

► Improving Sentences

Improving Sentences questions cover a wide range of issues, including grammar and usage, sentence structure and organization, and logic and style. You'll be given a sentence with a portion underlined, and have to determine whether that portion contains an error. If it does, you must choose the best one of four versions of the sentence. To do so, you must consider not only what is correct but also what is the most clear and effective way to express an idea.

We'll first look at how these questions are structured, then review the writing issues you're most likely to encounter. Before you try your hand at ten Improving Sentences questions, you'll learn the best strategies for approaching them.

Question Structure

In each Improving Sentences question, part or all of the sentence will be underlined. Choice **a** will repeat the original underlined text. Approximately one in five times, choice **a** is the correct answer because the orig-

inal version is the best (the most clear, concise, and correct) version of the sentence. Answer choices **b–e** will offer different versions of the underlined portion of the sentence. Your task is to determine which choice offers the best version of the sentence.

Some choices will correct or improve the original problem, if there is one. Some will continue to make the same mistake and/or introduce new ones. Only *one* choice will be both grammatically correct *and* the most clear and concise way to express the idea.

If it sounds like Improving Sentences questions are a little more complex than Identifying Sentence Errors, you're right. Instead of focusing on individual words or phrases to determine the error, you need to look at larger structural and stylistic issues within the sentence to determine the correct answer. Finding that answer requires two distinct steps: (1) determining what, if anything, is wrong with the underlined portion of the sentence and (2) deciding which answer choice fixes that mistake *and* does not introduce a new mistake.

The Top Seven Errors in Improving Sentences

The errors in Improving Sentences cover a wide range of writing issues, including grammar and usage, sentence structure and organization, and logic and style. Fortunately, the ETS likes to focus on a handful of specific mistakes. You can expect to see these seven kinds of errors—some of them many times—on test day:

1. improper coordination or subordination of ideas
2. incorrect sentence boundaries
3. faulty comparisons
4. misplaced modifiers
5. wordiness
6. incorrect use of the passive voice
7. incorrect punctuation

The eight most common errors are covered in the Sentence Errors section!

Errors You're Likely to See

Improper Coordination or Subordination of Ideas

Within sentences, clauses (groups of words containing both a subject and verb) are often connected by **coordination** (two independent ideas) or **subordination** (one idea depends upon the other):

Coordination: We are going to dinner and then we are going to a movie.

Subordination: After we go to dinner, we are going to a movie.

Before we go to a movie, we are going to dinner.

One of the favorite issues in Improving Sentences questions is coordination and subordination, because it tests your ability to see logical relationships between ideas. To tackle these questions, you need to determine how the ideas in the clauses work together. Is one idea in addition to the other? In contrast? Is there a progression in time or sequence? How exactly does one idea relate to the other? Here's an example:

It was snowing, but I wore my boots.

There are two distinct ideas here: (1) It was snowing and (2) I wore my boots. But the relationship between these ideas isn't correctly expressed by the coordinating conjunction *but*, which expresses *contrast*. Instead, it needs a conjunction that shows the second idea is a result of the first:

It was snowing, *so* I wore my boots.

OR

Because it was snowing, I wore my boots.

Here's another example:

Henry tried to read *War and Peace* in the original Russian, and it was too difficult.

What's the relationship between the two ideas? Contrast. *And* expresses addition. Here are three corrected versions:

Henry tried to read *War and Peace* in the original Russian, *but* it was too difficult.

Although Henry tried to read *War and Peace* in the original Russian, it was too difficult.

Henry tried to read *War and Peace* in the original Russian, *however* it was too difficult.

