DIGITAL SAT · READING & WRITING

plainprep

SAT Punctuation & Grammar Card

Works best online
Tap the answers and step through every example. This PDF has the same content, for printing.
plainprepsat.com/card/punctuation-card.html

Made so that even a complete beginner can read it and understand: first you see the rule in plain English, then **how it shows up in a question**, then a step-by-step worked example.

Compiled from the notes of someone who studied on their own and scored 1530 on the SAT.

1
Understand
See the rule in plain English, with a ✓ and a × example.

2
Recognize
Use the "If you see these in a question" box to spot the rule.

3
Solve
Follow the steps in the worked SAT-style example.

Topic map

1 **Basic Terms** — clause · phrase · FANBOYS
2 **Joining Two Sentences** — comma splice · semicolon · FANBOYS
3 **Semicolons** — full sentences · lists
4 **Colons & Dashes** — explain · list · pairs
5 **Commas: The Basics** — lists · openings · where NOT
6 **Extra Information** — essential vs nonessential
7 **Participles & Modifiers** — comma + -ing · dangling
8 **Apostrophes & Possessives** — its · who's · plural vs possessive
9 **Subject–Verb Agreement** — real subject · there is · or / nor
10 **Verb Tense & Forms** — perfect tenses · if-sentences
11 **Pronouns** — case · agreement · clear reference
12 **Parallel Structure & Comparisons** — lists · pairs · than
13 **Question Recognition Map** — what you see → what you do

BOUNDARIES punctuation and joining sentences · FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE grammar · CORE RULE learn these first

How to read an example card? First the **QUESTION**, then the numbered **steps**, then the **ANSWER**. Follow the order: find the rule, apply it, eliminate. The gray line at the bottom shows a common mistake or a shortcut.

Practice · Punctuation & Grammar Bank
Finished the card? Test yourself on **250 original SAT-style questions**, built chapter by chapter from this card. Every question names the card chapter it comes from, so a miss sends you straight back to the right rule.

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INTRO

About this resource

This resource was compiled from notes kept during preparation by **someone who studied for the SAT on their own and scored 1530**. The notes cover the rules seen on the test, mistakes made, and shortcuts that worked.

The goal is to collect **all the punctuation and grammar rules the Digital SAT tests** in one place, with the rule, **how to spot it in a question**, and a worked example. Beginners and people who have already studied a bit can both scan it and practice quickly.

13	48	22
chapters, one flow	worked SAT-style examples	practice questions with answers

Short and clear
Every rule: what it says, how to spot it, a worked example. No long lectures.

Plain explanations, real test terms
Since the test is in English, terms appear in their original form, with simple explanations.

TRUST THE RULE, NOT YOUR EAR

The test checks rules. A choice that "sounds fine" can still be wrong, and one that sounds strange can be right. Find the rule first, then decide. And don't just read: **solve every example yourself before looking at the steps.**

ABOUT THE EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

The examples are **SAT-style questions written to teach each rule**, easy to medium on purpose, so you can apply the rule you just learned directly. They are not real test questions.

How should you study?

1. **Read Chapter 1 first.** Every rule uses these few words (clause, FANBOYS, modifier...).
2. **If you are short on time, take the fast route:** read the map in Chapter 13 (about 10 minutes), then go to the chapters where you see gaps.
3. **Go through each chapter in order:** "If you see these in a question" box → rule cards → worked examples.
4. **Solve the example yourself first**: cover the steps and try; then check. The place where you get stuck is the place you need to study.
5. **Test yourself** with the "Try it now" questions at the end, then review the map in Chapter 13. On the last day before the test, look only at that page.
6. **Practice.** Solve questions from the official Bluebook tests; this resource does not replace that practice, it speeds it up.

The example questions are SAT-style questions written to teach each rule; they are not real test questions. This is an independent study resource and is not affiliated with College Board.

MAP

Standard English Conventions

On the Digital SAT, the Reading & Writing section has 54 questions, and **11–15 of them are Standard English Conventions**: editing a text so that it follows the conventions of Standard English. They fall into two skills. The card follows the same order.

Boundaries

punctuation

Joining and separating sentences, setting off extra information, and choosing the right punctuation at the beginning, middle or end of a sentence.

Chapter 2 · Joining Two Sentences | Chapter 3 · Semicolons | Chapter 4 · Colons & Dashes | Chapter 5 · Commas: The Basics | Chapter 6 · Extra Information | Chapter 7 · Participles & Modifiers

Form, Structure, and Sense

grammar

Choosing the correct form of a word and the correct structure of a sentence: agreement, verb forms, pronouns, possessives and plurals, and modifier placement.

Chapter 7 · Participles & Modifiers | Chapter 8 · Apostrophes & Possessives | Chapter 9 · Subject–Verb Agreement | Chapter 10 · Verb Tense & Forms | Chapter 11 · Pronouns | Chapter 12 · Parallel Structure & Comparisons

Question counts are for the adaptive test, as published by College Board; the exact mix on your test may differ. Chapter 1 gives you the vocabulary, and Chapter 13 is the recognition map. Transitions (however, therefore…) and connecting words are covered in the separate **SAT Transitions & Connectors Card**.

1 Basic Terms

The words you need, in plain English

CORE RULE

Every rule in this card is built from a few words. Learn them once and the rules become easy to read.

Subject who or what
The person or thing the sentence is about, the one doing the action. “The storm passed.”

Verb action or state
What the subject does or is: run, study, is, seems. A sentence needs a real verb (not just an -ing word).

Clause subject + verb
A group of words with its own subject and verb.

Independent clause (IC) can stand alone
A clause that is a complete sentence: “The rain stopped.”

Dependent clause (DC) cannot stand alone
Has a subject and verb but starts with a connector (although, because, when, who, which): “because the rain stopped”.

Phrase no subject + verb pair
A group of words without its own subject and verb: “after the storm”, “a former teacher”.

Fragment not a full sentence
A dependent clause or a phrase written as if it were a sentence.

FANBOYS for · and · nor · but · or · yet · so
The seven coordinating conjunctions. With a comma, they can join two independent clauses.

Subordinating conjunction although · because · while · if
Starts a dependent clause: when, since, unless, whereas, after, before...

Conjunctive adverb however · therefore · moreover
Shows the link between two sentences. It is NOT a FANBOYS word, so it cannot be glued to a sentence with just a comma.

Appositive renames a noun
A noun phrase placed next to a noun to rename it: “Marie Curie, a physicist,”.

Modifier describes
A word or phrase that describes another word. It must sit next to what it describes.

Participle -ing / -ed word
A verb form used as an adjective: walking, exhausted, written. A participle alone is not a verb.

Antecedent what a pronoun replaces
The noun a pronoun refers to: in “The company raised its prices”, “company” is the antecedent of “its”.

Essential / nonessential needed or extra
Essential information is needed to know which one (no commas). Nonessential information is extra (commas).

Comma splice / run-on two ICs joined wrongly
Comma splice: two full sentences joined by only a comma. Run-on: joined by nothing at all.

THE 10-SECOND SENTENCE TEST

Ask three questions about any group of words: **Is there a subject? Is there a real verb? Does it make a complete thought on its own?** Three yes answers = an independent clause (a full sentence). Otherwise it is a dependent clause or a phrase.

