

Every Grammar Rule You Need for the SAT

54 QUESTIONS • 64 MINUTES • 2 ADAPTIVE MODULES

~11 Standard English Conventions questions per module. The rest test reading comprehension (vocabulary, main idea, evidence, transitions). This guide covers the grammar & punctuation rules.

Boundaries (Punctuation)

Connecting Clauses: The Big Picture

The #1 skill on SAT grammar: knowing how to join two pieces of a sentence. Ask yourself: is each side a **complete sentence** (independent clause) or a **fragment** (dependent clause/phrase)?

FIVE WAYS TO JOIN TWO COMPLETE SENTENCES

1. **Period:** Sentence. Sentence.
2. **Semicolon:** Sentence; sentence.
3. **Comma + FANBOYS:** Sentence, and sentence.
4. **Colon:** Sentence: explanation.
5. **Dash:** Sentence — elaboration.

FANBOYS

The seven coordinating conjunctions that can join clauses with a comma:

F A N B O Y S

For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

WATCH OUT

However, therefore, moreover, furthermore, consequently are NOT FANBOYS. They cannot join two sentences with just a comma. Use a semicolon before them: "She studied hard; however, she still struggled." A comma before "however" joining two clauses is always a **comma splice**.

Semicolons

BETWEEN CLAUSES

A semicolon works like a period. Both sides must be complete, independent sentences. If either side is a fragment, the semicolon is wrong.

"The study was groundbreaking; it changed the field." ✓

WITH TRANSITIONS

Semicolons pair with conjunctive adverbs: "She was tired; however, she kept working." Semicolon before the transition; comma after.

This is the SAT's favorite pattern.

FRAGMENT TEST

"The study was groundbreaking; changing how researchers work." ✗

"changing how researchers work" cannot stand alone as a sentence, so the semicolon is wrong. Use a comma instead.

Comma Splices & Run-Ons

THE ERROR

You **cannot** join two complete sentences with just a comma. This is called a **comma splice**.

✗ "Larrazolo was elected governor, in 1928 he became a senator."

Both sides are complete sentences, so a comma alone isn't enough.

THE FIXES

✓ "...governor. In 1928 he became..." (period)

✓ "...governor; in 1928 he became..." (semicolon)

✓ "...governor, **and** in 1928 he became..." (comma + FANBOYS)

The SAT will give you one correct fix among the four choices.

The one question to ask yourself on every Boundaries question: Is each side of the punctuation a complete sentence? If yes: period, semicolon, or comma + FANBOYS. If one side is a fragment: comma, dash, or no punctuation.

Commas

When to Use Commas

1. LISTS OF THREE OR MORE

Separate items in a series: A, B, and C. The SAT uses the Oxford comma (the comma before "and" in a list).

"He enforced the sanctity of animal life, the just treatment of the elderly, and the abolition of the slave trade."

2. AFTER INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS

After an introductory word, phrase, or clause, place a comma before the main clause.

"After immigrating from Mexico, Larrazolo entered politics."

"However, the impact may be overstated."

3. COMMA + FANBOYS BETWEEN CLAUSES

Before a FANBOYS conjunction joining two independent clauses: "She studied hard, but she still struggled."

Both sides must be complete sentences. If the second part isn't a full clause, no comma: "She studied hard but struggled." ✓

4. AROUND NONESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Nonessential clauses, appositives, and parenthetical asides get commas on **both sides** (or comma + period if at the end of a sentence).

"Poe, a celebrated author, wrote dark stories."

When NOT to Use Commas

NEVER SEPARATE THESE

No comma between subject and verb: "The dog, ran away" ✗

No comma between verb and object: "She ate, the cake" ✗

No comma before a preposition: "She arrived, at noon" ✗

If you can't name a specific comma rule, the comma probably shouldn't be there.

TWO-ITEM LISTS & COMPOUND PREDICATES

No comma with just two items: "I like dogs and cats" ✓ (no comma).

Commas are only for three or more items.

No comma before FANBOYS joining only two verbs: "She studied hard and passed the test" ✓ (no comma, because "passed the test" is not a full sentence on its own).

