

## SAT Strategies

### General Test Strategies

- **Be familiar with the instructions *before* you take the test** so that you won't need to waste time rereading them on the day of the test.
- **Take a watch with a timer** so you can keep track of how much time you have left on the section you're working on.
- **Don't spend too much time on any one problem.** You want to be sure to answer all of the easier questions in the section, so if you get stuck on a difficult problem, circle it in the test booklet and move on—but be sure that you don't mess up the numbering on your answer sheet.
- Remember that you're looking for the *best* answer choice available, so **be sure to look at all of the answer choices for each problem.** Don't just go with the first one that seems like it *could* be right.
- **Use the process of elimination:** cross out any answer choices that you decide are incorrect.
- **Guess when you can eliminate at least one answer choice that you know can't be the right answer.** One-fourth of a point is subtracted from your raw score for each incorrect answer, but guessing when you can confidently eliminate one answer choice is more likely to help your score than hurt it.
- **Unless you have a clear reason for changing an answer, go with your first guess;** statistically speaking, your first random guess is more likely to be correct than your second random guess.
- Although the answer choices are randomized, you may well encounter a stretch in which three straight questions have the same answer (A, B, C, D, or E). This can occur multiple times on the same test. **If you have chosen the same letter more than three times in a row, however, it is very likely that at least one of your answers is wrong.**
- **Use all the time you have;** if you finish a section early, double-check any answers you're not sure about, make sure your answer sheet is marked correctly, and take a second look at any questions you skipped.

### Sentence Completion

- Read the sentence first, and try to get a sense of the possible meaning of the sentence and the word(s) in the blank(s) before you look at the answer choices. **Anticipate the answer in your own words,** and then see whether any of the answer choices has about the same meaning as your guess.
- **The correct answer choice must be *specifically* supported by the clues in the sentence.** Remember that the sentences are logically constructed, not random; everything in the sentence is meaningful, and no answer choice will be contrary to the logic of the rest of the sentence. The sentences are designed very carefully, because there must be an ironclad argument that can be made for the best answer.
- **Look for structural clues:** words like *although* and *but* that express contrast or contradiction, words like *so* and *therefore* that express cause and effect, and semicolons and colons, which are used to introduce an explanation of, or additional information about, the first part of the sentence.
- Many of the sentences rely on a **contrast between positive and negative expressions.**
- **For sentences with two blanks, first focus on one blank and try to narrow down the possible answers;** then examine the other blank of the answer choices you think might be correct.
- I would recommend a pace of **30-40 seconds for each sentence completion problem.** If you can't figure out a particular sentence completion problem within that timeframe, you're probably not likely to get the right answer anyway.

### Critical Reading

- **Take time to read the italicized introduction to each passage first.** It gives you important background information that can help you interpret what you're reading.
- **Pacing yourself is especially important on these sections.** It's easy to get bogged down and spend a lot of time on critical reading questions, so make sure that you're aware of

how much time you've spent on each passage and how much time you have left. A good general rule is to allow 1 minute for each short-passage question, the number of questions plus 1 minute for medium-length passages with several questions, and the number of questions plus 2 minutes for long passages with a lot of questions (i.e. 14 minutes for a long passage with 12 questions). That pace should allow you to finish the section with a little bit of time to spare.

