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# STRATEGIES

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Before we delve into test specifics, let's review some general strategies to use when approaching each passage and its questions.

## Don't Forget the Title

When the pressure's on and you're rushing against the clock, passage titles can be easy to overlook. We get it! But here's why you should always read the passage title.

**The SAT loves to ask you questions about the main idea of passages.** You might not have to look much further than the title.

### EXAMPLE 3

#### An Unusual Island

Located in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of south-eastern Africa, Madagascar is the world's fourth-largest island.

Don't quote me on this, but I think that passage is going to be about an island that is unusual.

The title can also clue you in to the author's tone. Is the title a pun? You may be looking at an informal passage. Is the title deadly serious? You may be looking at an academic passage.

## Read and Answer Questions Paragraph-by-Paragraph

**When you approach a passage, read through the entirety of the first paragraph, then return to the top and work through each of its associated questions.** This advice may seem counterintuitive. Since most SAT Writing and Language questions focus on one sentence, it can be tempting to attack each question as you come across it. This approach is risky! It can lead you to misinterpret questions that relate to more than the sentence at hand. Reading the paragraph before going to the questions will do a couple things for you.

First, it will help you understand the key ideas of the paragraph, which will help you understand the individual sentences better, especially when you're breaking them down structurally. For instance, if you read a paragraph about researchers who study elephants in Africa, you'll have a better time keeping track of the subjects (the researchers) and the objects (the elephants).

Second, it will help you answer questions about sentence order and paragraph structure. Questions like these often have little clues buried throughout the paragraph, so it really helps to have a good impression of the entire thing.

Reading paragraph-by-paragraph saves you time and gains you points. Let's look at an example:

### EXAMPLE 4

The vast number of species found in Madagascar stems from the fact that it has been cut off from other landmasses for 80 million years. **4** As a result, the island has been an ideal setting for allopatric speciation, a process in which geographically isolated populations of the same species evolve independently. Due to the diverse habitats of Madagascar, many populations have also become isolated from one another on the island itself, resulting in further speciation.

4

- A NO CHANGE
- B On the other hand,
- C In spite of this,
- D On the contrary,

For this paragraph, you need to have read the whole thing to be able to choose the right transition, as this question relies on knowing how the first and second sentences connect.



### ESSENTIAL STRATEGY

**Don't try to save time by reading only the sentences with underlined sections. By reading the full paragraph, you'll save time on questions that ask about more than one sentence.**

## Read the Whole Sentence...EVERY TIME

If it's important to read the whole paragraph, then it should go without saying (but we'll say it anyway) that once you've read the paragraph and are ready to answer questions, you should re-read the whole sentence to answer the question.

**Most questions, whether they're testing you on punctuation, subject-verb agreement, or parallel construction, depend on your understanding of a sentence's structure.** Additionally, there are usually important clues in the non-underlined portion of the sentence to help you. Not reading the entire sentence can cost you big time. Here's an example:

### EXAMPLE 5

Truman marketed himself as  
**5** attainable—making himself available to discuss local political issues with the residents of the small towns he visited.

5

- A NO CHANGE
- B plausible
- C approachable
- D palatable

Many students will stop reading this sentence at the dash. And if they do, they'll probably think the sentence sounds fine and answer NO CHANGE. They should have read the whole sentence! If they did, they'd realize that the rest of the sentence elaborates on just exactly how Truman marketed himself. What is another word to describe Truman making himself available for discussion with the residents of small towns? C is the best answer. See how important it is to read the whole sentence?

**When you've completed all of paragraph one's questions, move on to paragraph two, and repeat.**

## Use Your Pencil and Annotate!

We know you all have smart phones in your pockets, and handwriting is a thing of the past, but your No. 2 pencil can be a key tool in conquering the SAT. Here are some annotation and marking rules to follow:

1. As you read, use the tip of your pencil to guide you through the text. This simple technique will keep you focused, help you move along faster, and put you in a prime position to mark any errors you see.
2. While reading the paragraph, place an X next to any errors in the text. When you return to that sentence's question, immediately eliminate A) NO CHANGE as an option.
3. Since many grammar rules deal with relationships between words, make a habit of drawing arrows between words that relate to each other. This can help you save time and anticipate right answers.

