

Improving Sentences

In the Improving Sentences section of the SAT Writing Exam, your job is to read each sentence carefully and identify any errors. For each of these questions, part of the sentence or even an entire sentence is underlined. You will be presented with five versions of the underlined word or phrases. Choice **A** is always a repeat of the sentence as it is; if you select Choice **A**, you are indicating that “no change is needed to make the sentence correct.” Otherwise, you must choose one of the alternative structures that expresses the sentence most accurately. Under NO circumstances should you choose a response that changes the substantial meaning of the original sentence, despite the correctness of grammar and usage in that response.

In this section of the SAT Exam, you are expected to recognize whether there is a mistake in a sentence, even if you cannot identify specifically what the mistake is. In other words, the Improving Sentence questions measure your ability to recognize only conventional and/or unconventional uses of language. You are expected to distinguish errors in standard American English as well as problems in style and expression.

The following are some ways to approach these sentences:

- Read the entire sentence.
- Try to *hear* the sentence in your head.
- Focus on any awkward-sounding words and/or phrases in the underlined sections.
- If you recognize grammar or usage flaws, good for you. If not, sometimes the underlined section just sounds wrong. Go with your best, educated instinct. Be sure to review all of the choices for grammar and usage flaws.
- Remember that the first choice, (**A**) is just a replication of the original sentence. If the sentence has no mistakes, then Choice **A** is the appropriate answer.

Here’s an example:

In conclusion, all these facts are reasons for us to change the direction our company is going. Always keeping in mind that whatever we decide, we must look forward and not to the past.

- A.** we must look forward and not to the past.
- B.** we must look to the future and not to the past.
- C.** we must look to the future and not behind us.
- D.** we must look forward and not to what has already taken place.
- E.** we must not look backward but to the future.

Choice **B** is the correct answer.

Wow, no matter how you read it, this is one complicated sentence. However, your ear—inner and outer ear—should have picked up that there was something wrong with “we must look forward and not to the past.” This clause lacks parallel construction. Either it should state that we must look forward and not backward, which is *not* an option given here, or match the construction of “not *to the past*” by changing the phrase “must look forward” to “must look *to the future*.” All the other choices do get the basic idea across, but none states it as well as Choice **B**.

Errors to Anticipate

Like many items in the Writing Section of the SAT Exam, the variety of errors on the Improving Sentences and Improving Paragraph questions is rather narrow. The following are some of the most common errors for which to look:

Run-on Sentences

Usually the SAT Sentence Correction questions include run-on sentences, and they will appear a couple of times in the Improving Sentence questions. Generally these contain two independent clauses incorrectly connected. For example:

The decrease in new college graduates entering education can be attributed to more difficult job conditions and rather low pay, in fact, education graduates have decreased at least 20 percent in the last decade.

Each of these independent clauses could stand alone as a sentence. Remember you can use a couple of ways to join these two independent clauses.

- Two totally independent sentences (not really joined)
- A semi-colon between the two independent clauses
- A comma in front of one of the seven coordinate conjunctions—**but, or, yet, for, and, nor, so** (BOY FANS):

Gregor was a slow eater, everyone else had finished eating before he did.

These independent clauses need to be joined by a semi-colon, or one of the coordinating conjunctions (BOY FANS) preceded by a comma. In this sentence, a good fix could read *Gregor was a slow eater, so everyone else finished eating before he did.*

The section on punctuation at the end of this chapter will refresh your memory about run-on sentences.

Sentence Fragments

A fragment occurs when a group of words tries to pass itself off as a *bona fide* sentence:

The committee, discovering the size limitations of the conference center, deciding to look for an alternative site.

Although *discovering* and *deciding* are verb forms, in this case they are used as adjectives (officially called present participles) modifying committee. In other words, it is a discovering committee as well as a deciding committee.

Can you figure out how to fix this long, rambling fragment? Actually you have a couple options. You can leave it as it is until the word “deciding.” Make this the verb, not a participle. Then your sentence would read:

The committee, discovering the size limitations of the conference center, *decided* to look for an alternative site.

You can also decide that the committee did two separate things and, therefore, give the sentence two separate verbs:

The committee *discovered* the size limitations of the conference center and *decided* to look for another site.

