

About Writing and Language

While you'll take the reading section first on the actual SAT, the writing and language section is the easiest to improve on, so let's start here. This section is largely focused on using proper grammar, choosing correct transitions, and knowing where to put commas—fairly straightforward concepts that you can quickly learn. Here's the breakdown:

Time	35 minutes
Questions	44
Time per question	47 seconds

The Basic Approach:

You don't have to read the full passages, but if you have enough time, you should. This will help you understand the main idea and be able to better answer questions that rely on this understanding. If you're slower with reading or need the extra time to answer questions, then skim through the reading until you get to a sentence with a question. You can then look back as needed (e.g. to see what you're transitioning from).

Easy and difficult questions are mixed in each passage, so keep a steady pace throughout and plan to not spend much more than a minute on answering any one question. You'll likely answer the grammar questions quickly, and this will save more time for questions that ask you to connect a sentence to the main idea or place a sentence within a paragraph.

Notes:

- Even if you're an English pro, commit to studying the writing and language. Students often see the largest gains on this section.
- Most students don't have trouble finishing this section within the time limit.
- The questions test 17 skills that fall under three categories: grammar, phrasing and main idea.

As you review the writing and language skills in this chapter, use the following tables to self-assess your skills and help you know where to focus your studies:

Assess Your Skills

✓ *confident* O *could use practice* — *need to study*

Grammar	Self-Assessment
Sentence Structure	
Punctuation	
Tense	
Parallel Structure	
Faulty Comparatives	
Subject-Verb Agreement	
Vague Pronoun Reference	
Misplaced Modifiers	
Adv. Sentence Structure	

Sentence Structure

In order to master grammar skills on the SAT, you must know what makes up a sentence.

A complete sentence must meet two criteria:

1. Contain a subject and a verb

- a. “John thinks.”
 - i. Subject (who/what is doing the verb): “John”
 - ii. Verb (action word/what is being done): “thinks”
 1. **To-be verbs** count as verbs: is, are, was, were

Knowing this skill will help you learn punctuation such as commas and colons.

2. Be able to stand alone

- a. “Isabella gave”
 - i. This sentence has a subject (Isabella) and a verb (gave) but can’t stand alone. You need to know what Isabella gave, and so “Isabella gave” is not a complete sentence.

Caution: Participles don’t count as verbs

- A **participle** is a verb that typically ends in –ing but acts as an adjective. e.g. “Sophomores studying for the SAT are planning ahead.”
- The word “studying” is a participle, so you still need the verb “are” to make this a complete sentence.
- The phrase “studying for the SAT” is your **participial phrase** (the participle and its associated words). The sentence needs to have a verb outside of this phrase in order to be complete. Thus, you need the “are.”

If a group of words can stand alone as a sentence, we call this an **independent clause (IC)**.

- Ex: “John went to the river”

If a group of words can’t stand alone, we call this a **dependent clause (DC)**. (The actual definition is more complicated, but you don’t need to worry about that for the SAT).

- Ex: “Before meeting his friends”

If you start with a dependent clause, you still need an independent clause.

- Ex: “Before meeting his friends, John went to the river.”
 - This sentence starts with a DC, so it needs to have an IC in order to stand alone as a complete sentence.

Try It Out

Because John dwelled on his past relationship and what may have caused the sudden breakup, therefore he found it difficult to meet other people and enjoy the dating scene.

1

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) breakup, he
- C) breakup, so
- D) breakup, then

Since this sentence starts with the conjunction “Because,” the first clause is a dependent clause. “Because John dwelled...” can’t stand alone as a sentence. In fact, no clause that starts with a conjunction can stand alone as a sentence

(try to start a sentences with “because”—you’ll eventually need a comma followed by an IC). Therefore, the clause after the comma must be an IC so that the complete sentence can stand alone. Don’t try to squeeze in any conjunctions or transitions here. Just state your IC, which will usually start with a subject (in this case, “he”). Thus, your answer is B.

Try It Out

People dwelling on lovers from an often romanticized past.

1

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) dwell
- C) tend to dwelling
- D) DELETE the underlined portion.

You may not even know what dwell means, but you can see that “dwelling” is a participle and that “dwelling on lovers from an often romanticized past” is a participial phrase, so this sentence still needs a verb. Your only option is B.

Two independent clauses can’t be combined with only a comma.

Incorrect Example: Isabella likes freedom, John likes money.

This is called a comma splice and is not allowed. You can’t shove two sentences together.

Correct Examples: Isabella likes freedom. John likes money.
Isabella likes freedom, but John likes money.

You can use a period, conjunction, or semicolon (we’ll review this later) to combine two ICs.

Try It Out

While Isabella infiltrated John’s thoughts, he respected her right to choose her own path forward, he only hoped that their futures might cross again.

1

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) forward he
- C) forward, John
- D) forward. He

You have a full sentence (consisting of a DC comma IC), then a comma, and then another full sentence (consisting of one IC). This is a comma splice, but it can be fixed by using a period, conjunction, or semicolon. Option D uses a period.

Try These Problems in the College Board 2020 SAT Book**Easier Questions**

- a) p. 838, #1
- b) p. 972, #4
- c) p. 1101, #10
- d) p. 1103, #19
- e) p. 1110, #34
- f) p. 1215, #11

Harder Questions

- a) p. 844, #14
- b) p. 846, #19
- c) p. 980, #29
- d) p. 1103, #19
- e) p. 1104, #21
- f) p. 1106, #24