- In a section with two longer passages, do the one that seems easier first. But watch the numbering on your answer sheet carefully.
- Although each student should practice doing critical reading passages in order to figure out which approach works best for him or her, in general, reading the questions first is not likely to be the most efficient approach. **Scan the passage first (rather than reading word for word)**, focusing especially on the first paragraph, the last paragraph, and the first and last sentences of each paragraph. (I recommend underlining any key sentences to help you focus on them and help you find them easily when answering the questions.) **Pay close attention to the *main idea* of the passage (and of each paragraph) as you read it, as well as the author's tone or attitude toward the subject.** If you're wrong about the main idea or about the tone, you're likely to get many of the questions wrong.
- After you feel you have a good overall grasp of the passage, refer to the questions to guide you in reading particular sections of the passage in greater detail. But **don't just read the quoted lines; read *around* those lines to be sure you have a good understanding of their meaning and purpose in *context*.**
- **Understanding context is the single most important factor in getting the right answer.** If you don't consider the context, you're likely to misinterpret what the author is saying. Questions about specific things in the passage are usually related to the main idea of the passage or the main idea of the paragraph. Ask yourself this: How does the specific quotation, paragraph topic, or example fit into the context? In other words, how does it serve to support the point being made in the paragraph, and how does it relate to the main idea of the passage as a whole?
- **Answer as many questions as possible on a passage that you've already started before moving on.** If you've invested time in reading the passage, make sure you get the most out of that time. Remember, the questions aren't asked in order of increasing difficulty, so hard questions may be followed by easier questions.
- **Don't waste time with details that aren't relevant to the questions;** obviously, you only earn points for answering the questions.
- **Most of the questions are ordered according to the location of the answer in the passage, and most of them will refer to specific lines.** Use this information to figure out what parts you need to read more carefully. **It's best not to answer questions from memory;** find the specific information in the passage that gives the answer to the question.
- Don't base your answers on what you already know (or think you know) about the topic of the passage—**base your answers only on the information given in the passage.** Since the questions are not supposed to require specific outside knowledge about the topic, you should be able to answer them based only on what is in the passage. Applying outside knowledge to the questions may lead you to the wrong answer, especially since many of the passages present surprising information or ideas that contradict the “conventional wisdom” about the topic.
- **This principle especially holds true for “vocabulary-in-context” questions; don't base your answer only on whatever meanings of the word you may already know.** Although that knowledge might be helpful in finding the right answer, it might also lead you astray, because the words that they ask about are usually being used in an unusual way. **Go back and read the sentence in which the word appears, and answer the question based on *how it is used in that context*.** Be open to what may seem like unusual definitions of the word.
- **Answer choices that are extreme or ridiculous, or contrary to common sense, are not likely to be the right answer.** Correct answers are usually somewhat nuanced because SAT critical reading passages tend to be thoughtful and sophisticated, not simplistic; answer choices that express unqualified absolutes are usually not correct.

- **Accurately determining the author’s main point and tone/attitude is especially important for paired passages**, because some questions will ask you to compare or contrast the two passages. These passages usually express different points of view on the same general topic.
- **Do the paired passages one at a time.** Generally speaking, the first several questions will be about the first passage, the next several will be about the second passage, and the last few will be about both. If you answer the questions about the first passage while that passage is fresh in your mind, you’re less likely to get confused.
- **Many passages involve irony in some way**, so be on the lookout for sarcasm, subtle humorous touches, exaggerated claims, and other clues that indicate that the author is trying to imply something beyond what the surface meaning of the words might seem to indicate. Again, *context* is critical in identifying the use of irony.
- One of the characteristics of good writing that the test makers want you to be able to recognize is conciseness, the elimination of unnecessary words. Therefore, **shorter answer choices may have a slightly higher likelihood of being correct.**
- **However, remember that there are times when it is necessary to use more words to express an idea in a clear and grammatically correct way**, especially when the principles of parallelism and precision demand longer phrasing.
- Some of the most common errors in these questions (in addition to the subject-verb agreement, verb tense and form, and pronoun errors that are common in “ISE” questions) include **dangling modifiers, errors in parallelism, fragments** (usually due to the lack of a complete or “finite” verb), **comma splices, awkward phrasing, and errors in coordination** (using the right conjunction to connect different parts of a sentence).

### Improving Sentences

- **Try to do these questions in less than 40 seconds each on average.**
- For these questions, answer choice A is always the same as the original sentence, so **don’t waste your time rereading A.** Of the 25 Improving Sentences questions on the SAT (divided between two sections), **you can expect to see 3-6 correct sentences (answer choice A).** However, it’s possible for an entire section of “IS” questions to contain no A’s.
- **“IS” questions are generally presented in order of increasing difficulty.**
- **Any answer choice that contains a definite grammar error cannot be the right answer**, no matter how smoothly, clearly, and concisely it is worded.
- **However, remember that the answer choice you choose must not only be free of grammar errors within itself; it must also fit the rest of the sentence.** As in other types of SAT questions, *context* is critical. No matter how well it is worded, if an answer choice doesn’t make grammatical sense when paired with the rest of the sentence, it can’t be the right answer.

