

# SAT Grammar. Read the structure.

QUICK REFERENCE 1 OF 2 · Sentence boundaries and punctuation

Compare the choices → identify the rule → find the sentence's core → insert the answer and reread. A pause in your voice is not a punctuation rule.

## 1 · Find a complete clause · p3

An independent clause (IC) has a subject, a finite verb, and a complete thought. A dependent clause cannot stand alone.

**Complete:** The telescope detected a signal.

**Dependent:** Although the telescope detected a signal

## 2 · Join complete clauses · p3

Use a period, a semicolon, or a comma plus a coordinating conjunction. A comma alone creates a comma splice.

IC. IC

IC; IC

IC, and / but / so / yet IC

## 3 · Handle however correctly · p3

However and therefore do not join independent clauses by themselves. Their punctuation depends on where they sit.

The trial ended; **however**, questions remained.

The trial, **however**, ended early.

## 4 · Introduce an explanation · p4

A colon normally follows a complete clause and introduces a list, example, or explanation. The material after it may be a phrase.

The team needed one tool: a microscope.

Not: The team needed: a microscope.

## 5 · Mark removable material · p5

Use paired commas, paired dashes, or parentheses around a nonessential interruption inside a sentence. Match the pair.

The device, **invented in 1920**, still works.

Core: The device still works.

## 6 · Keep essential parts together · p5

Do not place a lone comma between a subject and its verb, a verb and its object, or a preposition and its object.

The results of the two experiments **agree**.

Not: The results of the two experiments, **agree**.

## 7 · Read the introduction · p5

An introductory dependent clause is followed by a comma before the main clause. A following essential dependent clause usually is not.

**Because the road flooded**, we turned back.

We turned back **because the road flooded**.

## 8 · Identify lists and shared verbs · p4–5

Semicolons can separate complex list items. A shared subject can take two verbs without a comma before and.

The team **measured** the samples and **recorded** the results.

## A reliable punctuation check

Read both sides of the blank, including the words already printed after it. Then ask: two complete clauses, an explanation, an interruption, or no boundary at all?

# Words must fit the sentence.

QUICK REFERENCE 2 OF 2 · Agreement, verb forms, reference and modifiers

## Subject–verb agreement · p6

Match the verb to the grammatical subject, not the closest noun.  
Cross out intervening phrases temporarily.

The **collection** of rare maps **is** valuable.  
The **maps** in the collection **are** valuable.

## Finite verb or verbal? · p7

A main clause needs a verb that carries tense. An -ing form or to + verb cannot fill that role alone.

The scientist **studies** ice.  
The scientist **studying** ice **works** here.

## Tense & time · p7

Use the passage's timeline. Past perfect (had + participle) places an action before a past reference point; present perfect connects past and present.

By the time the guests arrived, the band **had begun**.

## Pronoun agreement · p8

Find the specific noun the pronoun refers to. Match its number and keep the reference clear.

The **museum** updated **its** website.  
The **museums** updated **their** websites.

## Possession & contractions · p8

First count the owners, then decide whether ownership is intended.  
Expand contractions to test them.

One artist: the **artist's** studio.  
Several artists: the **artists'** studio.  
**It's** = it is / it has; **its** = possessive.

## Introductory modifiers · p9

Ask who or what the opening phrase describes. That person or thing should be the subject that follows.

**Built from stone, the bridge** survived.  
Not: Built from stone, the engineer admired the bridge.

## Parallel structure · p10

Items doing the same grammatical job should use matching forms.  
Check both sides of paired constructions.

The job involves **sorting, labeling, and storing** samples.

## Logical comparisons · p10

Compare the same kinds of things. That of or those of can stand in for a repeated noun phrase.

This comet's **orbit** is wider than **that of** the other comet.

## Spot the rule from the choices

Punctuation changes → boundaries. is / are → agreement. studies / studying / to study → verb form. its / their / it's → pronouns and possession. Different opening nouns → modifier placement.

### Scope & research

Aligned with [College Board's Standard English Conventions specifications](#): Boundaries and Form, Structure, and Sense. Parallel structure and comparisons are included as supporting editing patterns. Transition-word meaning is a separate SAT skill; this guide covers its punctuation.

Rule checks: Purdue OWL on [clauses](#), [commas](#), [agreement](#), [apostrophes](#), [tense](#), [modifiers](#), and [parallel structure](#). Reviewed September 20, 2026. Full worked questions come from Pursu's bank; answers and explanations independently reviewed. Short teaching examples are original.

