

# Guide to ACT English

This section is designed to measure how strong your writing skills are—after all, in college you’ll be writing a lot of papers. You will be expected to adhere to the conventions of standard written English, while also ensuring a logical progression of ideas throughout a passage. The key to the section is to gain familiarity with the types of questions you’ll see on the English section and to think critically about the author’s rhetorical aims to ensure the ideas of the passage are expressed clearly and concisely.

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# Introduction

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The English section of the ACT tests your ability to revise and edit written text. Your goal is to improve the expression of ideas and to correct errors in sentence structure, usage, and punctuation.

Consider it this way: the ACT English section gives you college-level papers or essays to revise, as if your friend asked you to proofread her paper. You're not in her class, so you don't need to fact-check the info she's presenting. Instead, you just need to read it for style, logical progression of ideas, and adherence to the basic laws of English grammar.

This guide has two purposes:

To teach you fundamental grammar concepts you can apply to your own writing—both in high school and beyond. (Because that's what actually matters.)

To teach you how to perform well on this portion of the ACT.

## Structure and Timing

You have 45 minutes to complete 75 questions. Overall, the ACT English Test requires significantly less strategy than the Reading Test. Think of the English Test as the first gear of ACT—it's a nice way to get into test-taking rhythm.

The test consists of 5 passages, each with 15 questions. This means you have about 9 minutes for each passage, which shouldn't feel like a crunch. English is definitely more generous with time than Reading, Math, or Science. **Most questions refer to specific underlined portions of passages, though some ask you to make broader inferences based on several paragraphs or lines of text.**

## Question Types

The English Test is a rather straightforward examination of the three aspects of English: Conventions of Standard English, Production of Writing, and Knowledge of Language. In this packet, we will discuss these three categories in depth. You may not know these words off the top of your head, but trust us, you're probably already 90% of the way there as far as mastery is concerned.

It's helpful to think about two broad categories:

Questions that have no additional instructions

Questions have additional instructions

Below is an example of a question with no additional instructions. You'll find an underlined portion of one or more sentences, and your job is to pick the best possible way that portion of the sentence can be written. **These questions usually test sentence-level grammar and punctuation issues, so you should act as a careful proofreader.** The first answer on these will always be NO CHANGE. The remaining three options will be alternatives: variations on a theme, if you will.

### EXAMPLE 1

Having studied, my mother is a marine biologist.

- A NO CHANGE
- B As my mother's interest is science, she is
- C My mother's occupation is that of
- D My mother is

This is an example of Conventions of Standard English: the nuts and bolts of the English language. Conventions of Standard English refers to how punctuation is used, how sentences are formed, and how subject nouns and verbs connect. The answer to this question is choice D, by the way, but we'll go over that later!

Questions with additional instructions, like the example below, may ask you to look at a specific part of the passage and consider bigger-picture issues of writing strategy, organization, and style. You may, for example, be asked to choose the best sentence to introduce a paragraph, or you may be asked about the best order for the sentences in a particular paragraph. Alternately, some questions will ask you to consider elements of the passage as a whole.

**EXAMPLE 2**

Our household might have been described as uncooperative. Our meals weren't always served in the expected order of breakfast, lunch, and supper.

Which choice would most effectively introduce the rest of this paragraph?

- A** NO CHANGE
- B** There seemed to be no explanation for why Mom ran our household the way she did.
- C** Our household didn't run according to a typical schedule.
- D** Mom ran our household in a most spectacular manner.

This is an example of Production of Writing. It involves a more stylistic, zoomed-out perspective, and tests you on writing strategy, organization, and style.

For Production of Writing questions, there's technically no grammatical knowledge at play. You just need to know how to connect sentences to paragraphs. The answer is choice C.

**EXAMPLE 3**

I had no qualms, of course, about enjoying the results of his labor: the potatoes, squash, cucumbers, and cauliflower that he pursued out of the earth. I would even help him dig out the potatoes or cut a cucumber from its vine.

- F** NO CHANGE
- G** coaxed
- H** surrendered
- J** enlisted

This is an example of a Knowledge of Language question. Knowledge of Language tests your ability to choose the most effective word or phrase in terms of style, tone, clarity, and economy. Like Production of Writing, this section doesn't rely on grammatical knowledge. Instead, you're finding the best word to express the author's intended tone or meaning or finding the most direct (and least wordy) way of expressing the author's point. For this question, you're trying to find the word to best express the action of pulling vegetables out of the ground that the author is trying to describe. *Pursued*, which doesn't express a fully completed act but more of an ongoing attempt, isn't nearly as effective to elaborate on the word "results" in the line above as *coaxed*. So, the best option is choice B.

## Difficulty

You'll see texts that range from 9th-grade level to college level, and unlike ACT Math, the ACT English test has no defined order of difficulty. Although certain passages on each test are more challenging than others, they are ordered randomly.

As you work through practice exams, you may find that you struggle with certain question types more than others. If you struggle with time on English, feel free to skip the challenging question type and return to it at the end of the section. That way, you can run out the clock on the passage on which you're most likely to get hung up. After all, every question is worth the same amount! Discuss determining your most challenging question type with your tutor.

### TEST DAY REMINDER



**Do not expect the passages to increase in difficulty as you move along.**