- Remember that expressions using “being” such as “being that,” “being as,” “it being,” etc. are considered awkward and are unlikely to appear in the correct answer. This doesn’t mean that every use of the word *being* is wrong, of course.

### Identifying Sentence Errors

- **Try to do these questions in less than 30 seconds each on average** (under 9 minutes for all of them).
- **“ISE” questions are generally presented in order of increasing difficulty.**
- **Answer choice E (“No Error”) will most likely be the right answer between two and four times in the 18-question (#12-29) stretch of “ISE” questions.** If you have chosen E more than four times, you have probably missed an error.
- The most common errors that appear in ISE questions are errors in **idiom**, errors in **verb tense or form**, errors in **subject-verb agreement**, errors in **pronoun use** (especially **pronoun number agreement** and **pronoun case**), errors in **parallelism**, and errors in **coordination**. For a nearly complete list of the grammar errors you may encounter, see the College Board’s *Official SAT Study Guide*.

- **Whenever you see a verb underlined, look for errors in form or tense. If the verb is in the present tense (or the past tense of “to be”), look for a subject-verb agreement error.** Sometimes there is an “incomplete” verb (usually an “-ing” verb) in the sentence that makes it a fragment.
- **Whenever you see a list or a sentence structure based on a parallel expression (such as “either...or...,” “neither...nor...,” or “not only...but also...”), make sure the sentence is parallel.**
- **Whenever you see a pronoun underlined, check to make sure that its antecedent (the noun or pronoun it refers to) is clear and that they agree in number. Also check to make sure that it is in the correct case (nominative or objective).**
- **Whenever you see a conjunction underlined, check the logic of the sentence to make sure it is an appropriate conjunction to use, and make sure that the sentence is not a fragment.**

### Improving Paragraphs

- **Try to spend no more than six minutes total on the six questions in this section.**
- **Improving paragraphs questions are based on a rough draft of a short essay, report, narrative, or personal reflection. The passage contains the kinds of weaknesses and errors that students are likely to make in an unpolished piece of writing: any of the grammar errors listed in *The Official SAT Study Guide*, wordiness, awkward wording, choppy sentences or fragments that should be combined, irrelevant or redundant details or comments, lack of appropriate topic sentences, problems with unity and coherence, unclearly or illogically connected ideas, and lack of appropriate transitions.**
- **The passage is very short, so take the time to scan it once to get a grasp of the author’s main idea and the topic of each paragraph. As with critical reading passages, an understanding of the overall *context* of the individual sentences and details being asked about will be helpful in answering the questions.**
- **In addition to the main idea, identify the *tone* of the passage. Is the author trying to be playful**

and humorous, report facts objectively, offer serious criticism, or convey a sense of wonder or admiration? Keep this purpose in mind as you answer the questions.

- **Among the grammar errors you may encounter in the passage, vague or ambiguous pronouns are especially common. Make sure that any pronoun referred to in a question has a clear antecedent.**
- **Fragments, comma splices, run-on sentences, and fused sentences are also quite common in these passages.**
- **When you’re asked to add a sentence to the beginning of a paragraph, consider the need for a transition that relates the topic of the previous paragraph to the topic of the current paragraph, which must be made clear. In some passages, a sentence that gives necessary background information for what is discussed in the paragraph may be the best option.**
- **When you’re asked to add a sentence to the end of the passage, follow these criteria: find the answer choice that flows appropriately from the previous sentence, best sums up the main idea of the passage, gives the passage a sense of resolution, and fits the tone and style that have been established.**
- **When you’re asked a question about what kind of example or new paragraph would strengthen the essay, consider the author’s main point. Which answer choice is most relevant to the goal of convincing the reader of the truth of the author’s central claim?**
- **When you add words to the beginning of a sentence or revise the beginning of a sentence, make sure it is clear how that sentence is related to the sentence before it and to the paragraph as a whole. Does it *contrast* with the sentence before it? Does it explain the *effect* of the sentence before it? Does it give an *example* of what is being discussed in the paragraph?**
- **When you’re asked to combine sentences, make sure that the resulting sentence is a complete sentence that does not “run on” or contain a comma splice. Also make sure that you connect the ideas in the two original sentences in a clear and logical way.**