Because the same idea can often be expressed with several different conjunctions, be sure you choose the one that fits the 3C's (correct, clear, and concise). There might be two versions that express the right rela-

tionship, but only one will be correct, clear, and concise. For your review, here are the most common coordinating and subordinating conjunctions:

COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

and	for
but	nor
or	so
yet	

SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

after	rather than
although	since
as	so that
as if	than
as long as	that
as though	though
because	unless
before	until
even if	when
even though	whenever
if	where
if only	whereas
in order that	wherever
now that	while
once	

Incorrect Sentence Boundaries

A complete sentence requires a noun and verb, and expresses a fully developed thought. The two most common mistakes at the sentence level are extremes. **Sentence fragments** stop too quickly; they are phrases that are not whole thoughts. **Run-on sentences** don't stop soon enough; they include two or more complete clauses or sentences.

Sentence fragments are often missing a subject or verb, and may be dependent clauses. They can also be phrases or parts of other sentences. Fragments are punctuated as sentences, so they can sometimes be difficult to identify. Even though they don't express complete thoughts, they can be long and appear to be correct. Here are a few examples:

Because she had to stop studying and go to lacrosse practice.

Cried a lot.

When we finished the game after the sun began setting.

If you suspect a fragment, look for the version (choice **b**, **c**, **d**, or **e**) that expresses a complete thought. This might require adding a subject or a verb, deleting a subordinating conjunction (*because*, *while*), deleting a relative pronoun (*who*, *that*, *which*), or connecting a dependent clause to an independent clause. The fragments above can be corrected as follows:

She had to stop studying and go to lacrosse practice.

Sheu Ling cried a lot.

We finished the game after the sun began setting.

Run-on sentences are made up of two or more independent clauses or complete sentences placed together into one sentence without proper punctuation. For example:

We were hungry and John was tired so we had to stop at the first rest area that we saw.

Kim studied hard for the test that's why he got an A.

Patty took flying lessons every Saturday so she couldn't go to the picnic and she couldn't go to the graduation party either but she has already signed up for another group of flying lessons because she likes it so much.

If you suspect a run-on sentence, determine if there are two independent ideas that can stand alone (just because a sentence is long doesn't mean it's a run-on). Check the answer choices for one of the following fixes for run-on sentences:

1. Separate the clauses with a **period**. *We are here. You are not.*
2. Connect the clauses with a **comma and a coordinating conjunction** (*and*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *but*, *so*, or *yet*). Make sure the coordinating conjunction expresses the right relationship between the two ideas. *We are here, but you are not.*
3. Connect the clauses with a **semicolon** (and possibly a conjunctive adverb such as *however*, *therefore*, or *otherwise*, making sure it expresses the right relationship between the two ideas). *We are here; you are not.*
4. Make one sentence dependent upon the other by using a **subordinating conjunction** such as *although*, *because*, *since*, or *while*. Again, make sure the subordinating conjunction expresses the right relationship between the two ideas. *Although we are here, you are not.*

The context of the sentence will determine the best correction. If the relationship between the clauses needs to be expressed, then the run-on needs a conjunction of some sort. The run-ons above can be corrected as follows:

We were hungry and John was tired, so we had to stop at the first rest area that we saw.

Kim studied hard for the test; that's why he got an A.

Patty took flying lessons every Saturday so she couldn't go to the picnic. She couldn't go to the graduation party either, but she has already signed up for another group of flying lessons because she likes it so much.

Faulty Comparisons

Faulty comparisons are errors in sentence logic. They're often tough to catch because they *sound* okay; many people speak in faulty comparisons all the time. Here's an example:

I've seen every painting by Jackson Pollack, and they're better than any other painter.

You probably understood the sentence to mean that the paintings by Pollack are better than the paintings by any other artist, but that's not what the sentence *says*. The author is actually comparing the *paintings* of Pollack to the *other painters*, not their paintings. To correct faulty comparisons, like things must be compared.

I've seen every painting by Jackson Pollack, and they're better than any other painter's.

OR

I've seen every painting by Jackson Pollack, and they're better than paintings by any other artist.

Here's another example:

I'm more interested in the shoe sale at Macy's than in Walmart.

This sentence compares the shoe sale to *Walmart* rather than to a *sale* at Walmart. Here's the kind of fix to look for:

I'm more interested in the shoe sale at Macy's than in the white sale at Walmart.