FULL SENTENCE (IC)

The rain stopped.

Subject + verb + complete thought.

DEPENDENT CLAUSE

Because the rain stopped

Subject + verb, but the opening word “because” leaves the thought unfinished. It needs a main clause next to it.

PHRASE

After the storm

No subject + verb pair. It adds information to a main clause.

LOOKS LIKE A VERB, IS NOT

The rain stopping

An -ing word alone is not a verb. This is a fragment. (“The rain was stopping” is a sentence.)

STARTS WITH WHO · WHICH · WHOSE · WHERE

a statement, not a question

A statement that opens with one of these words is a dependent clause and cannot stand alone. “Which was built in 1890” is a fragment.

MOST OF WHOM · MANY OF WHICH

group word + of whom / of which

This pattern starts a dependent clause, so it cannot stand alone. “Most of them” is different: it starts a full sentence.

2 Joining Two Sentences

Period · semicolon · comma + FANBOYS · comma splice

BOUNDARIES | CORE RULE

36 questions in the bank

Two complete sentences can be joined in only a few ways. A comma alone is not one of them. This is one of the most tested rules in Boundaries.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- underlined punctuation between two full sentences
- a comma followed by it / this / they / he / she
- however / therefore after a comma
- choices with . ; , : ?
- one long sentence that feels like two

Four legal ways to join two full sentences

1 · PERIOD

IC. IC.

Two separate sentences. Always safe.

✓ The rain stopped. We went outside.

2 · SEMICOLON

IC ; IC

A semicolon works like a period, so both sides must be full sentences. No and / but after it.

✓ The rain stopped; we went outside.

3 · COMMA + FANBOYS

IC , and / but / or / so / yet IC

A comma alone cannot join two sentences. It needs a FANBOYS word right after it.

✓ The rain stopped, so we went outside.

× The rain stopped, we went outside.

4 · MAKE ONE SIDE DEPENDENT

Because IC , IC

Add a subordinating conjunction (because, although, when...) to one side. Then it is one sentence with a comma.

✓ Because the rain stopped, we went outside.

COMMA SPLICE: THE MOST COMMON ERROR

Two full sentences + **one comma and nothing else** = wrong. A comma followed by **it, this, that, they, he, she** is a red flag: the next words are usually a new sentence. Fix it with one of the four ways above.

Glue and bricks

FANBOYS = GLUE

IC , but IC

One comma + a FANBOYS word holds two sentences together.

✓ I was tired, but I kept working.

HOWEVER-WORDS = BRICKS

IC ; however, IC

however, therefore, moreover, consequently, nevertheless, thus, otherwise... are not glue. They need a period or a semicolon first, then a comma after. Time words do the same when they start a clause: then, now, today, later, currently.

× I was tired, however I kept working.

✓ I was tired; however, I kept working.

✓ I was tired. However, I kept working.

SPEED TIP: EQUAL CHOICES CANCEL EACH OTHER OUT

A period, a semicolon and comma + FANBOYS do the same job between two full sentences. If two or more of them are among the choices, they cannot all be right, so cross all of them out and test the choice that is left. Check the choices with a period or a colon first: they often show that two sentences are hiding in the passage.

Two sentences hiding in one

A PHRASE THAT FITS BOTH SIDES

prepositional phrase · -ing phrase · because clause

A phrase can sound right at the end of one sentence and still be a run-on. Check what comes after the blank: if it is a full sentence on its own, a break is needed.

- ✗ The team repaired the engine over the weekend it was ready by Monday.
- ✓ The team repaired the engine over the weekend. It was ready by Monday.

READ TO THE FULL STOP

back up to the start of the sentence

Do not judge the punctuation from the words around the blank. Read the whole passage sentence up to its period, then decide.

- ✗ The flight was delayed because of fog it landed two hours late.
- ✓ The flight was delayed because of fog. It landed two hours late.

Ending the sentence

DIRECT QUESTION → ?

Where is the library?

A sentence that asks something directly ends with a question mark.

- ✓ Where is the library?

REPORTED QUESTION → .

She asked where the library was.

A question reported inside a statement is not a question. It ends with a period, and the words after whether / if / where keep statement order: “she asked whether the library was open”.

- ✓ She asked where the library was.
- ✗ She asked where the library was?

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The first telescope was built in 1608 _____ Galileo improved the design a year later.

A) 1608, Galileo
B) 1608: Galileo
C) 1608, then Galileo
D) 1608; Galileo

1. Both sides are full sentences, so you need a period, a semicolon, or comma + FANBOYS.
2. A is a comma splice. C is also a comma splice: “then” is not a FANBOYS word.
3. B uses a colon, but Galileo’s improvement does not explain the first sentence.
4. D: a semicolon between two full sentences.

ANSWER D) 1608; Galileo

Only one choice is a legal joiner. Eliminate by the rules, not by the sound.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The study was small _____ its results were promising.

A) small, however its
B) small however, its
C) small, however, its
D) small; however, its

1. “however” is a conjunctive adverb (a brick), so the sentence needs a semicolon before it and a comma after it.
2. C has a comma on both sides, but the first comma cannot join two sentences.

ANSWER D) small; however, its

However in the **middle of one sentence** sits between commas. Between two full sentences it needs a semicolon first.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION **Although the experiment failed _____ the team learned a great deal.**

A) failed, the
B) failed; the
C) failed: the
D) failed the

1. "Although the experiment failed" is a dependent clause, not a full sentence.
2. A semicolon and a colon both need a full sentence before them. A dependent clause + main clause needs just a comma.

ANSWER **A) failed, the**

Dependent clause first → comma → main clause.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION **The recipe calls for butter _____ the baker used olive oil instead.**

A) butter, but
B) butter; but
C) butter, however
D) butter but

1. Two full sentences: comma + FANBOYS is a legal join. "but" is a FANBOYS word.
2. B: and / but never come right after a semicolon. C: however is not FANBOYS. D: the comma is missing.

ANSWER **A) butter, but**

Semicolon + but is never right on the SAT: either ", but" or "; however,".

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION **The town built a new library over the summer _____ residents borrowed more than a thousand books in its first month.**

A) summer residents
B) summer. Residents
C) summer, residents
D) summer; and residents

1. Read to the end: "The town built a new library over the summer" and "residents borrowed more than a thousand books" are two full sentences.
2. A joins them with nothing (a run-on). C is a comma splice. D: and never comes right after a semicolon.
3. B: a period between two full sentences.

ANSWER **B) summer. Residents**

The phrase "over the summer" fits at the end of sentence 1, but nothing is joining the two sentences.

3 Semicolons

A soft period: full sentence on both sides

BOUNDARIES · CORE RULE · 16 questions in the bank

A semicolon is a soft period. Everything on both sides must be a full sentence, with one exception: lists whose items already contain commas.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- a semicolon in the underlined part
- however / therefore / for example after a semicolon
- a list whose items already contain commas
- ; and or ; but
- a fragment after the semicolon

BETWEEN TWO SENTENCES

IC ; IC

Both sides must be full sentences (subject + verb).

✓ She studied all week; the test felt easy.
× She studied all week; because the test felt easy.

BEFORE HOWEVER-WORDS

IC ; however, IC

Also therefore, moreover, consequently, nevertheless, for example, in fact... Semicolon before, comma after.