# Sentence boundaries: count the clauses.

BOUNDARIES · Separate complete thoughts without creating fragments

## The subject + finite verb test

Locate the subject and its main verb. A finite verb can be one word (works) or a group (has been working). A complete thought must not be left dependent on a missing main clause.

**The findings surprised the team.** → complete

**Because the findings surprised the team** → dependent

## Three standard clause joins

A period or semicolon can separate related independent clauses. A comma can join them when followed by for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so (FANBOYS).

The sample changed, **so** we repeated the test.

## What a comma cannot do

Two complete clauses need more than a comma. A comma plus however, therefore, or nevertheless still creates a splice when those words introduce a new independent clause.

Wrong: The sample changed, **however**, the result held.

## Follow the whole sentence

A word such as because, although, if, or when can make a clause dependent. A semicolon cannot separate that dependent clause from the main clause it needs.

**Although the test failed**, the team learned from it.

Complete clause ; Complete clause

### PURSU BANK QUESTION

Semicolon between two complete clauses

The Alexander Technique, refined by Australian actor and educator F. Matthias Alexander, is recognized for its focus on postural awareness and its balance of tension and \_\_\_\_\_. practitioners may notice, for instance, the release of habitual muscle tightness during a simple seated exercise.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A relaxation

B relaxation which

C relaxation,

D relaxation;

**D · relaxation;**

The first clause says that the Alexander Technique **is recognized**. The second says that practitioners **may notice** a release of tension. Both can stand alone, so the semicolon joins them correctly.

**Eliminate:** A runs the clauses together; C uses only a comma. B inserts which without creating a grammatical connection to “practitioners may notice.”

### QUICK CHECK

The storm passed \_\_\_\_ however, the river remained high. Choose a comma or semicolon.

**Answer: Semicolon.** “The storm passed” and “the river remained high” are complete clauses. However supplies contrast, not the grammatical join.

## Avoid the “period = semicolon” shortcut

Both require complete clauses, but check capitalization and the full option. Semicolons also separate complex list items (p4).

# Colons, dashes & complex lists.

BOUNDARIES · Determine what the punctuation is introducing or enclosing

## Colon: complete setup → detail

Before a colon introducing a list or explanation, the setup should normally stand alone. After it, you may have a noun phrase, a list, or a complete clause.

The archive holds three formats: letters, maps, and films.

## Do not sever a required object

Avoid a colon immediately after a verb or preposition when it cuts that word off from its required object.

Wrong: The archive contains: maps.

Right: The archive contains **maps**.

## Dash: an explanation or interruption

A single dash may introduce an emphatic explanation after a complete setup. Paired dashes can enclose extra material within a sentence. Use actual em dashes in these patterns.

The archive contains one rarity—a hand-drawn map.

The map—a recent donation—is on display.

## Semicolons inside lists

When list items contain commas, semicolons can clarify the boundaries between items. Those items do not have to be complete sentences.

We visited **Lima, Peru; Quito, Ecuador; and La Paz, Bolivia.**

## PURSU BANK QUESTION

Colon introducing two named categories

A team of astronomers led by Sara Seager at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology analyzed the atmospheric compositions of two classes of \_\_\_\_\_ super-Earths, which have rocky surfaces and thin atmospheres, and mini-Neptunes, which are gaseous and significantly larger.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A exoplanets.

B exoplanets;

C exoplanets

D exoplanets:

## D · exoplanets:

The sentence before the blank is complete: a team **analyzed** the compositions of two classes of exoplanets. The material after the blank names and describes those two classes. A colon introduces that explanation.

**Eliminate:** A creates a fragment beginning “super-Earths.” B incorrectly uses a clause-joining semicolon before a list. C leaves no punctuation to introduce the explanatory list.

## QUICK CHECK

The archive—founded by local residents \_\_\_\_ now holds 4,000 photographs.

**Answer: An em dash (—)** closes the interruption. The core is “The archive now holds 4,000 photographs.” A comma would mismatch the opening dash.

## Read the function, not just the symbol

A semicolon between clauses and a semicolon between complex list items perform different jobs. A dash that closes an interruption is not introducing a new clause.

# Commas: what belongs together?

BOUNDARIES · Mark additions while preserving the sentence's core

## Essential vs. nonessential

An identifying element selects which person or thing you mean; do not bracket it with commas. Extra information about an already identified noun may be bracketed.