Nonessential vs. Essential Clauses

NONESSENTIAL (USE COMMAS)

Extra information that can be removed without changing the sentence's core meaning. Set off by commas on **both sides**.

"Photosynthesis, the mechanism by which plants use sunlight, is fueled by an enzyme called Photosystem II."

"**Which**" introduces nonessential clauses (with commas).

ESSENTIAL (NO COMMAS)

Information needed to identify what you're talking about. No commas.

"The radiation **that** occurs during the decay of radioactive nuclei is known as gamma radiation."

"**That**" introduces essential clauses (no commas).

Quick test: Remove the clause. If the sentence still makes complete sense and the noun is still clearly identified, the clause is nonessential (use commas). If removing it makes things unclear, it's essential (no commas). Commas must come in **matching pairs** around nonessential info — one comma opening and one closing.

Colons

THE RULE

A colon introduces an explanation, elaboration, or list. The part **before** the colon must be a complete independent clause. What comes after can be anything — a list, a phrase, or another sentence.

EXAMPLES

✓ "She bought three things: apples, bread, and milk."

✗ "She bought: apples, bread, and milk." ("She bought" alone is not a complete sentence.)

✓ "Commercial plastics have two associated problems: they are made from nonrenewable petroleum, and most do not biodegrade."

WATCH OUT

Never put a colon after "such as," "including," "like," or a verb that still needs its object. The clause before the colon must stand on its own as a complete thought.

Dashes

SINGLE DASH

Works like a colon at the end of a clause. Introduces emphasis or elaboration: "She had one goal — winning."

Can also replace a semicolon when you want to add dramatic emphasis.

PAIRED DASHES

Set off nonessential information in the middle of a sentence, just like paired commas: "The city — founded in 1850 — grew rapidly."

Everything between paired dashes should be removable without breaking the sentence.

WATCH OUT

If a dash opens a parenthetical, a **dash** must close it. You cannot mix punctuation: "The city — founded in 1850, grew rapidly" is **wrong**. Pair dashes with dashes, commas with commas. The SAT tests this pattern frequently.

Apostrophes & Possessives

Possessive vs. Plural

Apostrophes show **possession**, not plurality. If something *owns* something, it gets an apostrophe. If there are just *more than one*, no apostrophe.

NOUNS

Singular possessive: add 's — "the dog's bone"

Plural possessive (ends in s): add just ' — "the dogs' bones"

Irregular plural possessive: add 's — "the children's toys"

Just plural (no ownership): no apostrophe — "the stories of the immigrants" ✓

PRONOUNS (NEVER USE APOSTROPHES FOR POSSESSION)

its = belonging to it. **it's** = "it is."

their = belonging to them. **they're** = "they are."

whose = belonging to whom. **who's** = "who is."

your = belonging to you. **you're** = "you are."

SAT-STYLE: ITS VS. IT'S

✓ "a butterfly flapping **its** wings" (possessive — the wings belong to the butterfly)

✗ "a butterfly flapping **it's** wings" ("it is wings" makes no sense)

SAT-STYLE: PLURAL VS. POSSESSIVE NOUNS

✓ "the **stories** of the South Asian immigrants" (just plural)

✗ "the **story's** of the South Asian immigrants" (apostrophe = possession, but nothing is being owned here)

Quick test: Replace the word with "it is" or "they are." If the substitution makes sense, use the contraction (apostrophe). If not, use the possessive form (no apostrophe). For nouns, ask: "Does this noun own something?" If yes, add an apostrophe. If no, it's just a plural.

Form, Structure, and Sense

Subject-Verb Agreement

THE CORE STRATEGY

Cross out prepositional phrases and nonessential clauses between the subject and verb. The true subject is what remains. "The box of chocolates is on the table" (subject is "box," not "chocolates"). The SAT makes this hard by burying the subject under layers of extra information.

TRICKY SUBJECTS

Compound with "and": plural — "The cat and dog **are** playing."

Compound with "or"/"nor": verb agrees with the nearer subject.

Collective nouns (team, group, family, collection): singular on the SAT — "The collection of rare artifacts **was** donated."

Inverted sentences: The subject comes after the verb. "There **are** many reasons" (subject = "reasons").