OR

I'm more interested in Macy's shoe sale than in Walmart's.

Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that describes another part of a sentence. A **misplaced modifier** is simply in the wrong place in the sentence. The danger of misplaced modifiers is that they confuse meaning:

I had to have the cafeteria unlocked meeting with student government this morning.

Did the cafeteria meet with student government? To say exactly what is meant, the modifying phrase *meeting with student government* should be moved to the beginning of the sentence.

Meeting with student government this morning, I had to have the cafeteria unlocked.

Wordiness

Whether it's the main mistake in the original prompt or a flaw in one or more of the distracters, unnecessary wordiness is a common error in Improving Sentences questions. In general, the more concise, the better (as long as all necessary information is conveyed).

Wordiness has many causes, including:

- "clutter" phrases such as "because of the fact that"
- *that*, *which*, and *who* phrases (turn them into adjectives: "the manual that is helpful" becomes "the helpful manual")
- unnecessary repetition (e.g., "the meeting is at 4 P.M. in the afternoon"—4 P.M. *is* in the afternoon)
- inexact phrases ("I am not in agreement" vs. "I disagree"; "she was very upset" vs. "she was devastated")

THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE SECTION

Here are examples of wordiness, with their more concise counterparts (if there is no concise example, the word or phrase is unnecessary):

a lot of (many or much)	in the near future (soon)
all of a sudden (suddenly)	it is clear that
along the lines of (like)	last but not least (finally)
are able to (can)	on a daily basis (daily)
as a matter of fact	on account of the fact that (because)
as a whole	particular
as the case may be	somewhere in the neighborhood of (about)
at the present time (currently or now)	take action (act)
both of these (both)	the fact that
by and large	the majority of (most)
by definition	the reason why (the reason or why)
due to the fact that (because)	through the use of (through)
for all intents and purposes	with regard to (about or regarding)
in order to (to)	with the exception of (except for)
in the event that (if)	

Some words and phrases don't need a modifier, because the specific is implied in the general. For instance, the word *consensus* means general agreement. Therefore, modifying it with the word *general* is repetitive. Similarly,

mathematics is a field of study, so it does not need to be modified with the words *field of*. Review these lists of repetitive phrases and be ready to spot them more easily in SAT prompts and answer choices.

RETAIN ONLY THE FIRST WORD	DROP THE MODIFIER (FIRST WORD)
any and all	past memories
first and foremost	final destination
refer back	general consensus
close proximity	various differences
large in size	each individual
often times	basic fundamentals
reason why	true facts
heavy in weight	important essentials
period in time	future plans
round in shape	terrible tragedy

RETAIN ONLY THE FIRST WORD	DROP THE MODIFIER (FIRST WORD)
odd in appearance	end result
mathematics field	final outcome
cheap quality	free gift
honest in character	past history
confused state	totally obvious
modern in design	rarely ever
unusual in nature	unexpected surprise
extreme in degree	sudden crisis
strange type	

Another common problem that leads to wordiness is the use of unnecessary prepositions. When two or more prepositions are used together, chances are at least one is unnecessary.

I cleaned *up under* the kitchen cabinets.
She likes all sports *except for* soccer.

In both of these sentences, there is an unnecessary preposition. Here's how to correct them:

I cleaned *under* the kitchen cabinets.
She likes all sports *except* soccer.

Notice how choices **a**, **c**, **d** and **e** in the following example all suffer from wordiness. They all use *that* clauses and repeat words such as *program* and *called*:

The American Red Cross offers a program called the Learn to Swim Program that begins with a class called Introduction to Water Skills, then progresses to Fundamental Aquatic Skills.