**Students who revised** improved. → a subset  
**The students, who revised,** improved. → all those students

## Names and titles

A title plus an identifying name usually forms one noun phrase. A name can instead be parenthetical when the surrounding phrase already identifies the person.

**Physicist Nia Chen** spoke.  
**Our only speaker, Nia Chen,** arrived.

## Never split the core with one comma

Do not separate the subject from its verb just because the subject is long. Also keep a verb with its object and a preposition with its object.

**The discovery of three new species changes** the model.

## Two verbs can share one subject

If and joins two verbs with one subject, a comma is generally unnecessary. If it joins two independent clauses, use the clause-joining pattern.

The team **collected** samples and **tested** them.

## Place introductory commas by structure

An introductory dependent clause takes a comma. Introductory participial phrases also need separation from the main clause. Not every short introductory word requires a comma.

**After reviewing the evidence,** the panel voted.

## Match the interruption pair

Temporarily remove the inserted phrase. The remaining sentence must work, and an internal parenthetical needs matching boundaries.

The result, **however,** remained uncertain.

## PURSU BANK QUESTION

No comma between a subject and its verb

In developing her speculative fiction, Canadian author Margaret Atwood has drawn heavily from real-world political movements and historical events. Her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, is a chilling exploration of religious extremism, while her 2003 novel \_\_\_\_\_ presents a haunting vision of ecological collapse caused by unchecked genetic engineering.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>A</b> Oryx and Crake— | <b>B</b> Oryx and Crake, |
| <b>C</b> Oryx and Crake  | <b>D</b> Oryx and Crake: |

## C · Oryx and Crake

The second main clause reads “her 2003 novel **Oryx and Crake presents** a haunting vision.” The title identifies the novel and belongs to the subject. Nothing should separate that subject from presents.

**Eliminate:** A, B, and D insert a dash, comma, or colon between the complete subject and its verb.

## The removal test has a limit

Removing words may leave a grammatical sentence but change which people or things are meant. Use both grammar and meaning to decide whether a modifier is essential.

# Agreement: find the real subject.

FORM, STRUCTURE, AND SENSE · Ignore distracting nouns between subject and verb

## Cross out the interrupter

Prepositional phrases, appositives, and relative clauses can separate a subject from its verb. Their nouns do not determine the main verb's number.

The **quality** [of the paintings] **is** exceptional.

## And adds; together with does not

Two separate subjects joined by and normally take a plural verb. Together with, as well as, and in addition to usually introduce additions rather than a second grammatical subject.

The **guide and the curator are** ready.  
The **guide**, together with the curators, **is** ready.

## Each, every, everyone

Each and every generally call for singular agreement. In "each of the samples," each is the subject; samples is inside an of-phrase.

**Each** of the samples **contains** carbon.

## Either/or and neither/nor

When these join subjects of different numbers, the verb normally agrees with the nearer subject. Do not apply this nearest-noun rule to an ordinary prepositional phrase.

Neither the assistant nor the **researchers are** available.

## Inverted sentence order

In there is/are or a sentence beginning with a location, the subject can come after the verb. Put the sentence into ordinary order to check it.

On the shelf **are three notebooks**.  
Three notebooks **are** on the shelf.

## Number is not always an -s test

A singular noun can end in s, and a plural noun can lack s. Distinguish a number of (several) from the number of (one count).

**A number** of pages **are** missing.  
**The number** of pages **is** increasing.

## PURSU BANK QUESTION

Singular head noun with plural distractions

The recent discovery of several ancient fossils, including the remains of large marine reptiles and early mammals, \_\_\_\_\_ a significant challenge to the previously accepted timeline of the region's geological history.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- |                     |                     |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| <b>A</b> pose       | <b>B</b> poses      |
| <b>C</b> have posed | <b>D</b> are posing |

## B · poses

Reduce the sentence to its core: "**The discovery poses a challenge.**" Fossils, remains, reptiles, and mammals appear inside modifying material; none is the subject of the main verb.

**Eliminate:** A, C, and D use plural verb forms. The subject discovery is singular.

## QUICK CHECK

The specimens that the researcher catalogs each week \_\_\_\_ stored in a cabinet.

**Answer: are.** Specimens controls the main verb. Researcher controls catalogs inside the relative clause.

# Verb forms: need a verb or a modifier?

FORM, STRUCTURE, AND SENSE · Separate the verb's job from its timeline

## Finite verbs anchor clauses

Works, worked, is working, and has worked can function as finite verbs. Working or to work alone cannot be the main verb of a complete sentence.