This two-verb option corrects the sentence, but it is still a long breath of air to say it all. Perhaps you prefer to make two completely independent clauses connected by an appropriate comma and coordinate conjunction:

The committee *discovered* the size limitations of the conference center, *so it decided* to look for another site.

As you listen to the various versions of this sentence, you should notice how each option provides a slightly different emphasis on what is being said. This is something to become aware of as you structure sentences in your own writing.

Faulty Parallelism

Sentences can have faults in parallel structure in a couple ways.

Following are connective words that require parallel construction:

either	or
neither	nor
not only	but also

Not only did Paula receive a full-ride scholarship to Notre Dame, *but* she was *also* offered sizeable scholarships to Princeton and Northwestern.

Items in a series also need to be structured using a parallel format.

Even our Founding Fathers recognized the value of parallel structure when they wrote the Declaration of Independence. It states: “For taking away our Charters; for abolishing our laws, and altering our Forms of Government.” *For taking, for abolishing* and *(for) altering* create a resounding statement, don’t you think?

Many powerful speeches gain their strength through parallel statements. Mark Antony did not say, “Friends, Romans, and you people from the countryside, lend me your ears.” It loses something, don’t you think?

You can also create a faulty comparison when you present a series. Be sure each element in a series is similar in structure to make it correct. For instance:

Incorrect: Anya registered for the following courses in her freshman year at college: History 101, Composition 1-A, Econonmics 100, Biology 101, and a course in interpretive theater.

Correct: Anya registered for the following courses in her freshman year at collegeA: History 101, Compsition 1-A, Economics 100, Biology 101, and Theater 101.

Correct parallel structure also includes items in a series. In the previous example, all but the last course is a formal course name and a number. “interpretive theater” does not fit in this series as it is. The corrected sentence shows the proper sequence.

Lack of Conciseness

When writing, the saying that *more is always better* often does not apply. You need to write with conciseness and eliminate unnecessary or redundant words and phrases whenever possible. The following contains an example of redundancy:

The two twins both applied to the same college, but, to their disappointment, only one was accepted.

Since twins are a set of two, it is not necessary to use both words in the beginning of the sentence. It could be improved by writing the twins both applied, or both of the twins applied.

With a red pen, Martha made a circle around the dress she wanted in the catalog, so she would know where and be able to find it when she called to mail order it later that day.

Martha circled the dress in the catalog. That automatically implies that her pen made a mark around the picture. Later, she will know where to find it when she makes her call. Many of those words are not needed. Let’s look at the more concise version of the sentence:

With a red pen, Martha circled the dress she wanted in the catalog, so she could find it when she called to mail order it.

Notice how much better it sounds with fewer words.

Faulty Coordination and Subordination

Remember there are (only) seven coordinating conjunctions: but, or, yet, for, and, nor, so. If you are combining two clauses to present two pieces of information, you usually use *and*, “Mabel took the bus to the mall, and Martha drove her car.” However, if you want to show that Mabel is not as “privileged” as Martha, you would say, “Mabel took the bus to the mall, but Martha got to drive her car.” Your conjunction will need a comma before it and the one you select will be the one that makes the most sense for the idea you are trying to get across.

Sometimes coordination can be faulty, not because of incorrect use of punctuation or conjunctions but because they aren’t logical. It make little sense, at least to those in the Midwest, to say, “It’s January in Minnesota; *however* it’s very cold.” “However” indicates a contradiction. If it’s Minnesota and winter, then it’s cold—a simple case of cause and

effect. Therefore, it would be correct to say, “It’s January in Minnesota; *therefore* it’s very cold.” Now that makes more sense. For those of you in Florida and California, you just don’t know what you’re missing. Make sure that when you have two independent clauses, linked by a semi-colon and a transition word, such as *however* or *therefore*, that you present an idea that is logical.

I gazed out of the bus window while seeing a person getting mugged.

Subordination by its definition means that one idea is subordinate to another. The most important part of the sentence should be in the main clause. Any incidental information goes in the subordinate clause. Therefore, the sample sentence should read:

While gazing out of the bus window, I saw a person getting mugged.

