

# 16 Key SAT Grammar Rules

(Credit: Erica Meltzer from [The Critical Reader](#))

## 1. Periods & Semicolons

- **Periods** and **semicolons** are used interchangeably on the SAT and ACT.
- Both are used to **separate two complete sentences**.
- They can **precede conjunctive adverbs** (e.g., *however*, *therefore*) at the start of a clause.
  - **Incorrect usage example:** "Barbara McClintock...1983, she won the award."
  - **Correct usage example:** "Barbara McClintock...1983. She won the award."

## 2. Colons & Dashes

- **Colons** and **dashes** introduce **lists** and **explanations** and are treated the same on tests.
- They must follow a **complete sentence** that sets up the following information.
- They can be followed by either a **full sentence** or a **fragment**.
  - **Incorrect example:** "London is home to a variety of: museums, castles, and shops."
  - **Correct example:** "Visitors to London often spend their time in three main types of attractions: museums, castles, and shops."

## 3. Comma + FANBOYS

- **Comma + FANBOYS** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) is equivalent to a **period** or **semicolon**.
- Common conjunctions: **and**, **but** (so and yet are less common; or and nor are rarely tested).
- **Comma splices** (e.g., "London is a very old city, it has some modern parts") are incorrect.
  - **Correct alternatives for comma splices:** use a **period** or **semicolon**.
  - When the subject is implied in the second clause, **do not use a comma** before FANBOYS (e.g., "London is a very old city but has many modern buildings").

## 4. Commas & Dependent Clauses

- **Dependent clauses** (fragments) **cannot stand alone** as complete sentences.
- They begin with **subordinating conjunctions** (e.g., *although*, *because*, *when*, *until*, *while*, *since*, *before*, *after*).
  - **Example:** "Because London is a very old city, it has buildings from many different eras."

- When a dependent clause **precedes** an independent clause, a **comma** must follow the dependent clause.
  - **Example:** "Although London is a very old city, it has many modern buildings."

## **5. Transitional Words & Phrases**

- **Transitional words/phrases** test meaning; the correct choice creates **logical meaning**.
- Types: **Continuers** (e.g., *in addition, moreover*), **cause-and-effect** (e.g., *therefore, consequently*), and **contradictors** (e.g., *however, nevertheless*).
  - **Example:** "The obvious reason for the construction of the Great Wall of China was protection. However, China had no powerful enemies when the Wall began to be built."
  - **Eliminate transitions** with the same meaning (e.g., *therefore/consequently*).
  - **OMIT/DELETE options** on the ACT or no-transition options are often correct.

## **6. Non-Essential Information**

- **Non-essential information** can be **removed** without affecting the sentence meaning.
- **Punctuated** with 2 commas, 2 dashes, or 2 parentheses; mixed punctuation is incorrect.
  - **Example with commas:** "London, which is a very old city, has some extremely modern parts."
  - **Dashes:** "London—which is a very old city—has some modern parts."
  - **Parentheses:** "London (which is a very old city) has some modern parts."

## **7. Commas with Names & Titles**

- Use **commas** around names/titles only if they are **non-essential**.
  - **Essential names/titles:** no commas (e.g., "engineering professor Vikram Iyer").
  - **Non-essential names/titles:** two commas, one before and one after (e.g., "a University of Washington engineering professor, Vikram Iyer,").
  - **Incorrect:** A single comma before a name/title in the middle of a sentence.
  - Determine necessity by checking if the sentence makes sense **without** the name/title.

## **8. Additional Comma Uses & Misuses**

- Use **commas** to separate items in a **list** (e.g., "boost metabolism, aid weight loss, and increase endurance").
- Use **commas** to separate **adjectives** whose order can be reversed (e.g., "active, warm-blooded animals").
- **Do not use commas** before or after **prepositions** (e.g., "artists of the twentieth century").
- **Do not use commas** between **subjects and verbs** (e.g., "The oldest surviving bridge in London is Richmond Bridge").

- **Do not use commas** between **compound items** linked by "and" (e.g., "travel to London and Paris to visit museums and monuments").