✓ She studied all week; as a result, the test felt easy.

NEVER WITH FANBOYS

; but ✕ → , but ✓

After a semicolon do not add and / but / or / so. Need one? Use comma + FANBOYS instead.

- ✕ The plan was risky; but it worked.
- ✓ The plan was risky, but it worked.

AFTER IT: A FULL SENTENCE

; + subject + verb

If what follows could not stand alone, the semicolon is wrong. A her / him / them cannot be a subject.

- ✓ She earned her degree in 2019; she then joined a lab.
- ✕ She earned her degree in 2019; then joining a lab.

LISTS WITH COMMAS INSIDE

item, detail ; item, detail ; and item, detail

If any item already has a comma, separate ALL the items with semicolons.

- ✓ The team visited Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; and Portland, Oregon.

SEMICOLON VS COLON

; = like a period · : = explains

Use a colon only if the second part explains or gives an example of the first (Chapter 4). A semicolon just links two related sentences.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The tour will stop in _____

A) Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; and Portland, Oregon.
B) Austin, Texas, Denver, Colorado, and Portland, Oregon.
C) Austin, Texas: Denver, Colorado: and Portland, Oregon.
D) Austin; Texas, Denver; Colorado, and Portland; Oregon.

1. Each item is "city, state", so each item already contains a comma.
2. When items contain commas, the items themselves are separated with semicolons. Keep the commas inside each item.

ANSWER A) Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; and Portland, Oregon.

Option B is unreadable: you cannot tell where one item ends.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Maya wanted to study abroad _____ her family could not afford the tuition.

A) abroad; however,
B) abroad; but
C) abroad, however,
D) abroad however,

1. Two full sentences. A semicolon + however + comma works.
2. B: no "but" after a semicolon. C: however is a brick, so a comma before it is a comma splice. D: a semicolon or period is missing.

ANSWER A) abroad; however,

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION She earned her degree in 2019; _____

A) then joining a lab.
B) and then joining a lab.
C) which led her to join a lab.
D) she then joined a lab.

1. After a semicolon, what follows must be a full sentence. Check each choice for a subject + real verb.
2. A, B and C are not full sentences; D has a subject (she) and a verb (joined).

ANSWER D) she then joined a lab.

Quick check: if you can put a period where the semicolon is and both sides still read as sentences, the semicolon is right.

4 Colons & Dashes

Full sentence first, then explain

BOUNDARIES | CORE RULE

18 questions in the bank

A colon (or a single dash) announces what comes next: an explanation, an example or a list. The part before it must be a complete sentence.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- a colon in the underlined part
- a dash (—) in the underlined part
- a list after include / such as / are
- choices with : and —
- a full sentence followed by an explanation

COLON RULE

Full sentence : explanation / example / list

Before the colon: a complete sentence. After it: a list, a word, a phrase or a full sentence that explains or gives an example.

- ✓ The recipe needs three things: flour, eggs, and sugar.
- ✓ The result surprised everyone: the weakest team had won.

NEVER AFTER AN INCOMPLETE PART

is / are / include / of / such as → no colon

If the words before the colon could not stand alone (after a verb like is, are, includes, or after of, for, with, such as), do not use a colon.

- × The ingredients are: flour, eggs, and sugar.
- ✓ The ingredients are flour, eggs, and sugar.

COLON JOINING TWO SENTENCES

IC : IC (the 2nd explains the 1st)

Both sides can be full sentences, but the second must explain, give an example of, or be a result of the first.

- ✓ Her plan was simple: she would visit every school in the district.
- × She walked home: it rained on Tuesday.

AFTER A CONCEPT

theory / claim / idea : what it says

When you name a concept, a colon is the cleanest way to introduce the full sentence that explains it.

- ✓ The researchers proposed a new theory: the moon formed from a collision.

SINGLE DASH

IC — explanation

A single dash works like a colon: a full sentence before it, an explanation, example or addition after it. Never use a comma with it.

- ✓ The theory made a bold claim — plants can sense sound.

PAIR OF DASHES

— extra information —

Two dashes work like two commas or two parentheses: they wrap extra information. The pair must match. Do not mix a dash with a comma.

- ✓ The mayor — a former teacher — opened the school.
- × The mayor — a former teacher, opened the school.

DASH + APPOSITIVE

IC — a process that ...

A dash can add a noun phrase that sums up the idea before it.

- ✓ The ice sheet melts every summer — a process that raises sea levels.

COLON = SINGLE DASH

: ≈ —

In most SAT questions a colon and a single dash do the same job, so they will not both be correct choices.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The coach had one rule _____ everyone arrives early.

A) rule, everyone
B) rule: everyone
C) rule everyone
D) rule, which everyone

1. The second part explains what the rule is, so a colon fits.
2. A is a comma splice. C is a run-on. D is not a full sentence.

ANSWER B) rule: everyone

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The survival kit includes _____ a map, a compass, and a flashlight.

A) includes: a
B) includes a
C) includes, a
D) includes — a

1. "The survival kit includes" cannot stand alone: it needs its object.
2. A colon, a comma or a dash after the verb cuts the verb off from its object.

ANSWER B) includes a

No punctuation between a verb and what it needs.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The mayor _____ a former science teacher _____ opened the new lab.

A) mayor — a former science teacher — opened
B) mayor, a former science teacher — opened
C) mayor — a former science teacher, opened
D) mayor: a former science teacher: opened

1. "a former science teacher" is extra information, so it needs a matching pair.
2. B and C mix a comma with a dash. D uses colons, which cannot wrap extra information.

ANSWER A) mayor — a former science teacher — opened

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Three planets are visible tonight _____ Venus, Mars, and Jupiter.

A) tonight; Venus
B) tonight, Venus
C) tonight: Venus
D) tonight Venus

1. "Three planets are visible tonight" is a full sentence, and a list follows.
2. A semicolon needs a full sentence after it; a list is not one.

ANSWER C) tonight: Venus

5 Commas: The Basics

Lists · openings · FANBOYS · where NOT to put one

BOUNDARIES

28 questions in the bank

Commas have only a few jobs. Learn the jobs, and you will also know when a comma has nothing to do and must go.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- a comma in the underlined part
- choices that differ only in commas
- a list of three or more items
- a long opening phrase before the subject
- a comma right after the subject or before the verb

LIST

A, B, and C

Put a comma between items, including before the final and.

✓ She packed a tent, a stove, and a map.

OPENING ELEMENT

After the storm, we ...

A word, phrase or dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence is followed by a comma.

✓ Unfortunately, the store was closed.
✓ After the storm passed, we cleaned the yard.

COMMA + FANBOYS

IC, and IC

Use the comma only when there is a full sentence on both sides. With one subject and two verbs, no comma.

- ✓ She wrote the code, and he tested it.
- ✓ She wrote the code and tested it.

EQUAL ADJECTIVES

a tired, hungry traveler

Two adjectives that each describe the noun equally get a comma. Test: can you swap them or put “and” between them?

- ✓ a narrow, rocky ridge
- ✓ a small wooden box (no comma)

NOT BETWEEN SUBJECT AND VERB

subject ×, verb

Never separate a subject from its verb with a single comma, even when the subject is long.

- × The students who studied every day, passed.
- ✓ The students who studied every day passed.