Now the important part, “I saw a person getting mugged” is in the main clause, and your gazing is in the subordinate clause, providing the better emphasis. Here’s one more:

As Billy shattered the neighbor’s window with his line drive, he had to pay for it.

As is a word indicating time. Billy would hardly be paying for the window just as he was breaking it. The sentence does not indicate two simultaneous events. First he broke it; then he paid for it. Here’s the sentence improved:

Since Billy shattered the neighbor’s window with his line drive, he had to pay for it.

Using the appropriate subordinate conjunction “since” now gives the sentence the appropriate cause and effect feel that it needed.

Misplaced Modifier

Sometimes misplaced modifiers can be very amusing, but they can also cause embarrassment for the careless writer. A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause placed too far from the noun or pronoun it is supposed to be modifying. Following is an example of a misplaced modifier:

My dog chased a kid down the street on a bicycle.

Well, unless you are raising a circus dog, it is the kid who is on the bicycle, not the dog. To correct the error, “My dog chased a kid on a bicycle down the street.” Here’s another:

I could almost run all the way up the hill.

What you probably meant to say is I could run almost all the way up the hill. Once the modifier is put in the right place it’s easy to say—“Oh, now I know what was wrong with that sentence.”

Dangling Modifier

Dangling modifiers are similar to misplaced modifiers. However, the thing (noun or pronoun) being modified is not present at all, so the modifier simply dangles by itself:

Sailing into the harbor, the Statue of Liberty was seen.

You can rest assured, the Statue of Liberty has not been seen taking any moonlight cruises. What is wrong with this sentence is that the phrase, “sailing into the harbor” has nothing to modify. An easy way to fix this is to say, “As we sailed into the harbor, we saw the Statue of Liberty.”

Here’s a double one:

Smashed flat by a truck the retriever sniffed at the remains of the ice cream cone held by the little boy.

Now we hope it's only an ice cream cone that has been smashed. The way this sentence reads, however, the picture is unclear: all three—the dog, the ice cream cone, or the little boy could be the victim. See how easily modifiers, whose purpose is to exemplify and clarify can muddle a meaning if used carelessly? Let's look at a clearer, happier sentence:

The retriever sniffed at the remains of the ice cream cone that the little boy had dropped just before the truck smashed it flat.

Passive Voice

Another thing that you must remember to avoid in your writing and be on the look out for as an incorrect response in the multiple-choice questions, especially in the Improving Sentences questions, is passive voice.

Good writing expects the subject to do the action, not be acted upon.

So many mistakes were made by the student when he took the test that he received a failing grade.

A trip far north into Alaska was taken by my aunt last summer.

These are not very exciting sentences, are they? That is the problem with passive voice it is boring. Unfortunately, many textbooks are written in passive voice. Not surprising, is it? In the above two sentences, we need to make the subject do the action. Here's how they can be rewritten:

The student made so many mistakes on the test that he received a failing grade.

Last summer my aunt took a trip far north into Alaska.

Practice Questions

The following sentences are questioning you about sentence correctness and expression of information. Part, or all, of each sentence is underlined. Following the sentence, five versions of the underlined portion are presented. Choice **A** repeats the original; the other choices are different. If you think a better sentence can be found in Choices **B–E**, then choose one of them. If the sentence is correct as stated, your answer will be Choice **A**.

1. An elderly bank robber, wearing an innocuous fishing hat, forgot to ask for the money before robbing the bank.
 - A. before robbing the bank.
 - B. during robbing the bank.
 - C. after the bank was robbed.
 - D. when he robbed the bank.
 - E. while the bank was robbed by himself.
2. Children should avoid riding the bicycle before fully assembled.
 - A. before fully assembled.
 - B. while being assembled.
 - C. until they are assembled.
 - D. after it is fully assembled
 - E. until the bicycle is fully assembled.
3. The two company presidents were in conflict against each other over the terminology of their agreement.
 - A. The two company presidents were in conflict against each other
 - B. The two company presidents were in conflict
 - C. In conflict and against each other, the two company presidents were
 - D. Against two president's was the conflict over the terminology
 - E. Against and in conflict, the two company presidents were

