity to a new real estate development.
- NO CHANGE
 - history; cooperate; near
 - NO CHANGE; NO CHANGE; near
 - history; cooperate; NO CHANGE
- 4) The rising increase of home prices around the city failed to affect only those people who had the ability to afford them.
- NO CHANGE
 - NO CHANGE; could
 - increase; could
 - increase; NO CHANGE
- 5) The teacher said, in view of the fact that everyone turned in their homework on time, which he regarded as a(n) essential requirement of the class, that his students would have an added bonus of 15 extra minutes of recess.
- NO CHANGE
 - because; requirement; an extra 15 minutes
 - because; NO CHANGE; NO CHANGE
 - NO CHANGE; requirement; NO CHANGE

Rule No. 16: Idioms

- What it means:** The tests will expect you to know a range of common idioms. Here are some of them:
 - identical with
 - in contrast to
 - independent from
 - indifferent towards
 - modeled after
 - (no) more...than/(no)
 - less...than
 - more than ever
 - neither...nor
 - not only...but also
 - not so much...as
 - prohibits X from doing Y
 - potential to

- regard as
- regardless
- responsible for
- resulting in
- retroactive to
- so X as to be Y
- so (adjective) that
- subscribe to
- such...as
- the same to X as to Y
- to contrast X with Y
- to mistake X for Y
- to result in
- to sacrifice X for Y
- range from X to Y

2. **How the tests will try to trick you:** These idioms will often appear as preposition in questions on the tests.
3. **Tips/strategies:** Study these idioms.