NOT BETWEEN VERB AND ITS OBJECT

verb ×, object

No comma between a verb (or a preposition) and what it needs to finish the idea.

- × She gave, the book to Sam.
- ✓ She gave the book to Sam.

NOT BEFORE A CLOSING BECAUSE

IC because ...

A dependent clause that completes the meaning at the end of a sentence usually needs no comma.

- ✓ I stayed home because it rained.

NOT AFTER THAT / AND

that ×, / and ×,

Do not put a comma right after that, because, and or but when the sentence simply continues.

- × The report said that, prices rose.

CONTRAST WORD AT THE END

IC , although · though · while · whereas DC

A contrast word that opens the second part is normally set off by a comma. Words of reason or condition (because, since, if, unless) usually take no comma.

- ✓ She stayed calm, although the news was bad.
- ✓ She stayed calm because the news was good.

“-SELF” WORDS

the mayor herself · the city itself

No comma before or around a -self word (itself, herself, themselves). A comma can follow it only when the sentence needs one anyway, for example before and or but.

- × The mayor, herself, opened the park.
- ✓ The mayor herself opened the park.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION **The students who finished the exam early _____ were allowed to leave.**

A) early,
B) early;
C) early:
D) early

1. The subject is “The students who finished the exam early”. The verb is “were allowed”.
2. No punctuation separates a subject from its verb.

ANSWER **D) early**

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION **After the storm finally passed _____ the volunteers cleared the fallen branches.**

A) passed, the
B) passed the
C) passed; the
D) passed: the

1. “After the storm finally passed” is an opening dependent clause, so a comma follows it.
2. A semicolon or a colon would need a full sentence before it.

ANSWER **A) passed, the**

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Priya designed the logo _____ tested the website.

A) logo, and
B) logo; and
C) logo, but
D) logo and

1. One subject (Priya) with two verbs (designed, tested): no comma before and.
2. A comma before and is used only when a full sentence follows.

ANSWER D) logo and

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The hikers crossed a narrow _____ rocky ridge.

A) narrow
B) narrow;
C) narrow:
D) narrow,

1. Both adjectives describe ridge equally: "a rocky, narrow ridge" and "narrow and rocky" both work.
2. Equal adjectives are separated by a comma.

ANSWER D) narrow,

6 Extra Information

Commas · dashes · parentheses · essential vs nonessential

BOUNDARIES · CORE RULE · 24 questions in the bank

Extra information can be removed without breaking the sentence. Wrap it in a matching pair: two commas, two dashes or two parentheses. Never mix them.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

two commas, dashes or parentheses around a phrase | who / which / a noun phrase renaming the noun before it | a name right after a general noun (the playwright August Wilson) | choices with only ONE comma | that vs which

THE CUT-OUT TEST

Cross it out: does the sentence still work?

Yes, and the meaning stays → nonessential (extra) → matching pair of commas, dashes or parentheses. No, or the meaning changes → essential → no punctuation.

NONESSENTIAL (EXTRA)

My sister, who lives in Ohio, is a nurse.

"who lives in Ohio" is extra (there is only one sister). Both commas are needed.

× My sister, who lives in Ohio is a nurse.

ESSENTIAL (NEEDED)

The sister who lives in Ohio is a nurse.

It tells you WHICH sister, so you cannot remove it. No commas.

APPOSITIVE = EXTRA

Marie Curie, a physicist, won two Nobel Prizes.

An appositive renames the noun next to it. If it is extra, wrap it in a pair.

ESSENTIAL APPOSITIVE

The playwright August Wilson wrote Fences.

"August Wilson" is needed to say WHICH playwright. When the name identifies the general noun before it, no commas. Same with titles: American artist Richard Serra.

× The playwright, August Wilson, wrote Fences.

MATCHING PAIR

, … , — … — (…)

Both ends must be the same mark. A comma on one end and a dash on the other is wrong. After a closing parenthesis, add a comma only if the sentence needs one anyway.

× The mayor, a former teacher — opened it.
✓ The mayor, a former teacher, opened it.

THAT VS WHICH

that = essential · , which = extra

“that” has no comma before it. “which” is used with a comma for extra information.

- ✓ The book that I borrowed was long.
- ✓ The book, which I borrowed from Sam, was long.

AT THE EDGE: ONE COMMA

We visited Paris, which Sam loves.

At the beginning or the end of a sentence the sentence edge acts as the second comma.

WHERE DOES IT END?

the last comma sits right before the main verb

In a long sentence, find where the extra information starts, then where it stops. It stops right before the main verb, and that is where the closing comma goes.

- ✓ The old observatory, which was built on the hill more than a century ago, still attracts visitors.

DO NOT STOP AFTER IT

subject , who / which ... (no verb) = fragment

A subject plus extra information is not a sentence until a main verb follows. Look for the real verb after the closing comma.

- ✗ The observatory, which opened in 1901.
- ✓ The observatory, which opened in 1901, still attracts visitors.

OF WHOM · OF WHICH

most of whom · many of which

Extra information that starts with a group word + of whom / of which is dependent, so it follows a comma. “Most of them” starts a new sentence, so a comma before it is a comma splice.

- ✓ The museum hired ten guides, most of whom speak three languages.
- ✗ The museum hired ten guides, most of them speak three languages.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Dr. Alvarez _____ published a new report.

A) , who studies coral reefs
B) who studies coral reefs,
C) , who studies coral reefs,
D) who studies coral reefs

1. A name is already specific, so “who studies coral reefs” is extra information.
2. Extra information in the middle needs both commas.

ANSWER C) , who studies coral reefs,

One comma only (A or B) is never right for extra information in the middle.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The playwright _____ set many of his plays in Pittsburgh.

A) August Wilson
B) , August Wilson,
C) , August Wilson
D) August Wilson,

1. “The playwright” alone does not say which playwright, so “August Wilson” is needed.
2. Essential information gets no commas.

ANSWER A) August Wilson

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The bridge _____ still carries thousands of cars a day.

A) — completed in 1932,
B) , completed in 1932 —
C) — completed in 1932 —
D) : completed in 1932 :

1. "completed in 1932" is extra information, so it needs a matching pair.
2. A and B mix a dash with a comma. D uses colons, which cannot wrap extra information.

ANSWER C) — completed in 1932 —

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Mount Kilimanjaro _____ attracts thousands of climbers each year.

A) , the tallest mountain in Africa,
B) the tallest mountain in Africa,
C) , the tallest mountain in Africa
D) the tallest mountain in Africa

1. "the tallest mountain in Africa" renames Kilimanjaro. Kilimanjaro is already a specific name, so the appositive is extra.
2. It needs both commas.

ANSWER A) , the tallest mountain in Africa,

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The museum hired ten guides _____ speak three languages.

A) guides, most of them
B) guides most of whom
C) guides; most of whom
D) guides, most of whom

1. "most of whom" starts extra information (a dependent clause), so it follows a comma and the sentence continues with its verb: speak.
2. A: "most of them" starts a new sentence, so a comma alone is a comma splice. B: the comma is missing. C: a semicolon needs a full sentence after it.

ANSWER D) guides, most of whom

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The observatory, which opened in 1901 _____ still attracts thousands of visitors each year.