4. Either the Prince of Darkness or the Princess of Light would rule this intricate and malevolent computer game.
- A. Either the Prince of Darkness or the Princess of Light would rule
 - B. Neither the Prince of Darkness or the Princess of Light would rule
 - C. Ruling would not take place by either the Prince of Darkness nor the Princess of Light
 - D. Ruling would be controlled by either the Prince of Darkness or the Princess of Light.
 - E. The Prince of darkness or the Princess of light would either be able to rule
5. The cafeteria was in a shambles; all the decorations were on the floor, tired and cross chaperones wandered around and the band kept playing.
- A. tired and cross chaperones wandered around and the band kept playing.
 - B. tired and cross, chaperones wandered around the band that was playing.
 - C. tired and cross chaperones wandered around, and the band kept playing.
 - D. the band kept playing around the tired and cross chaperones.
 - E. the chaperones, who were tired and cross, kept the band playing.

Answers and Explanations

1. This is a case of faulty subordination due to the incorrect use of the subordinate conjunction, “when.” The bank robber would not ask for money *before* he robbed the bank; it would be at the time of the robbery, making Choice **D** the correct response.
2. This question is an amusing example of misplaced modifier. It is not the child who needs to be assembled but the bicycle. Therefore, Choice **E** is the correct response. One does not want a child on the bike until it is assembled.
3. Two plus each other plus each other sounds like too much of the same thing. Therefore, this sentence contains a redundancy that needs to be adjusted. This makes Choice **B**, “two company presidents,” the cleanest choice for this question.
4. There is actually *nothing* amiss in this sentence. It contains the parallel construction of *either. . .or*, the correct, balanced combination. This makes Choice **A** the correct response.
5. This sentence contains a *run-on sentence error*. The comma before the last clause should be a semi-colon. Therefore, Choice **C** is the correct response. A comma is not forceful enough, and therefore, causes it to be a run-on.

Punctuation Patterns

Although we talked about grammar and usage before, and this section is about punctuation, you cannot have one without the other. When sentences include subordination and coordination, punctuation helps put everything together. In fact, if punctuation is incorrectly used in coordination and subordination, you might find yourself “guilty” of using run-ons, split infinitives, and other errors. So let’s do some review.

Coordination

An **independent clause** has a subject and a verb and presents a complete thought. These can be presented in three ways:

Two separate sentences—Sam was angry. Laura was late.

Two independent clauses connected with a semi-colon—Sam was angry; Laura was late.

Two independent clauses connected with a comma and a **coordinate conjunction**—Sam was angry, but Laura was late.

There are only seven coordinate conjunctions that can combine two independent clauses. *Without a comma before the coordinate conjunction, or without other proper punctuation such as using the semi-colon instead of the coordinate conjunction, the sentence becomes a run-on, and then it has faulty coordination.* Following are the seven coordinate conjunctions:

but	B
or	O
yet	Y
for	F
and	A
nor	N
so	S

You can remember these conjunctions by remembering the phrase **BOY FANS**, which is created by using the initial letter of each conjunction.

Let's look again at Sam and Laura:

- Sam was angry. Laura was late.
- Sam was angry; Laura was late.
- Sam was angry, but (yet, for, and, so) Laura was late.

Subordination

A **dependent clause** usually has a subject and a verb but does *not* present a complete thought. When they are used alone, dependent clauses are incomplete—that is, they are *sentence fragments*. Dependent clauses are introduced by subordinate conjunctions. *If the wrong subordinate conjunction is used or the sentence is improperly punctuated, then the sentence is guilty of faulty subordination.* The following is a list of many of the subordinate conjunctions:

after	if	unless	wherever
although	in order that	until	whether
as	once	what	, which
as if	provided that	whatever	while
as long as	since	when	who
before	so that	whenever	whom
during	that	where	whose
how	though	whereas	why

Not every one of these subordinate conjunctions makes sense with the Sam and Laura scenario. However, each of the subordinate conjunctions casts a slightly different tone to the sentence. Here are some examples:

Whenever Laura was late, Sam was angry. Apparently Sam is probably a very punctual person.

Before Laura was late, Sam was angry. In this case there is more to the story than what we know.

If Laura was late, Sam was angry. Here we have a condition. Sam only gets angry due to lateness.

If the dependent clause appears first in a sentence, it is followed by a comma. If the dependent clause appears last in a sentence, there is no need for a comma except when the subordinate conjunction is the word “which.”