- a.** The American Red Cross offers a program called the Learn to Swim Program that begins with a class called
- b.** The American Red Cross's Learn to Swim Program begins with a class called
- c.** The American Red Cross offers a program that is called the Learn to Swim Program that begins
- d.** The American Red Cross is an organization that offers a program that is called the Learn to Swim Program that begins with a class called
- e.** The American Red Cross offers a program called the Learn to Swim Program that begins with a class called

Incorrect Use of the Passive Voice

You may find one or more prompts or answer choices that use the passive when the active voice is needed. In the passive voice, the subject (most often *you*) is acted upon. While there are occasions in which it's correct to use it, most sentences should be in the active voice. Passive constructions tend to be wordy or lack focus. Compare these sentences:

Active: My friend asked for another helping.

Passive: Another helping was asked for by my friend.

Active: I misplaced my wallet.

Passive: My wallet was misplaced by me.

Active: The administration has selected three finalists for the open position.

Passive: Three finalists for the open position have been selected by the administration.

Note the simplicity and directness of the first sentence in each pair. The second sentences, written in the passive voice, are clunky and noticeably longer. With very few exceptions, sentences like these should be quickly eliminated; they're almost always wrong.

Incorrect Punctuation

Identifying Sentence Errors questions don't test for it, but Improving Sentences questions do. (The good news is, though, that neither tests for spelling!) Keep in mind when answering these questions that a misplaced or missing comma, an errant apostrophe, or an unnecessary semicolon could be the error you're looking for. There are dozens of rules about the many different punctuation marks in the English language. Fortunately, the punctuation errors on the SAT tend to stick to three categories: semicolon, comma, and apostrophe errors.

■ Semicolon Errors

Semicolons (;) are used in two ways: to separate independent clauses and to separate the items in a list when those items contain commas.

1. There are three ways to use semicolons to separate independent clauses.

First Case: Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses joined without a conjunction.

Example:

Four people worked on the project; only one received credit for it.

Second Case: Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses that contain commas, even if the clauses are joined by a conjunction.

Example:

The strays were malnourished, dirty, and ill; but Liz had a weakness for kittens, so she adopted them all.

Third Case: Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses that are connected with a conjunctive adverb that expresses a relationship between clauses.

Example:

Victoria was frequently tardy; therefore, she received a low grade.

2. Use semicolons to separate items in a series that contain commas to show which sets of items go together.

Examples:

The dates for our meetings are Monday, January 10; Tuesday, April 14; Monday, July 7; and Tuesday, October 11.

She has lived in Omaha, Nebraska; Nutley, New Jersey; Amherst, Massachusetts; and Pensacola, Florida.

■ Comma Errors

There are many rules about when to use and when not to use commas. Here are the five comma errors you are most likely to see on the exam:

1. **Comma between subject and verb.** When a subject is immediately followed by its verb, nothing should come between them:

Mary decided to relax with a good book.

2. **No comma after introductory phrase or clause.** Introductory phrases and clauses should be followed by a comma:

By lunchtime, Aidan had already finished his project.

After a long day at work, *Mary* decided to relax with a good book.

3. **No comma around “interrupters.”** Words, phrases, and clauses that “interrupt” the core sentence (and are *not* essential to the meaning of that core sentence) should be set off by commas:

Mary, a pediatrician, really enjoys her work.

The phrase *a pediatrician* is an “interrupter”: It’s not essential to the sentence. We could take it out and the sentence would still be a complete, grammatically correct idea. Thus, it needs to be set off with commas. Here’s another example:

Mary, who always wanted to be a pediatrician, loves her job.

In the following example, the *who* clause is essential to the sentence and should not be set off with commas:

Mary is the one who wrote the prescription.

Here, the purpose of the sentence is to explain who wrote the prescription, so that clause is essential. The context of the sentence will help you determine whether information is essential and therefore whether commas are needed.

4. **Comma separating two independent clauses.**

Known as a *comma splice*, this error is the incorrect use of a comma to connect two complete sentences. It creates a run-on sentence. To correct a comma splice, you can either:

- replace the comma with a period, forming two sentences
- replace the comma with a semicolon
- join the two clauses with a conjunction such as *and*, *because*, or *so*

Comma splice: Our school received an award, we raised the most money for the local charity.

Corrected sentence: Our school received an award. We raised the most money for the local charity.