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

Always singular: everyone, everybody, everything, each, every, anyone, anybody, anything, no one, nobody, someone, somebody

"Everyone **has** arrived." "Each of the students **is** ready."

The SAT's favorite trick: Place a long nonessential clause between the subject and verb so you forget the subject is singular:

"The radiation that occurs during the decay of radioactive nuclei **is** known as gamma radiation." ✓

WATCH OUT

The words between the subject and verb are designed to distract you. "The artistic talents of Barbara Chase-Riboud, most known for her 1979 novel Sally Hemings and the conversation it inspired, **aren't** limited to prose." Subject = "talents" (plural), not "Chase-Riboud" or "conversation."

Verb Tense

STAY CONSISTENT

Don't shift tense without a reason. Look for **time markers** (in 1977, recently, now, since, before) that signal which tense is correct. Match the tense of surrounding verbs in the passage.

If the passage is narrating past events, keep verbs in past tense. If it's describing a general truth or ongoing state, use present tense.

PAST PERFECT (HAD + PAST PARTICIPLE)

Use only when one past event happened **before** another past event:

"She **had already left** when he arrived."

Don't use "had" when simple past is enough. If the sentence only describes one past event, simple past ("she left") is correct.

Verb Form: Finite vs. Non-Finite

THE THREE VERB TYPES

Finite verb (is, was, claim, claimed) → the main action of a clause. Every sentence needs at least one.

Participle (claiming, having claimed, known) → describes a noun or adds background info. Cannot be the main verb.

Infinitive (to claim, to develop) → expresses purpose or intent.

SAT-STYLE EXAMPLES

✓ "Some historians **claim** that tulip mania was the first bubble." (finite = complete sentence)

✗ "Some historians **claiming** that tulip mania was the first bubble." (participle = fragment, no main verb)

✓ "Price premiered her symphony and **developed** relationships." (parallel finite verbs joined by "and")

✗ "Price premiered her symphony and **developing** relationships." (mismatched forms)

SAT pattern: The answer choices are four different forms of the same verb (e.g., claim / claims / claiming / to claim). Ask: "Does this sentence already have a main verb?" If yes, you probably need a participle or infinitive. If no, you need a finite verb. Then check if it should be singular or plural, present or past.

Modifiers (Dangling & Misplaced)

DANGLING MODIFIERS

An introductory descriptive phrase must be followed **immediately** by the noun it describes. If the wrong noun follows the comma, it's a dangling modifier.

✗ "Known for her work in biocrusts, **a recent study** estimated..." (The study isn't known for biocrust work.)

✓ "Known for her work in biocrusts, **the researcher** estimated..." (The researcher is.)

THE FIX

Read the opening phrase. Ask: "**Who or what is being described?**" That noun must appear right after the comma.

SAT pattern: The sentence starts with a descriptive phrase, and the four answer choices each begin with a different subject. Only one logically matches the opener.

"Far from being modern inventions, **drinking straws** were used 5,000 years ago." ✓ (Straws are the inventions, not Sumerians.)

WATCH OUT

The SAT loves phrases like "Based on events...", "Named in 1999 as...", "Compared to that of...", and "Despite being cheap..." The noun right after the comma **must** be what the phrase describes. Read each choice and ask "Does the opener logically describe this subject?"

Pronoun Agreement & Reference

AGREEMENT

A pronoun must match its antecedent in number. Singular nouns need singular pronouns; plural nouns need plural pronouns.

"When a given industry carries high start-up costs, **it** often consists of one or two suppliers." ✓

"...when a given industry carries high costs, **they** often consist..." ✗ ("industry" is singular)

Ambiguous pronouns: If "it," "they," or "this" could refer to more than one thing, the SAT prefers repeating the specific noun.

PRONOUN CASE

Subject pronouns: I, he, she, we, they, who

Object pronouns: me, him, her, us, them, whom

Who vs. whom: Substitute "he/him." If "him" fits, use "whom." If "he" fits, use "who."