- Because Laura was late, Sam was angry.
- Laura was late because Sam was angry.
- Laura was late, which was the reason Sam was angry. (Remember—“which” always needs a comma in front of it.)

Practice Exercises

The following are Improving Sentences questions that dwell on those errors you have just studied in this section of the book.

1. When you finally decide to go to the party surely heading straight for the shrimp, warm brie and caviar and chow down while you having a chance.
 - A. When you finally decide to go to the party surely heading straight for the shrimp, warm brie and caviar and chow down while you having a chance.
 - B. When finally deciding to go to the party surely heading straight for the shrimp, warm brie and caviar and chowing down while having a chance.
 - C. When you finally decide to go to the party, be sure to head straight for the shrimp, warm brie and caviar and chowing down while you have a chance.
 - D. When you finally decide to go to the party, be sure to head straight for the shrimp, warm brie and caviar and chow down while you have a chance.
 - E. When you finally decide to go to the party, be sure to head straight for the shrimp, warming brie and caviar and chowing down while you have a chance.

2. Most people who drink coffee don't know where it comes from it is actually the fruit of an evergreen tree.
 - A. from it is actually the fruit of an evergreen tree.
 - B. from; it is actually the fruit of an evergreen tree.
 - C. from; because it is actually the fruit of an evergreen tree.
 - D. from, it is actually the fruit of an evergreen tree.
 - E. from; so it is actually the fruit of an evergreen tree.

3. Either Henry nor Heidi was voted class president; everyone was anxious to hear the results.
 - A. Either Henry nor Heidi was voted class president;
 - B. Neither Henry or Heidi was voted class president,
 - C. Either Henry or Heidi was voted class president,
 - D. Either Henry or Heidi will be voted class president;
 - E. Either Henry or Heidi will be voting for class president,

4. In conclusion, all these facts are reasons for us to change the direction our company is going. Always keeping in mind that whatever we decide, we must look forward and not to the past.
 - A. we must look forward and not to the past.
 - B. we must look to the future and not to the past.
 - C. we must look to the future and not behind us.
 - D. we must look forward and not to what has already taken place.
 - E. we must not look backward but to the future.

5. Although Hernandez needed the information immediately, Claudia had to put him off while she searched for it among her resources.
- A. Although Hernandez needed the information immediately, Claudia had to put him off while she searched for it among her resources.
 - B. Because Hernandez needed the information immediately, Claudia had to put him off while she searched for it among her resources.
 - C. Although Hernandez needed the information immediately; Claudia had to put him off while she searched for it among her resources.
 - D. Hernandez, in need of the information immediately, Claudia had to put him off while she searched for it among her resources.
 - E. Although Hernandez needed the information immediately, Claudia needing to put him off while she searched for it among her resources.
6. Tanya barely took 15 minutes to finish her SAT essay, a fact that amazed her friends and worried her not at all.
- A. Tanya barely took 15 minutes to finish her SAT essay,
 - B. Only 15 minutes did it take Tanya to barely finish her SAT essay,
 - C. Tanya barely took 15 minutes to finish her SAT essay;
 - D. Tanya took barely 15 minutes to finish her SAT essay;
 - E. Tanya took barely 15 minutes to finish her SAT essay,
7. Unfamiliar with New York, Mohammed checked carefully the map before boarding the A train.
- A. Mohammed checked carefully the map before boarding
 - B. Mohammed checking carefully the map before boarding
 - C. Mohammed, before boarding, carefully checked
 - D. Mohammed carefully checked the map before boarding
 - E. Carefully before checking the map, Mohammed boarded
8. The soccer coach was young, inexperienced and inept, that is why Rubin decided not to go out for the team this year.
- A. that is why Rubin decided not to go out for the team this year.
 - B. that is why going out for the soccer team was not decided by Rubin.
 - C. which is why Rubin decided not to go out for the team this year.
 - D. which is reason for Rubin to decide not to go out for the team this year.
 - E. which is the reason for Rubin to decide not going out for the team was good.
9. The project finished by Raymond was such a masterpiece that he had several offers from hobby and craft magazines to buy his product.
- A. The project finished by Raymond was such a masterpiece that he had several offers from hobby and craft magazines to buy his product.
 - B. The project, which Raymond finished, was such a masterpiece, that he had several offers
 - C. Raymond's finished project was such a masterpiece that he had several offers
 - D. Raymond finishing the project was such a masterpiece that he had several offers
 - E. Raymond finished the project that being such a masterpiece that he had several offers
10. While Sonya's children were in school, she had a number of tasks to complete which included picking up the laundry, stopping at the post office, filling the SUV with gas and she went grocery shopping.
- A. picking up the laundry, stopping at the post office, filling the SUV with gas and she went grocery shopping.
 - B. picking up the laundry, a stop at the post office, filling the SUV with gas, and going grocery shopping.
 - C. picking up the laundry, stopping at the post office, filling the SUV with gas and going grocery shopping.
 - D. a trip to the laundry, stopping at the post office, filling the SUV with gas and going grocery shopping.
 - E. a trip to the laundry, a stop at the post office, filling the SUV with gas and a trip to the grocery.