OR

Our school received an award; we raised the most money for the local charity.

OR

Our school received an award because we raised the most money for the local charity.

Its vs. It's

Unlike most possessives, *its* does not contain an apostrophe. The word *it's* is instead a contraction of the words *it is*. The second *i* is removed, and replaced by an apostrophe. When revising your writing, say the words *it is* when you come across *it's* or *its*. If they make sense, you should be using the contraction. If they don't, you need the possessive form, *its*, without an apostrophe.

■ Apostrophe Errors

Apostrophes are used to form contractions, indicate ownership, and form certain plurals. Review these six rules for their use.

1. Apostrophes form contractions by taking the place of a missing letter or number:

We're going out of town next week.

Don't write the proposal without the instructions from your boss.

My husband was in the class of '89.

2. Add 's to form the singular possessive, even when the noun ends in s:

The *school's* lunchroom needs to be cleaned.

The *drummer's* solo received a standing ovation.

Mr. Perkins's persuasive essay was very convincing.

3. A few plurals that don't end in s also form the possessive by adding 's:

The *children's* toys were found in every room of the house.

The line for the *women's* restroom was too long.

Men's shirts come in a variety of neck sizes.

4. Possessive plural nouns already ending in s need only the apostrophe added:

The *customers'* access codes are confidential.

The *students'* grades improved each semester.

The flight *attendants'* uniforms were blue and white.

5. Show possession in the last word when using names of organizations and businesses, in hyphenated words, and in joint ownership:

Brad and Janet's graduation was three months ago.

I went to visit my *great-grandfather's* alma mater.

The Future Farmers of America's meeting was moved to Monday.

6. Use an 's to form the plurals of letters, figures, and numbers used as words, as well as certain expressions of time and money. The expressions of time and money do not indicate ownership in the usual sense:

She has a hard time pronouncing *s's*.

My street address contains three *5's*.

He packed a *week's* worth of clothing.

The project was the result of a *year's* worth of work.

Now What?

But what if you can't identify the error? Here are three strategies:

- 1. Let the choices guide you.** Scan each version to see what aspect of the original sentence is changed and how. The way the original is rewritten will often reveal the nature of the error in the original prompt.
- 2. Look for the most commonly tested errors.** There are seven kinds of mistakes that pop up most often in Improving Sentences questions. If you are having trouble finding an error, do a quick check for the common errors described in this section.
- 3. Guess or move on.** If you can eliminate at least one choice as obviously wrong, guess. If not, skip the question and move on.

Strategies for Improving Sentences

- **Locate the error.** Try to determine the error as you read the sentence. What's wrong with the underlined portion? Is it a run-on sentence, does it have faulty parallelism, or does it have unnecessary wordiness? If you determine there is no error (remember, approximately 20% of the questions will be error-free), select choice **a** and move on to the next question.
- **Eliminate all choices with the original error.** If you identify an error, eliminate choice **a** (don't even bother reading it; it only repeats the original prompt). Then, eliminate any other choices that make that same mistake.
- **Eliminate all choices that make other errors.** From the remaining choices, eliminate any versions that make a different error, even if they correct the error in the prompt. This includes any versions that are grammatically correct but are unnecessarily wordy, ambiguous, or use unnecessarily complicated sentence structure.
- **Find the best sentence using the 3C's.** From the choices that remain, select the one that is **correct** (no grammar or usage errors or lapses in logic), **clear** (no ambiguity or tangled sentence structure), and **concise** (no unnecessary wordiness).

Practice Improving Sentences Questions

Directions: In each of the sentences that follow, part or all of the sentence is underlined. The underlined text may contain an error in sentence construction, grammar, word choice, or punctuation. Choice **a** repeats the original underlined text. If there is no error in the underlined portion, choose **a**. If there is an error, select the answer choice that most effectively expresses the meaning of the sentence without any ambiguity or awkwardness. Answers can be found at the end of the chapter.

