Digital SAT Deep Dive: Grammar and Punctuation

A free, unofficial study guide to Standard English Conventions. Practice with official Bluebook tests and the College Board Student Question Bank, then use this guide to understand why answers are right or wrong.

1. What to Expect

- Standard English Conventions is roughly one in four Reading & Writing questions.
- Each question shows a short passage with a gap or an underlined part. You choose the option that follows standard written English.
- There are two families: Boundaries (where sentences and clauses start and stop) and Form, Structure, and Sense (verbs, pronouns, modifiers, and word forms).
- These are the most learnable questions on the test. The same handful of rules repeats.

2. Boundaries: Sentences, Clauses, and Punctuation

Know your building blocks

- Independent clause: has a subject and a verb and can stand alone. Example: The bridge opened.
- Dependent clause: has a subject and a verb but cannot stand alone, usually because it begins with a word like although, because, since, while, if, when, unless, after, before, which, or who. Example: Although the bridge opened.
- Fragment: a piece that lacks a complete independent clause. Example: Opening early in the morning.

The legal ways to join two independent clauses

- Period: The bridge opened. Traffic increased.
- Semicolon: The bridge opened; traffic increased.
- Comma + FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so): The bridge opened, and traffic increased.
- Semicolon + transition + comma: The bridge opened; as a result, traffic increased.
- Colon or dash, when the second clause explains the first: The bridge had one effect: traffic increased.

Anything else is an error. A comma alone creates a comma splice. No punctuation at all creates a run-on.

Joining a dependent clause to an independent clause

- Dependent clause first: add a comma. Although the bridge opened, traffic stayed light.
- Independent clause first: usually no comma. Traffic stayed light although the bridge opened.

Colons and dashes

- A colon must come after a complete sentence. Correct: She packed three things: a map, a flashlight, and water. Incorrect: She packed: a map, a flashlight, and water.
- A single dash works like a colon, so a complete sentence must come before it.
- A pair of dashes works like a pair of commas around extra information.

Quick test

Look at what sits on each side of the punctuation. Complete sentence + complete sentence needs a period, a semicolon, a comma + FANBOYS, or a colon/dash. Complete sentence + fragment usually needs a comma or nothing.

3. Commas and Nonessential Information

- Nonessential information (it can be removed without changing the core meaning) goes inside a pair of commas, dashes, or parentheses. Example: Mount Kenya, which is Africa's second-highest peak, attracts climbers.
- Essential information gets no commas. Example: The students who finished early were released. (Only those students.)
- Use matching punctuation on both sides. One comma and one dash together is an error.
- Use which for nonessential clauses and that for essential clauses.
- Never separate a subject from its verb with a single comma. Wrong: The tallest tree in the forest, fell. Right: The tallest tree in the forest fell.
- Do not put a comma before and when it joins two verbs that share a subject. Wrong: She sketched the harbor, and painted the boats. Right: She sketched the harbor and painted the boats.

4. Apostrophes and Possessives

- Singular possessive: add an apostrophe + s. The student's book.
- Plural possessive (plural ending in s): add an apostrophe after the s. The students' books.

- Irregular plural: the children's toys.
- Its means belongs to it. It's means it is or it has. Their, there, and they're follow the same logic: possession, place, and they are.
- Plurals never take an apostrophe. Wrong: three book's. Right: three books.
- Possessive pronouns never take an apostrophe: hers, yours, ours, theirs.

5. Form, Structure, and Sense

Subject-verb agreement

- Find the true subject and cross out phrases in between. The collection of ancient coins is on display. (The subject is collection, not coins.)
- Inverted sentences: find the subject after the verb. There are two exits. There is one exit.
- Subjects joined by and are plural. With or / nor, the verb agrees with the closer subject. Neither the teacher nor the students were ready.
- Each, every, either, neither, everyone, and anybody are singular.
- Collective nouns (team, committee, audience) are usually singular when acting as one unit.

Pronouns

- Match singular with singular and plural with plural. The company announced its new policy. (not their)
- A pronoun needs a clear reference. If it could refer to two different nouns, the sentence is flawed.
- Who is for people doing the action. Whom is for people receiving the action. Test: if he or she fits, use who. If him or her fits, use whom.

Verb tense and form

- Keep tense consistent unless the time clearly changes.
- Past perfect (had + past participle) shows an action finished before another past action. By the time the guests arrived, the chef had prepared the meal.
- Use the correct participle. Wrong: She has wrote. Right: She has written.
- Look for time clues such as yesterday, by 2020, or since last year.

Modifiers

- A modifying phrase must sit next to the word it describes.
- Wrong: Walking through the forest, the birdsong delighted Maya. (The birdsong was not walking.)
- Right: Walking through the forest, Maya was delighted by the birdsong.

Parallel structure and comparisons

- Items in a list or comparison must share the same grammatical form. She likes hiking, swimming, and photographing wildlife.
- Compare like with like. Wrong: The climate of Oslo is colder than Madrid. Right: The climate of Oslo is colder than that of Madrid.
- Use fewer with countable things and less with amounts.

6. A Step-by-Step Method

1. Read the whole sentence, not just the underlined part.

2. Decide the question type: boundaries (punctuation) or form (agreement, tense, pronoun, modifier).

3. Find the subject and verb and identify the clauses.

4. Predict the correction before you look at the options.

5. Eliminate choices that break a rule. Do not choose by what sounds right.

6. Reread your choice in the sentence.

7. Common Traps

- Choosing what sounds right when spoken. Written rules differ from speech.
- Ignoring the words between the subject and the verb.
- Adding a comma wherever you would pause.
- Forgetting that a semicolon needs a complete sentence on each side.
- Picking the longest, most formal-sounding answer.

8. Practice Drills

Try these first, then check the answers below.

1. The committee reviewed the proposal ___ it needed more funding.

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

2. The collection of ancient coins ___ displayed in the lobby.

A) are B) is

3. The ___ backpacks (belonging to all of the students) were left in the hallway.

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

4. Walking through the forest, ___

A) the birdsong delighted Maya.

B) Maya was delighted by the birdsong.

5. Neither the teacher nor the students ___ ready.

A) was B) were

6. The recipe requires three ingredients ___ flour, sugar, and butter.

A) : B) , C) ; D) no punctuation

7. By the time the guests arrived, the chef ___ the meal.

A) prepared B) had prepared C) has prepared D) would prepare

8. She likes hiking, ___, and photographing wildlife.

A) to swim B) swimming C) swim D) she swims

9. The company announced ___ new policy yesterday.

A) their B) its C) it's D) there

10. Mount Kenya, ___ is Africa's second-highest peak, attracts climbers.

A) that B) which C) what D) it

Answers

1. B. A semicolon + transition + comma joins two complete sentences. Choice D is a comma splice.

2. B. The subject is collection, which is singular.

3. C. This is a plural possessive: backpacks belonging to several students.

4. B. The person doing the walking must follow the opening phrase.

5. B. With neither/nor, the verb agrees with the closer subject, students.

6. A. A colon comes after a complete sentence and introduces the list.

7. B. Past perfect shows the meal was prepared before the guests arrived.

8. B. The list must be parallel: hiking, swimming, photographing.

9. B. The company is singular, and its shows possession.

10. B. A nonessential clause between commas uses which.

Next step: practice 20 to 30 official Standard English Conventions questions in the

College Board Student Question Bank, and write down the rule behind every mistake.