Answers and Explanations

- 1. D.** The original “sentence” is not a sentence at all. It is a series of strung together clauses and phrases, making it a *fragment*. Nowhere is there an independent clause with the requisite subject and verb. **C** actually has an independent clause but the rest of the sentence is a jumble. **D** is the only choice that makes sense.
- 2. B.** This sentence is a *run on*. What we have is two independent clauses with no appropriate punctuation of conjunction between them. Remember that you can join independent clauses with a semi-colon or a comma followed by a coordinate conjunction (but, or, yet, for, and, nor, so). The only choice offering the correct method of connecting the clauses is **B**, the semi-colon.
- 3. D.** either-or, neither-nor, not only-but also, all of these are forms of correct *parallelism*. Any other combination makes it *faulty comparison*. With Henry and Heidi, either one or the other was voted class president, so the correct, parallel presentation of this information would be Choice **D**.
- 4. B.** This sure sounds like the end of a long winded, speech, doesn't it? The speaker is guilty of faulty parallelism as well as probably boring his audience. Expressing the past and the future needs to be done using similar structure. The only option that does that is **B**. All the others try to fix the original, but succeed in making it worse.
- 5. A.** Careful with this one. Several of the choices sound like they might work. However, all but the original has some sort of *faulty subordination*. **C** says the same thing as the original, but notice the semi-colon, which is incorrect. **B** might be a possibility, but based on only what we know, it does not make as much sense as the original. Stick with the original.
- 6. E.** Tanya has a *misplaced modifier*, and, perhaps a misplaced brain if she thinks 15 minutes is enough time to write her essay. “Barely” has to do with the amount of time—in other words, she might have been done in 14 minutes. The modifier “barely” goes with the time, not with the verb “took.” These are tricky, because when we speak, we are not always careful with our modifiers. Say the sentence aloud a few times and you will get a sense of the difference.
- 7. D.** Here's another misplaced modifier, and probably a misplaced person if he didn't get on the right subway line. The correct sequence should be “carefully checked,” making **D** the only reasonable choice for this sentence.
- 8. C.** *Coordination* and *subordination* within sentences is not easy. We use the structures easily in our speech, but when we write them or have to discern errors in others' writing, it is not so easy. This question presents a subordination/punctuation problem. When the dependent clause is at the end of the sentence, it does not take a comma before it. However, there is one exception to this rule and it is when the dependent clause starts with the subordinate conjunction which. “Which” always needs a comma in front of it. In the original sentence, the comma is not underlined, so the only word that can follow is “which.” **C**, **D**, and **E** all begin with which, but **C** is the only one that makes sense.
- 9. C.** Wow, this one can be tricky. Choice **B** is actually correct grammatically. However, in this section of the book, we were just reviewing the need to avoid passive voice and how that can be done. Consequently, Choice **C** is the best response for this question. **B** is incorrect because “that” never takes a comma in front of it. Therefore “that Raymond finished” would be considered essential information (requiring no commas) if the conjunction “that” were used in the sentence.
- 10. C.** Busy lady. Here again is a series of phrases that need to be presented using a parallel structure. Choice **C** is the only one that consistently uses the *-ing* form for all the chores: picking, stopping, filling, going.