- 11.** I'm getting forgetful; yesterday, my wallet was misplaced by me.
- forgetful; yesterday, my wallet was misplaced by me.
 - forgetful; yesterday, my wallet is misplaced by me.
 - forgetful; yesterday, I misplaced my wallet.
 - forgetful; yesterday, I was so forgetful that I misplaced my wallet.
 - forgetful. Yesterday, my wallet was misplaced by me.
- 12.** In 1985, the few families that had a computer used them mainly for word processing and game playing, although most families today have Internet access that allows them to e-mail and surf the web.
- although most families today have Internet access that allows them to e-mail and surf the web.
 - while most families today have Internet access that allows them to e-mail and surf the web.
 - however, today, most families have Internet access that allows them to e-mail and surf the web.
 - most families today have Internet access that allows them to e-mail and surf the web.
 - although for most of today's families, there is Internet access that allows them to e-mail and surf the web.
- 13.** Seated high in the arena, the rock band looked like toy figures to the audience members with the cheapest tickets.
- Seated high in the arena, the rock band looked like toy figures to the audience members with the cheapest tickets.
 - Being seated high in the arena, the rock band looked like toy figures to the audience members with the cheapest tickets.
 - The rock band looked like toy figures to the audience members with the cheapest tickets, who were seated high in the arena.
 - The rock band looked like toy figures to the audience members with the cheapest tickets, seated high in the arena.
 - Seated high in the arena, to the audience members with the cheapest seats, the rock band looked like toy figures.
- 14.** Valerian is the name of two different plants: one of the most popular medicinal herbs in the United States, whereas in Honduras it is a grass that grows to be three to four feet tall.
- whereas in Honduras it is a grass that grows to be three to four feet tall.
 - and a grass that grows to be three to four feet tall in Honduras.
 - but in Honduras, it is a grass that grows to be three to four feet tall.
 - in contrast, in Honduras, it is a grass that grows to be three to four feet tall.
 - and in Honduras, it is a plant that is a grass that grows to be three to four feet in height.

15. Iridology, the study of the colored part of the eye, known as the iris, to diagnose health problems, had its first medical reference in a German physician's 1670 book *Chiromatica Medica*.

- a. Iridology, the study of the colored part of the eye, known as the iris, to diagnose health problems, had its first medical reference in a German physician's 1670 book *Chiromatica Medica*.
- b. Developing long ago, in 1670, iridology, which is the study of the colored part of the eye, known as the iris, to diagnose health problems.
- c. While it had its first medical reference in a German physician's 1670 book *Chiromatica Medica*, iridology is the study of the colored part of the eye, known as the iris, to diagnose health problems.
- d. The study of the colored part of the eye, known as the iris, to diagnose health problems, iridology had its first medical reference in a German physician's 1670 book *Chiromatica Medica*.
- e. The first medical reference to iridology, the study of the iris to diagnose health problems, was in a German physician's 1670 book *Chiromatica Medica*.

16. Once known as a fringe treatment, meditation has been scientifically proven to help manage the symptoms of depression.

- a. Once known as a fringe treatment, meditation has been scientifically proven to help manage the symptoms of depression.
- b. Being known as a fringe treatment, many people who suffer from depression have been able to help manage their symptoms by meditating.
- c. Meditation is no longer thought of as a fringe treatment; managing the symptoms of depression has been scientifically proven.
- d. The symptoms of depression have been scientifically proven to be managed through meditation, once thought of as a fringe treatment.
- e. Scientifically proving that meditation, once known as a fringe treatment, can help manage the symptoms of depression.

17. Free verse is poetry without regular form, although sonnets are organized into three or four stanzas followed by a couplet.

- a. although sonnets are organized into three or four stanzas followed by a couplet.
- b. while sonnets are organized into three or four stanzas followed by a couplet.
- c. likewise sonnets are organized into three or four stanzas followed by a couplet.
- d. since those that are organized into three or four stanzas followed by a couplet, sonnets.
- e. poetry organized three or four stanzas followed by a couplet is called a sonnet.