The scientist **is observing** the comet.  
Not: The scientist **observing** the comet.

## Verbals do other jobs

An -ing form can modify a noun or function as a noun itself. A participial modifier does not need an extra finite verb when the sentence already has its main verb.

**Observing** comets requires patience.  
The scientist, **observing** a comet, took notes.

## Simple past vs. present perfect

A definite finished past time usually calls for simple past. Has/have + past participle can connect past activity to the present or describe experience without a finished time.

She **published** the paper in 2018.  
She **has published** three papers since 2018.

## Past perfect, aspect & passive voice

Had + participle marks an action completed before a past reference point. Was/were + -ing marks ongoing past activity. Be + past participle forms the passive voice.

By noon yesterday, they **had finished**.  
The samples **were collected** yesterday.

### PURSU BANK QUESTION

Participial phrase inside a complete sentence

Director Alfred Hitchcock, \_\_\_\_\_ to establish a mood of creeping dread that unsettles the viewer, opens his film Psycho with a long aerial shot panning slowly across an ordinary city skyline.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- |              |           |
|--------------|-----------|
| A sought     | B seeks   |
| C is seeking | D seeking |

### D · seeking

The sentence already has its main verb: Hitchcock **opens** his film. Between the commas, “seeking to establish a mood...” modifies Hitchcock and explains his purpose. The -ing form belongs in that descriptive phrase.

**Eliminate:** Sought, seeks, and is seeking create an extra finite verb inside the comma-bracketed phrase without a proper clause connection.

Hitchcock , **seeking to establish a mood,** opens his film.

### QUICK CHECK

By the time the second trial began, the team \_\_\_\_ the first trial. (had completed / has completed)

**Answer: had completed.** Both reference points are past; completion occurred before the second trial began.

## Do not force every verb into one tense

A passage may discuss a past discovery and a fact that remains true now. Follow meaning and time markers rather than blindly copying the nearest tense.

# Pronouns, plurals & apostrophes.

FORM, STRUCTURE, AND SENSE · Identify the referent, then identify possession

## Trace the pronoun backward

An antecedent is the noun a pronoun refers to. Choose the pronoun that matches the intended referent, not whichever noun is closest.

The **committee** published **its** decision.  
The **members** published **their** decisions.

## Expand contractions

Its and their show possession. It's means it is or it has; they're means they are. There can indicate a place or introduce a clause.

**It's** complete. → It is complete.  
The model lost **its** label.

## Count before placing the apostrophe

For one owner, usually add 's. For a regular plural already ending in s, add only an apostrophe. For an irregular plural, add 's.

One: **researcher's** notes  
Several: **researchers'** notes  
Irregular plural: **children's** books

## Plural does not mean possessive

A plain plural simply counts things. It does not need an apostrophe. A possessive connects an owner or associated entity to another noun.

Two **scientists** arrived.  
The two **scientists' findings** agreed.

## Keep the reference unambiguous

If two nouns could plausibly be the antecedent, repeat or clarify the intended noun. Singular they is grammatical for a person; do not reject it solely because the person is singular.

After Ava called Mira, **Ava** revised the draft.

## Keep pronoun roles straight

Subject forms include I, she, he, we, and they; object forms include me, her, him, us, and them. Possessive forms include my/mine and their/theirs.

**She and I** revised it.  
The editor thanked **her and me**.

## PURSU BANK QUESTION

Singular institutional antecedent

The local historical society, which relies on volunteers from several nearby towns, recently completed a major restoration project. The society will celebrate \_\_\_\_\_ achievement with a public open house next month.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- |                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| <b>A</b> its   | <b>B</b> it's    |
| <b>C</b> their | <b>D</b> they're |

## A · its

The achievement belongs to **the society**, a singular organization in this sentence. Its is the singular possessive form and fits before achievement. Volunteers and towns do not control this reference.

**Eliminate:** It's would mean "it is" or "it has." Their changes the referent to a plural group; they're means "they are."

## QUICK CHECK

Several artists share one workshop. Complete: The \_\_\_\_ workshop is open. (artists / artist's / artists')

**Answer: artists'.** The owners are plural artists; adding an apostrophe after the existing s marks their shared possession.

# Modifiers: who is doing the action?

FORM, STRUCTURE, AND SENSE · Attach the description to the right noun

## Opening action → logical doer

After an introductory participial phrase, the main-clause subject should be the person or thing performing that action.