A) 1901;
B) 1901,
C) 1901
D) 1901, and

1. "which opened in 1901" is extra information that began after a comma, so it needs a closing comma before the main verb "still attracts".
2. A: a semicolon needs a full sentence before it. C: the second comma is missing. D: "and" would leave the sentence without a main verb after the extra information.

ANSWER B) 1901,

7 Participles & Modifiers

Comma + -ing · opening phrases · dangling modifiers

BOUNDARIES | FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE

28 questions in the bank

A phrase that starts with an -ing or -ed word describes something. The thing it describes must come right next to it, and the comma shows where the phrase ends.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- a sentence that starts with an -ing or -ed phrase and a comma
- comma + -ing at the end of a sentence
- and + -ing
- who is doing the action?
- choices that change the noun right after the comma

PARTICIPIAL PHRASE

-ing / -ed phrase

It has no subject and no real verb, so it cannot stand alone. It hangs on the main clause and is set off by a comma. -ing = active, -ed = passive.

✓ Exhausted by the trip, she fell asleep.

COMMA + -ING AT THE END

Main clause, -ing phrase

The -ing phrase adds information about the whole main clause, often a result or an action happening at the same time. It is a clean way to add a second idea.

✓ It rained heavily, flooding the streets.
✓ She left the room, slamming the door.

NEVER "AND" + -ING

finite verb and -ing ×

"and" joins equal parts. A real verb cannot be paired with a bare -ing phrase.

× The team trained for months and winning the title.

✓ The team trained for months and won the title.

ONE MAIN VERB PER CLAUSE

two finite verbs need a connector

If the second idea has no connector and no new subject, turn its verb into an -ing form.

× The robot assembles the parts, it moves them to the shelf.

✓ The robot assembles the parts, moving them to the shelf.

DANGLING MODIFIER

Opening phrase → the next noun is the doer

The noun right after the comma must be the one doing the action in the opening phrase.

× Walking to school, the rain started.

✓ Walking to school, Sam felt the rain start.

MISPLACED MODIFIER

put it next to what it describes

A description must sit next to the thing it describes.

× Written in 1925, many readers still admire the novel.

✓ Written in 1925, the novel is still admired.

CONNECTOR + -ING

since · while · before · after + -ing

After a connector, an -ing phrase works when there is no new subject. With its own subject, the clause needs a real verb. The past version is having + past participle.

✓ Since joining the club, she has won twice.

✓ Having finished the test, he left early.

× Although the lake freezing each winter, boats cross it.

QUICK CHECK FOR OPENING PHRASES

Read the opening phrase, then ask: **"Who or what is doing this?"** The answer must be the first noun after the comma. If it is not, the sentence is wrong.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Hoping to catch the comet, _____

A) the astronomer aimed the telescope at the northern sky.
B) the telescope was aimed at the northern sky.
C) the sky was clear that night.
D) a new telescope was built last year.

1. Who is hoping? A person, not a telescope or the sky.
2. The noun right after the comma must be that person.

ANSWER A) the astronomer aimed the telescope at the northern sky.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The team trained for months _____ the championship.

A) and winning
B) , and winning
C) and won
D) , won

1. One subject (the team) does both things: trained and won, joined by "and".
2. "and" joins equal forms: a real verb with a real verb. A and B pair a real verb with an -ing phrase. D has no connector.

ANSWER C) and won

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The company lowered its prices _____ more customers.

A) , and attracting
B) ; attracting
C) , it attracts
D) , attracting

1. The second idea is the result of the first. A comma + -ing phrase can add it.
2. A: "and" + -ing. B: a semicolon needs a full sentence after it. C: comma splice.

ANSWER D) , attracting

Comma + -ing is the one-comma way to join a result to a main clause.

8 Apostrophes & Possessives

its / it's · whose / who's · plural vs possessive

FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE — CORE RULE — 16 questions in the bank

An apostrophe has two jobs: showing a missing letter (it's = it is) and showing ownership (the dog's bowl). It never makes a plural.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

its / it's · whose / who's · their / they're / there · a noun + 's or s' · choices that differ only in the apostrophe

ITS VS IT'S

its = belongs to it · it's = it is / it has

Test: say "it is" or "it has" in its place. If it fits, use it's. If not, its. The form its' does not exist.

- ✓ The company changed its logo.
- ✓ It's a good plan.

WHOSE VS WHO'S

whose = of whom / of which · who's = who is / who has

whose can be used for things, too, not only people.

- ✓ The author whose novel won the prize will speak tonight.
- ✓ A river whose banks are steep is hard to cross.

THEIR / THEY'RE / THERE

their = of them · they're = they are · there = place

Test: replace with "they are". If it fits → they're. If it shows ownership → their.

- ✓ They're proud of their work, and it shows there.

ONE OWNER

the student's notebook

Singular owner: add 's.

MANY OWNERS

the students' notebooks

Plural owners ending in -s: add the apostrophe after the s.

IRREGULAR PLURALS

children's · women's · people's

A plural that does not end in -s takes 's.

- × childrens' books
- ✓ children's books

PLURAL ≠ POSSESSIVE

dogs · the dog's bowl

A plain plural has no apostrophe. A possessive needs a noun right after it to be owned.

- × The dog's are loyal.
- ✓ The dogs are loyal.

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS: NONE

yours · hers · ours · theirs · its

Possessive pronouns never take an apostrophe.

- × The decision is her's.
- ✓ The decision is hers.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The museum announced that _____ new wing will open in May.

A) it's
B) its'
C) its
D) they're

1. Replace with "it is": "that it is new wing" makes no sense, so it is not it's.
2. The wing belongs to the museum, so use the possessive its.

ANSWER C) its

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Several of the _____ essays were selected for publication.

A) students
B) students'
C) student's
D) students's

1. Several students own the essays, and the owner is plural: students' (apostrophe after the s).
2. "Several of the" signals more than one student.

ANSWER B) students'

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The author _____ novel won the prize will speak tonight.

A) who's
B) whom
C) whose
D) which

1. Replace with "who is": "The author who is novel" is wrong, so not who's.
2. The novel belongs to the author: whose.

ANSWER C) whose

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The library added a new section for _____ books.

A) childrens
B) childrens'
C) children's
D) children

1. The books belong to children. Children is a plural without -s, so it takes 's.

ANSWER C) children's

9 Subject–Verb Agreement

Find the real subject, then match

FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE | CORE RULE | 30 questions in the bank

A singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. The trick on the SAT is that other words get in the way.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- an underlined is / are, was / were, has / have
- a verb ending in -s next to a plural-looking noun
- a long phrase between the subject and the verb
- there is / there are
- each · every · either · neither
- and · or · nor between subjects
- a group noun (committee, team, family)

FIND THE REAL SUBJECT

cross out the phrase in the middle

Phrases that start with of, in, with, along with, as well as, including do NOT change the subject.

- ✓ The box of old letters was missing.
- ✓ The results, along with a new measurement, suggest a problem.

SINGULAR VERBS END IN -S

she suggests · they suggest

With regular present-tense verbs, the singular verb ends in -s. Is / was / has are singular; are / were / have are plural.

AGREEMENT DISGUISED AS TENSE

choices: has / have · was / were · is / are

If the choices differ only in singular vs plural, the question is about agreement, not tense. Find the real subject first.