4. Cross out incorrect answer choices entirely as you work to eliminate options. Get them out of your eyesight, and you'll feel a sense of momentum!

Start practicing these techniques in your practice tests now. You'll want them to be second nature by the time test day rolls around.

## Don't Be Afraid to Do Legwork Upfront

**ID the Grammar Rule.** As you note those errors in the text with an X, identify the grammar rule being tested by determining what's changing in each answer choice. If you see commas moving around from answer choice to answer choice, you know you're being tested on different comma rules. Pull them up in your mind, and then go back to the passage, and see what the sentence gives you.

**Generate your own Answer Choice.** With the rules in mind, re-read the sentence(s), and decide for yourself what the answer should be. If you can't identify the grammar rule being tested, don't panic. Put your years of experience reading and writing in English to work, and listen to the words. Generate an answer that sounds right, and see if your prediction is correct.

**Don't Lean on the Answer Choices.** It's important to remember that the answer choices are sneaky, and while there is one answer that is correct, there are three that are not! The test makers write all the answers for each question to sound plausible. So the less you rely on the answer choices, the better. While it may feel like more work not to use them from the start, leaning on your answer choices too much can lead to unnecessary second-guessing.

## Be on the Lookout for Questions that Test More than One Concept

Sometimes the error will seem so obvious that you'll say to yourself, "Psh. I know what they're testing here." You're probably right. But be careful: many questions test more than one concept or rule at the same time. That's why it's important to spot all the little differences between the answer choices. Let's look at an example:

### EXAMPLE 6

Using train travel in a political campaign was a fairly common practice that had begun in the nineteenth **6** century. The specific term "whistle stop" wasn't coined until Truman used it to describe his whirlwind campaign tour.

6

Which choice most effectively combines the sentences at the underlined portion?

- A century, but the
- B century; also, the
- C century, so the
- D century; meanwhile, the

At first glance, this seems like a straightforward question about punctuation. But wait a minute! The answer choices also ask us about transition words and how to connect independent clauses. As it turns out, this question is a lot more complicated than meets the eye. So, while you should still generate your own answer before referencing the choices given, you can also use the differences between the answer choices to clue you in to concepts you may not have originally considered. The punctuation is technically correct in each choice, so this question is actually about coordinating conjunctions and transition words! (The correct answer is A. We'll talk about why when we cover transitions later.)

## If All Else Fails, Trust Your Ear

If you're reading this, you've probably been hearing and speaking English for years, possibly since birth. At this point, your ear is a well-tuned B.S. detector. (B.S. stands for "bad syntax," duh.) You know more grammar than you think you do. Let your ear do the work for you.

The key to doing this is to make predictions. **Before you look at the answer choices, try to fix the error in your head.** In many cases, you'll predict the right answer, especially as you sharpen your grammar skills (that's what this guide is for!). Occasionally, you'll read the underlined portion and think it sounds fine. Well, guess what? NO CHANGE is a valid answer choice that is correct about 25% of the time, just like each of the other answer choices, so don't be afraid to pick it.

Lots of students look right at the answer choices without first making predictions. We find that students who do this are more prone to error. Each answer choice, in its own bizarre way, is tempting. You may not have predicted adding a semicolon—not in a million years—but suddenly one appears in the answer choices and you go, "Oh, a semicolon! How exotic!" Suddenly, you find yourself adding a piece of completely unnecessary punctuation, a fate you could have avoided if only you'd made a prediction.

(Side thought: back in the Third Reich, there must've been someone in Goebbels's propaganda office whose job was to correct all the punctuation and typos. Whoever he was, that person was literally a grammar Nazi. Think about that.)