

# Guide to SAT Writing and Language

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 Writing section and to think critically about the author’s rhetorical aims to ensure the ideas of the passage are expressed clearly and concisely.

Introduction .....	46
Strategies .....	49
Overview of Question Types.....	55
Basic Parts of Speech.....	58
Standard English Conventions.....	63
Subject and Verb Agreement .....	69
Separating and Combining Sentences.....	79
Punctuating Nonessential and Essential Elements .....	82
Additional Commas Uses and Misuses.....	86
Colons and Dashes.....	90
Pronoun and Noun Agreement.....	92
Expression of Ideas .....	111
Conclusion.....	135

# INTRODUCTION

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The Writing and Language section of the SAT 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 SAT Writing and Language Test gives you college-level papers or essays to revise, as if a 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 SAT.

## Structure & Timing

You will have 35 minutes to complete 44 multiple-choice questions. These questions will appear in a column that is side-by-side with passages on which the questions are based.

The section consists of 4 passages, each about 400 words long. **This means you have just under 9 minutes per passage and 1 minute per question.** Your testing

room might not have a visible clock, so we highly recommend using your SAT Timer Watch to track your movement through each test section.

## Passage Types and Content

You'll encounter three different passage types in Writing and Language:

Argument: passages that convey an author's point of view.

Informative/Explanatory Text: straightforward passages, aimed to convey information.

Nonfiction Narrative: passages that narrate an event in a story-like way.

Passages will fall into one of four broad content categories:

Careers: Pieces on trends, issues, and debates in popular careers.

History/Social Studies: Passages on topics in archaeology, psychology, economics and anthropology, in addition to history.

Humanities: Texts about the arts: literature, film, music, etc.

Science: Discussions of foundational scientific concepts as well as recent advancements in the field.

Don't get hung up identifying which passage falls into which category. It really doesn't have any impact on strategy. We simply want you to know what to expect.

## Question Types

There are all kinds of questions, but it's helpful to think about two broad categories:

Questions that have no additional instructions

Questions that 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**

As a result, the island has been an ideal setting for allopatric speciation, a process in which geographically isolated populations of the same species **1** evolves independently.

**1**

- A** NO CHANGE
- B** evolve
- C** is evolving
- D** has evolved

The correct answer to the above example is B, 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**

The world's largest and smallest species of chameleon are both found on Madagascar. The largest, Parson's chameleon, can be almost a meter in **2** length. The smallest can sit comfortably on the head of a match.

**2**

- Which choice most effectively combines the sentences at the underlined portion?
- A** length; notwithstanding, the
  - B** length, while the
  - C** length; albeit the
  - D** length, even though the

Do you notice the question? This tells us this is an Expression of Ideas question and you'll be focusing on how the sentences flows.

## Difficulty

You'll see texts that range from 9<sup>th</sup>-grade level to college level, and unlike SAT Math, the SAT Writing and Language 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 passage types more than others. If you struggle with time on Writing and Language, feel free to skip the challenging passage 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 passage type with your tutor.

**TEST DAY REMINDER**

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

# 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