THERE IS / THERE ARE

the subject comes AFTER the verb

Find the subject after the verb, then match.

- ✓ There are three reasons for the delay.
- ✓ There is a reason for the delay.

AND → PLURAL

A and B → plural

Two subjects joined by and are plural.

- ✓ The pen and the notebook are on the desk.

OR / NOR → THE CLOSER ONE

A or B → verb matches B

With or, nor, either...or, neither...nor, the verb agrees with the subject closest to it.

- ✓ Neither the teacher nor the students were ready.
- ✓ Neither the students nor the teacher was ready.

SINGULAR ALWAYS

each · every · one · either · neither (+ of ...)

“Each of the answers is...”, “One of the books was...”. The word after of does not matter.

- ✓ Each of the students is required to submit an essay.

GROUP NOUNS

committee · team · company · family

Treated as one unit: singular verb, singular pronoun (it, its).

- ✓ The committee has voted.

A NUMBER OF · THE NUMBER OF

a number of + plural · the number of + singular

“A number of” means several, so the verb is plural. “The number of” is a count, so the verb is singular.

- ✓ A number of students are absent.
- ✓ The number of students is growing.

RELATIVE CLAUSES

who / which / that take the verb of what they replace

“one of the X who ...” → plural (who = the X). “the only one of the X who ...” → singular.

- ✓ She is one of the scientists who study coral.
- ✓ She is the only one of the scientists who studies coral.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The collection of rare coins _____ displayed on the second floor.

A) are
B) is
C) were
D) have been

1. Cross out “of rare coins”. The subject is “collection” (singular).

ANSWER B) is

The noun right before the verb (coins) is the trap.

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION There _____ several reasons the experiment failed.

A) is
B) was
C) has been
D) are

1. After “there”, the subject comes after the verb: “several reasons” (plural).

ANSWER D) are

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Neither the manager nor the employees _____ aware of the change.

A) were
B) was
C) is
D) has been

1. With neither...nor, the verb agrees with the closest subject: "employees" (plural).

ANSWER A) were

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The results of the study, along with a new set of measurements, _____ that the model needs revision.

A) suggests
B) suggest
C) is suggesting
D) has suggested

1. "along with..." does not change the subject. The subject is "results" (plural).

ANSWER B) suggest

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The number of applicants for the scholarship _____ risen every year.

A) have
B) is
C) were
D) has

1. The subject is "the number" (a count), not "applicants". It is singular.
2. The number of → singular verb: has risen. A would need a plural subject.

ANSWER D) has

A number of = several (plural) · The number of = a count (singular).

10 Verb Tense & Forms

Time clues · perfect tenses · if-sentences

FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE — CORE RULE — 26 questions in the bank

Keep the tense consistent unless time really changes. Look for the clue words: dates, since, for, by the time, if.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

a verb with -ed, -ing, has / have / had · years, dates, since, for · by the time · by the beginning of · if ... would · has + went / wrote / took · choices: was · has been · had been · will be

SIMPLE PAST

in 2015 · last year · yesterday · ago

A finished action at a specific time in the past.

✓ She moved here in 2015.

PRESENT PERFECT

since · so far · up to now · over the past... → has / have + past participle

An action that started in the past and connects to now.

✓ He has lived here since 2015.

PAST PERFECT

by the time · by the end of → had + past participle

An action finished before another past moment. "By the beginning / end of + past time" almost always signals it.

✓ By the end of 1999, the band had sold ten thousand copies.

STAY CONSISTENT

match the surrounding verbs

Keep the same tense in a sequence unless the time really changes.

✓ She opened the door and walked in.
✗ She opened the door and walks in.

CONDITIONALS

If + had + pp → would have + pp

The "if" part takes had + past participle; the result part takes would have + past participle. Never "if ... would have".

- ✓ If I had known, I would have called.
- × If I would have known, I would have called.

HYPOTHETICAL PRESENT

If + past → would + verb

For something unreal now, use the past form in the "if" part (were for be).

- ✓ If the tower were taller, it would block the view.

DEMANDS AND SUGGESTIONS

suggest · recommend · insist · require + that + base verb

After a verb of demand or advice, the verb after that stays in its base form, even with he / she / it.

- ✓ The doctor recommended that he rest.
- × The doctor recommended that he rests.

WISHES

wish + past form · wish + had + pp

A wish about now uses the past form (were for be). A wish about the past uses had + past participle.

- ✓ I wish it were Friday.
- ✓ She wishes she had called earlier.

PAST PARTICIPLE AFTER HAS / HAVE / HAD

has risen · had taken · have begun

After has, have or had, use the past participle, not the simple past.

- × The river has rose.
- ✓ The river has risen.

-ING ALONE IS NOT A VERB

is studying ✓ · studying ×

A sentence needs a finite verb (is, was, studies). A bare -ing or to + verb makes a fragment.

- × The scientist studying coral.
- ✓ The scientist studies coral.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION By the beginning of the 2000s, the town _____ its only factory.

A) closes
B) has closed
C) had closed
D) will close

1. "By the beginning of the 2000s" points to an action finished before a past moment: past perfect.

ANSWER C) had closed

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Since 2010, the lab _____ more than 200 species.

A) discovered
B) has discovered
C) discovers
D) had discovered

1. "Since 2010" connects the past to now: present perfect.

ANSWER B) has discovered

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION If the committee _____ the data earlier, it would have reached a different decision.

A) would have reviewed
B) reviewed
C) had reviewed
D) has reviewed

1. The result part has "would have reached", so the "if" part takes had + past participle.

ANSWER C) had reviewed

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The river has _____ over its banks twice this year.

A) rose
B) rising
C) rises
D) risen

1. After "has", use the past participle: has risen.

ANSWER D) risen

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The board required that every member _____ the new policy before the vote.

A) signs
B) signed
C) is signing
D) sign

1. "required that" is a demand, so the verb after "that" stays in its base form.
2. Even with a singular subject (every member), the base form is used: sign. A adds -s, B is past, C is a progressive form.

ANSWER D) sign

require · suggest · insist · recommend + that → base verb (that he rest, that she be).

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The explorer opened the map, studied the route, and _____ the camp at dawn.

A) left
B) leaves
C) has left
D) leaving

1. The first two verbs are simple past, so the third one matches: opened, studied, left.

ANSWER A) left

Keep a sequence of actions in one tense.

11 Pronouns

Case · agreement · clear reference

FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE

16 questions in the bank

A pronoun must match the noun it replaces (its antecedent) in number, and it must use the right case: subject, object or possessive.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

he / him · she / her · they / them | its / their | this / that / it with an unclear meaning | who / whom | a company, team or group | one / you / they switching

SUBJECT PRONOUNS

I · you · he · she · it · we · they

They do the action and are followed by a verb. After a semicolon the next clause needs a subject.

✓ She completed her studies.

OBJECT PRONOUNS

me · you · him · her · it · us · them

They receive the action or come after a preposition: with her, to them.

✓ The teacher thanked Priya and me.

POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVES

my · your · his · her · its · our · their

They must be followed by a noun, and they cannot be subjects.

✓ Her education was important.

× Her was a dancer.

NUMBER AGREEMENT

singular noun → it / its · plural noun → they / their

The pronoun must match the noun it replaces in number.

✓ The company raised its prices.