**Examining the fossil, the scientist** noticed a crack.

## Opening description → described thing

A past-participial phrase such as *built in 1900* describes the thing built. The subject that follows should name that thing.

**Built in 1900, the theater** still hosts concerts.

## Possession does not fix a mismatch

A person's name inside a possessive phrase does not automatically make that person the subject. Identify the head noun of the whole subject.

Wrong: **Having earned her doctorate, Maya's telescope** detected a signal.

## Put the modifier beside its target

Placement can change what is being described. Keep phrases such as *made of silk* near the noun they modify. Watch limiting words such as *only* and *almost*.

Clear: The curator displayed **a scarf made of silk**.

## Do not confuse noun-phrase length with subject

A long subject may begin with an article and several modifiers. Find its central noun before deciding whether the opening description fits.

**The newly restored portraits** are paintings; their owner is not.

## Check both grammar and meaning

A structurally complete option can still attach a description to the wrong thing. Ask the literal question: what was carved, tested, or discovered?

**Tested twice, the device** performed reliably.

### PURSU BANK QUESTION

Opening description must modify sculptures

Carved from reclaimed wood and hand polished using a lacquering technique inherited from the artist's Japanese grandfather, \_\_\_\_\_ so smooth and visually striking that viewers are compelled to lean in and examine them closely.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- A the abstract sculptures of American woodworker George Nakashima are
- B the American woodworker George Nakashima creates abstract sculptures that are
- C when he creates his abstract sculptures, American woodworker George Nakashima makes them
- D George Nakashima is an American woodworker whose abstract sculptures are

### A · the abstract sculptures of American woodworker George Nakashima are

Ask what was **carved from wood and hand polished**: the sculptures. Choice A makes sculptures the subject and supplies are, producing "the abstract sculptures ... are so smooth..."

**Eliminate:** B and D make the artist the subject of "carved" and "polished." C introduces a when-clause and still fails to attach the opening description to the sculptures.

### A useful elimination shortcut

Read the opener and each option's first noun phrase. Eliminate mismatched subjects, then reread the whole sentence.

# Parallel structure & logical comparisons.

SUPPORTING EDITING PATTERNS · Match grammatical roles and comparable things

## Keep list items in matching forms

Compare the structure of each item, not just its meaning. Nouns can match nouns; -ing forms can match -ing forms; clauses can match clauses.

Use: **to observe, record, and analyze.**

Or: **observing, recording, and analyzing.**

## Paired constructions need balance

Look at what follows both...and, either...or, and not only...but also. The paired elements should perform the same grammatical job.

The method is **both accurate and inexpensive.**

It **not only saves time but also reduces waste.**

## Compare like with like

A property should be compared with the same property of another thing. That of replaces a singular noun phrase; those of replaces a plural one.

The comet's **orbit** differs from **that of** the asteroid.

## A comparison can also be a modifier

When a sentence begins "Compared with X," examine the subject immediately after the comma. It should be the corresponding thing being compared.

**Compared with last year's budget, this year's budget** is larger.

### PURSU BANK QUESTION

Comparison + modifier placement

Compared to that of hardwood flooring, \_\_\_\_\_ bamboo flooring fibers are so tightly compressed that they resist scratches and dents far more effectively than most traditional materials.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- A bamboo flooring is at a significant advantage due to its denser fiber structure:
- B bamboo flooring has a denser fiber structure, resulting in a significant advantage:
- C a significant advantage of bamboo flooring is that its fiber structure is denser:
- D bamboo flooring's fiber structure is denser, resulting in a significant advantage:

**D · bamboo flooring's fiber structure is denser, resulting in a significant advantage:**

"That of hardwood flooring" means **the fiber structure of hardwood flooring**. Choice D makes bamboo flooring's **fiber structure** the subject, creating a structure-to-structure comparison. Its colon also follows a complete setup and introduces the explanation.

**Eliminate:** A and B compare flooring with a fiber structure. C compares an advantage with a fiber structure. Those are mismatched comparisons.

### QUICK CHECK

The telescope's lenses are larger than \_\_\_\_ of the older model. (that / those)

**Answer: those.** The comparison is between plural lenses and plural lenses.

### Your final check

Insert the entire option. Read through the next punctuation mark. Confirm that the sentence has its required verb, every modifier attaches sensibly, and the punctuation reflects the actual clause structure.