"K'iche' Achí, a leader **who** had been an ally..." ✓ (he had been an ally)

"...the leader **whom** the king captured..." ✓ (the king captured him)

Relative Pronouns

PRONOUN	REFERS TO	CLAUSE TYPE	COMMAS?
who / whom / whose	People	Either	Depends on context
which	Things	Nonessential	Yes, always
that	Things (sometimes people)	Essential	No, never
where	Places	Either	Depends on context

WHICH VS. THAT

Which = extra info (use commas): "Her novel, which was published in 1979, inspired conversation."

That = necessary info (no commas): "The radiation **that** occurs during decay is called gamma radiation."

COMMON ERRORS

Don't use "which" for people: "the teacher **which** taught us" ✗ (use "who").

Don't use "that" with commas: "her novel, that was published in 1979," ✗ (use "which").

Parallel Structure

THE RULE

Items in a list or joined by a conjunction must follow the same grammatical form. If the first item is a verb in past tense, all items should be past tense.

✗ "She likes **swimming, hiking, and to bike**"

✓ "She likes **swimming, hiking, and biking**"

WHERE THE SAT TESTS THIS

Verb forms joined by "and": "Price premiered her symphony and **developed** relationships." (Both past tense.)

Comparisons: "compared to **that of** alumina glass" (compare measurements to measurements, not glass to measurements).

Strategy & Quick Reference

Decision Flowchart: How to Attack Any Grammar Question

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE QUESTION TYPE

Look at the **answer choices** — they tell you what's being tested:

Choices differ in punctuation (commas, semicolons, colons, dashes) → it's a **Boundaries** question. Go to Step 2A.

Choices differ in verb forms (is/are/was/were, claiming/claimed/claims) → it's **agreement or tense**. Go to Step 2B.

Choices are full phrases with different subjects → it's a **modifier** question. Go to Step 2C.

Choices differ in pronouns (it/they, its/their, who/which) → it's **pronoun agreement or relative clauses**. Go to Step 2D.

STEP 2: APPLY THE RULE

2A Boundaries: Is each side of the punctuation a complete sentence? Complete + Complete = period, semicolon, or comma + FANBOYS. Otherwise, comma, dash, or nothing.

2B Agreement/Tense: Find the true subject (cross out prepositional phrases). Match the verb in number and tense.

2C Modifiers: Read the intro phrase. Who/what is it describing? That noun must come immediately after the comma.

2D Pronouns: Find the antecedent. Match in number (singular/plural). Use "who" for people, "which/that" for things.

Punctuation Cheat Sheet

MARK	WHAT COMES BEFORE	WHAT COMES AFTER	PURPOSE
.	Complete sentence	Complete sentence	Full stop
;	Complete sentence	Complete sentence	Close connection
, + FANBOYS	Complete sentence	Complete sentence	Join with conjunction
:	Complete sentence	Anything	Introduce/explain
—	Complete sentence	Anything	Emphasize/elaborate
,	Separates nonessential info, list items, intro phrases		Soft pause

Common SAT Traps by Frequency

MOST COMMON TRAPS (BOUNDARIES)

- 1. Comma splice:** Joining two complete sentences with only a comma.
- 2. Semicolon before a fragment:** Putting a semicolon before a phrase that can't stand alone.
- 3. Colon after an incomplete clause:** Placing a colon when the lead-in isn't a full sentence.
- 4. Mismatched pairs:** Opening with a dash but closing with a comma (or vice versa).
- 5. Unnecessary comma:** Splitting a subject from its verb or breaking up essential info.

MOST COMMON TRAPS (FORM, STRUCTURE & SENSE)

- 1. Distractor noun near the verb:** A plural noun in a prepositional phrase tricks you into choosing a plural verb for a singular subject.
- 2. Participle as main verb:** "claiming" or "having claimed" instead of "claim" — creates a fragment.
- 3. Dangling modifier:** The opening phrase describes one thing, but a different thing follows the comma.
- 4. Singular/plural pronoun mismatch:** Using "they" for a singular noun like "industry" or "each."
- 5. it's vs. its:** Using "it's" (it is) when you need "its" (possessive).

Time management: You have about 71 seconds per R&W question. Grammar questions are often the fastest on the test because the rules are black-and-white. If you know the rule, apply it and move on confidently — save extra time for harder reading comprehension questions. When stuck between two answers, re-read the full sentence with each choice plugged in. The correct answer almost always "sounds right" to a trained ear.