× The company raised their prices.

GROUP NOUNS

company · committee · team · audience → it

Treated as a single unit.

✓ The committee announced its decision.

VAGUE PRONOUN

one pronoun = one clear owner

If a pronoun could mean two nouns, the sentence is unclear.

× Maria told Anna that she had won.

✓ Maria told Anna, “You won.”

DO NOT SWITCH PERSON

one … one · you … you · students … they

Do not jump from one to you or from a plural noun to he.

× If one studies daily, you will improve.

✓ If you study daily, you will improve.

WHO VS WHOM

who = subject · whom = object

who is followed by a verb. whom comes after a preposition or is the object (to whom, with whom). Details in the Transitions & Connectors Card.

✓ The student who won the prize thanked the teacher with whom she had studied.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The company announced that _____ profits had doubled.

A) its
B) their
C) it’s
D) there

1. “company” is one unit, so the pronoun is singular: it / its.
2. Profits belong to the company: the possessive its (not it’s).

ANSWER A) its

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The teacher thanked Priya and _____ for the careful work.

A) I
B) me
C) myself
D) mine

1. The pronoun is an object of “thanked”, so use the object form: me. Test: “thanked me”.

ANSWER B) me

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION Students who study every day will find that _____ scores improve.

A) his
B) your
C) their
D) one’s

1. “Students” is plural, so the pronoun is plural: their.

ANSWER C) their

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The twins and _____ walked to school together.

A) me
B) I
C) myself
D) mine

1. The pronoun is part of the subject. Test: “I walked”, not “me walked”.

ANSWER B) I

12 Parallel Structure & Comparisons

Same form in lists, pairs and comparisons

FORM · STRUCTURE · SENSE

12 questions in the bank

Items joined by and, or, but, or in a list must have the same form, and comparisons must compare like with like, with the right form for two things or three or more.

IF YOU SEE THESE IN A QUESTION, THINK OF THIS RULE

- a list of three things
- not only ... but also · either ... or · both ... and
- than / as ... as
- mixed -ing, to and plain verbs in a list
- a comparison with of
- taller / more tall / tallest in the choices
- fewer / less · many / much

LISTS

A, B, and C — same form

Every item in a list has the same grammatical form.

- ✓ She likes hiking, cycling, and swimming.
- × She likes hiking, to cycle, and swimming.

AND / OR / BUT

"and" joins equal structures

What is on the left of and must have the same form as what is on the right.

- ✓ She endured the heat and finished the race.
- × She endured the heat and finishing the race.

PAIRS

not only ... but also · either ... or · neither ... nor · both ... and · as ... as

What follows each half must match, and a pair cannot be mixed: neither ... nor (not neither ... or), as ... as (not as ... than).

- ✓ He is both a skilled writer and a gifted speaker.
- × He is both a skilled writer and speaks well.
- × Neither the actor or the director agreed.

COMPARISONS

compare like with like

You can only compare things of the same kind. Use that of / those of to avoid repeating a noun.

- ✓ The climate of Seattle is milder than that of Boston.
- × The climate of Seattle is milder than Boston.

TWO THINGS OR THREE?

two → -er / more · three or more → -est / most

Compare two things with -er or more (+ than). Pick one of three or more with -est or most (+ the). Use the ending or more / most, never both.

- ✓ Of the two plans, the second is cheaper.
- ✓ Of the three plans, the second is the cheapest.
- × The road is more narrower than the bridge.

COUNTABLE OR NOT?

fewer · many + plural · less · much + singular

If you can count it, use fewer / many. If you cannot count it, use less / much.

- ✓ The new engine burns less fuel and makes fewer errors.
- × The new engine burns fewer fuel and makes less errors.

Worked examples

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The program teaches students to write clearly, think critically, and _____.

A) speaking confidently
B) speak confidently
C) for speaking confidently
D) how they speak

1. The list is "to write..., think..., and _____": bare verbs after one "to".

ANSWER B) speak confidently

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The new design is not only cheaper but also _____.

A) it is more durable
B) durability is better
C) more durable
D) lasts longer

1. "not only cheaper" is an adjective, so the second half must be an adjective: more durable.

ANSWER C) more durable

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The population of Tokyo is larger than _____ of Paris.

A) Paris
B) that
C) it
D) those

1. Compare population with population: "that of Paris" (population is singular).

ANSWER B) that

WORKED EXAMPLE — SAT-style question

QUESTION The new engine burns _____ fuel than the old one.

A) fewer
B) many
C) less
D) much fewer

1. Fuel cannot be counted, so use less (not fewer or many).
2. D: "much fewer" has the same problem as fewer.

ANSWER C) less

Can you count it? One fuel, two fuels? No → less / much.

13 Question Recognition Map

What you see → what you do

Read the left column, say the right column. Know which rule a question tests and half the work is done.

WHAT YOU SEE IN THE QUESTION		WHAT YOU DO
two full sentences, choices include . ; , :	→	period · semicolon · comma + FANBOYS · never a comma alone
comma + it / this / they / he / she	→	probably a comma splice → period, semicolon or FANBOYS
however · therefore · moreover after a comma	→	brick, not glue → ; however, or . However,
; and / ; but	→	remove: use , and / , but
a list whose items contain commas	→	separate the items with semicolons
a colon	→	full sentence before it; explanation or list after it; never after is / are / include / of
a single dash —	→	same job as a colon: full sentence + explanation
two commas / two dashes / two parentheses	→	extra information: cross it out, it must still work; the pair must match
one lonely comma in the middle of a sentence	→	wrong for extra information; also wrong between subject and verb
a name right after a general noun (the poet Maya Angelou)	→	essential → no commas
that vs which	→	that: no comma · , which: extra information
opening -ing / -ed phrase + comma	→	the next noun must be the doer
comma + -ing at the end	→	fine: adds a result or a second action
and + -ing	→	wrong: use a real verb that matches the other verb
its / it's · whose / who's	→	say "it is" / "who is": fits → apostrophe form
students' vs student's	→	many owners → s' · one owner → 's
long phrase between subject and verb	→	cross it out and find the real subject
there is / there are	→	the subject comes after the verb
or / nor · and	→	or / nor → closest subject · and → plural
since · so far · over the past...	→	has / have + past participle
by the time · by the beginning of	→	had + past participle
if ... would have	→	if + had + pp, would have + pp
company · team · committee	→	it / its, singular verb
mixed -ing / to / plain verbs in a list	→	make every item the same form
than + a noun of a different kind	→	that of / those of: compare like with like
-er / more / -est / most in the choices	→	two things → -er / more · three or more → -est / most · never both
? or . in the choices	→	asks directly → ? · reported question (she asked where...) → .
a statement starting with who · which · whose · where	→	dependent clause: a fragment if it stands alone
most of whom · many of which vs most of them	→	of whom / of which: extra info, one comma · of them: new sentence
. ; and , + and / but all among the choices	→	they do the same job: cross them all out, test the one left
then · now · today · later after a comma	→	new sentence: period or semicolon first
fewer · less · many · much	→	countable → fewer / many · not countable → less / much
as ... as · neither ... nor · more ... than	→	keep the pair together (not as ... than, not neither ... or)
choices: is / are · has / have · was / were	→	agreement first: find the real subject
a number of / the number of	→	a number of → plural verb · the number of → singular verb
suggest · require · insist + that	→	base verb after that: that he rest (not rests)

THE 4-STEP ROUTINE FOR ANY CONVENTIONS QUESTION

1. Read the whole sentence, not just the underlined part. **2.** Look at what changes between the choices (punctuation? verb form? pronoun?): that tells you the rule. **3.** Apply the rule and cross out the wrong choices. **4.** Plug your answer back in and read it once more.