## **9. Apostrophes (Plural vs. Possessive)**

- **Apostrophes** indicate **possession**: add apostrophe + -s for **singular nouns** (e.g., "cell's DNA").
- For **regular plural nouns**, add -s or -es + apostrophe (e.g., "cells' DNA").
- **Irregular plural nouns**: add apostrophe + -s (e.g., "people's responses").
- **Pronouns**: possessive pronouns do not use apostrophes (e.g., "its" for possessive, "it's" for "it is").
- Differentiate between **"they're"** (they are), **"their"** (possessive), and **"there"** (place).
- **"Who's"** = "who is"; **"whose"** = possessive form of "who".

## **10. Pronouns & Nouns**

- **Pronouns** replace nouns and must **match in number**: "he/she" for singular people, "it" for singular things, and "they" for plural.
- Ensure **pronouns correctly refer** to their antecedents even if the antecedent is not in the same sentence.
- Use **"who"** for people and **"which"** for things.
- Use **"whom"** correctly: before verbs is incorrect; after prepositions is correct.
- **Nouns** must agree in number, e.g., use "examples" for multiple items, not "example."

## **11. Subject-Verb Agreement**

- **Singular third-person verbs** end in -s, while **plural verbs** do not.
- **Compound subjects** connected by "and" require **plural verbs**.
- **Prepositional phrases** and **non-essential clauses** between subjects and verbs **do not change** the verb's agreement.
- **Each** and **every** are singular; **collective nouns** are treated as singular.
- Be aware of **subject-verb agreement** in **complex sentences** and **passive voice** constructions.

## **12. Verb Tense**

- **Maintain consistent verb tense** throughout sentences and paragraphs.
- Use the **present perfect** ("has/have been") for actions that **started in the past** and **continue to the present**.
- Use the **simple past** ("published") for **completed past actions**.
- Use the **past perfect** ("had studied") for actions **completed before another past action**.
- **Passive voice** should be used cautiously to avoid **wordiness** and **awkwardness**.

## **13. Parallel Structure & Word Pairs**

- Keep all items in a list **parallel in structure** (e.g., all **nouns** or all **verbs**).
- For lists with only **two items** joined by "and" or "but," ensure **parallelism**; **repeat infinitives** as needed.
- Certain **word pairs** must be used correctly and in **parallel form** (e.g., "*either...or*" and "*not only...but also*").
- Ensure the constructions following pairs **match in structure**.
- Maintain **consistency** in the use of word pairs and **parallel structures** throughout sentences.

#### **14. Dangling Modifiers**

- Ensure the **noun described** by a modifier is immediately after the **descriptive phrase** to avoid **dangling modifiers**.
- A **dangling modifier** occurs when the descriptive phrase **does not clearly modify** the intended noun.
  - **Example of a dangling modifier:** "Born in Mexico City in 1907, self-portraits were what Frida Kahlo was best known for."
  - **Corrected version:** "Born in Mexico City in 1907, Frida Kahlo was best known for her self-portraits."
- **Misplaced modifiers** occur when a descriptive phrase **incorrectly modifies** a different noun than intended.

#### **15. Faulty Comparisons**

- **Comparisons** must be made between **equivalent items**: people with people and things with things.
- **Singular comparisons** should compare the **same type of singular items**.
- **Plural comparisons** should compare the **same type of plural items**.
- Use "**than**" for comparisons, not "**then**."
- Modify **plural nouns** with "**number**," "**many**," "**fewer**," and **singular nouns** with "**amount**," "**much**," "**less**."

#### **16. Question Marks**

- Use **question marks** only for **direct questions**, which are **separate** from the main sentence.
  - **Example of correct usage:** "Most of the experiments performed by cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Spelke have been designed to test one main question: how much do babies and young children understand about the world around them?"
- Use a **period** for **indirect questions** integrated into a sentence.
  - **Example of incorrect usage:** "Most of the experiments performed by cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Spelke have been designed to test how much babies and young children understand about the world around them?"