TRY IT NOW

22 questions, 11 chapters

Two questions from each chapter, easy to medium level. Solve them yourself first, then check the solutions after question 22. Remember the rule by **using** it, not by memorizing it.

1 Chapter 2 · Joining Two Sentences

The museum opened a new gallery in June _____ visitors have filled it every weekend since.

A) June, visitors
B) June visitors
C) June; and visitors
D) June; visitors

2 Chapter 2 · Joining Two Sentences

The storm knocked out power across the city _____ crews worked through the night to restore it.

A) city, and crews
B) city, crews
C) city, therefore crews
D) city and, crews

3 Chapter 3 · Semicolons

The trail is steep and rocky _____ the views from the summit are worth the effort.

A) rocky; however the
B) rocky; however, the
C) rocky, however, the
D) rocky however, the

4 Chapter 3 · Semicolons

The panel included _____

A) Dr. Lee, a chemist; Dr. Patel, a physicist; and Dr. Cruz, a biologist.
B) Dr. Lee, a chemist, Dr. Patel, a physicist, and Dr. Cruz, a biologist.
C) Dr. Lee; a chemist, Dr. Patel; a physicist, and Dr. Cruz; a biologist.
D) Dr. Lee, a chemist: Dr. Patel, a physicist: and Dr. Cruz, a biologist.

5 Chapter 4 · Colons & Dashes

A good study plan has one requirement _____ consistency.

A) requirement: consistency
B) requirement, consistency
C) requirement; consistency
D) requirement consistency

6 Chapter 4 · Colons & Dashes

The scientists made a startling discovery _____ the signal was coming from inside the lab.

A) discovery, the
B) discovery — the
C) discovery the
D) discovery, — the

7 Chapter 5 · Commas: The Basics

The chef roasted the vegetables _____ plated them with care.

A) vegetables, and
B) vegetables; and
C) vegetables, but
D) vegetables and

8 Chapter 5 · Commas: The Basics

The village sits beside a quiet _____ peaceful lake.

A) quiet
B) quiet,
C) quiet;
D) quiet:

9 Chapter 6 · Extra Information

Marie Curie _____ discovered two elements.

A) , the first woman to win a Nobel Prize,
B) , the first woman to win a Nobel Prize
C) the first woman to win a Nobel Prize,
D) the first woman to win a Nobel Prize

10 Chapter 6 · Extra Information

The novelist _____ won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

A) , Toni Morrison,
B) Toni Morrison
C) Toni Morrison,
D) , Toni Morrison

11 Chapter 7 · Participles & Modifiers

Surprised by the early snow, _____

A) the hiking trip was cut short.
B) a new trail was closed.
C) the hikers cut their trip short.
D) the weather turned colder.

12 Chapter 7 · Participles & Modifiers

The factory expanded its night shift _____ production by 30 percent.

A) , and increasing
B) ; increasing
C) , increasing
D) , it increased

13 Chapter 8 · Apostrophes & Possessives

The school has 400 students, and each has a locker. The _____ lockers were repainted over the summer.

A) students’ **B)** students
C) student’s **D)** students’s

14 Chapter 8 · Apostrophes & Possessives

Do you know _____ coat this is?

A) who’s **B)** whom
C) who **D)** whose

15 Chapter 9 · Subject–Verb Agreement

The key to the success of the new programs _____ careful planning.

A) are **B)** were
C) have been **D)** is

16 Chapter 9 · Subject–Verb Agreement

Each of the volunteers _____ trained for several weeks before the event.

A) were **B)** have
C) was **D)** are

17 Chapter 10 · Verb Tense & Forms

By the time the rescue team arrived, the hikers _____ in the cave for two days.

A) are **B)** have been
C) had been **D)** were being

18 Chapter 10 · Verb Tense & Forms

If the engineers _____ the flaw sooner, the bridge would never have failed.

A) had found **B)** would have found
C) found **D)** have found

19 Chapter 11 · Pronouns

The coach gave the award to Sam and _____.

A) I **B)** myself
C) mine **D)** me

20 Chapter 11 · Pronouns

Both of the engineers said that _____ had checked the design twice.

A) he **B)** they
C) she **D)** it

21 Chapter 12 · Parallel Structure

The coach asked the players to run faster, pass more accurately, and _____.

A) for better communication **B)** communicate better
C) communicating better **D)** that they communicate better

22 Chapter 12 · Parallel Structure

The rainfall in Lima is lower than _____ in Quito.

A) Quito **B)** it
C) that **D)** those

Answers and short solutions

1 · D Two full sentences. *June, visitors* is a comma splice; *June visitors* is a run-on; *; and* is never right. Semicolon.

2 · A Comma + FANBOYS (and). *therefore* is not a FANBOYS word, so B and C are comma splices.

3 · B Semicolon before the conjunctive adverb, comma after: *; however, the*.

4 · A Every item already contains a comma (name, job), so the items are separated with semicolons.

5 · A What follows the blank is a single word that names the requirement. A colon fits. A semicolon needs a full sentence.

6 · B A single dash (like a colon) introduces the explanation. A is a comma splice, C a run-on, D mixes a comma and a dash.

7 · D One subject (the chef), two verbs (roasted, plated). No comma before *and*.

8 · B Quiet and peaceful describe the lake equally (“a peaceful, quiet lake” works), so they get a comma.

9 · A The appositive is extra information about a specific name: a pair of commas.

10 · B “The novelist” does not say which novelist, so the name is essential: no commas.

11 · C Who is surprised? The hikers. The noun right after the comma must be the doer.

12 · C Comma + -ing adds the result. *, and increasing* pairs “and” with an -ing form, a semicolon needs a full sentence, and *, it increased* is a comma splice.

13 · A Four hundred students own lockers: plural owners → students’.

14 · D The coat belongs to someone: whose. (Who’s = who is.)

15 · D Subject: *key* (singular). The words after *of* do not change the subject.

16 · C *Each* is always singular → was trained.

17 · C An action that was already going on before another past moment: past perfect (had been).

18 · A The result part has *would have failed*, so the "if" part takes *had found*.

19 · D Object of the preposition to: *Sam and me*. Test: "gave the award to me".

20 · B *Both* → plural → they.

21 · B The first two verbs are *run* and *pass* (after one *to*), so the third is *communicate* in the same form.

22 · C Compare rainfall with rainfall: *that* in Quito. *than Quito* compares rainfall with a city.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Start using the rules

Finishing this card does not mean you are ready. You will know you are ready when you **use the rule on a question**: a rule you read gets forgotten, but a rule you use in a solved question sticks.

1. **Cover the example on the card and solve it yourself.** Look at the steps only when you get stuck.
2. **Get used to the exam format with official Bluebook tests**; solve them with a timer.
3. **After every mistake, find the rule in this card** and write down its chapter number. Your list of chapters is your study plan.

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