

AP English Language and Composition

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Essential

PSAT

Grammar

Skills

Lesson 1: Subject-Verb Disagreement

One of the most common grammatical mistakes tested on the PSAT Writing is subject-verb disagreement.

The children is playing in the park.

Here, the verb *is* does not agree in number with its subject *children*. *Children* is plural, but *is* is singular. Clearly, the verb should be changed to *are*.

You can catch the mistake easily in the sentence above, because the verb immediately follows the subject. PSAT Writing questions, however, won't be quite this easy. They will include sentences in which the agreement between subject and verb is harder to determine, because the verb won't immediately follow the subject.

You should be able to pick out the subject and verb of each clause in a sentence, and determine whether or not they agree. It helps to know the tricky ways that sentences can hide subject-verb disagreement.

Inverted Sentences

In most clauses, the subject comes *before* the verb. Sometimes, however, a clause is **inverted**—its subject comes *after* the verb. Sentences that start with *There is* or *There are*, for instance, are inverted. **To check subject-verb agreement in these sentences, it helps to “invert” them.**

There is many flies in the barn.

This sentence is inverted. The verb *is* comes before its subject *flies*. The word *There* serves as a **dummy subject**, holding the place for the real subject, *flies*. Since *there* can be either plural or singular, you can't tell that the sentence has a problem after reading just the first two words. To see the problem more clearly, “invert” the sentence.

Many flies is in the barn.

The sentence is now right side up. The verb *is* immediately follows the subject *flies*, and you have eliminated the dummy subject. Now the mistake is even more obvious. The verb should be *are*.

Intervening Words

Sometimes a subject and verb are separated by a bunch of other words. You need to be able to ignore the intervening words and focus just on the subject and verb.

The columnist, like so many other experts, were convinced that the new program would fail.

If you read this sentence quickly, it may not sound wrong because the verb *were convinced*, which is plural, immediately follows the noun *experts*, which is also plural. But *experts* is not the subject of the verb. It is part of a modifying phrase between commas. This kind of modifying phrase is called an **interrupter**. **Every good sentence must remain “grammatical” even when its interrupters are removed.** In other words, an interrupter can never contain the main subject and verb of the sentence.

The columnist were convinced that the new program would fail.

Now that the interrupter has been removed, the mistake is obvious. The verb should be *was convinced*.

Tricky Subjects

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether a subject is singular or plural. Here are some helpful rules.

The word *and* combines two nouns into a plural subject, as in *Jane and Bob are sick*. **Any nouns within interrupters, however, are not included in the subject, as in *Jane, as well as Bob, is sick*.**

The words *neither* and *either* are singular when they stand alone as subjects.

Neither is very expensive. Either is sufficient.

They are also singular when they are part of a *neither of* or *either of* phrase.

Neither of the boys is ready to take the test.

However, the phrases *neither A nor B* and *either A or B* have the same number as the noun in *B*.

Either Ben or his brothers *have taken* the car.

The second noun, the *B*, in the *Either A or B* phrase is the plural *his brothers*, so the subject as a whole is regarded as plural.

People often confuse the numbers of the following words, so here's a list to keep them straight.

Singular	Plural	Correct sentence
<i>phenomenon</i>	<i>phenomena</i>	<i>Phenomena</i> like that <i>are</i> surprisingly common.
<i>medium</i>	<i>media</i>	The <i>media</i> <i>have</i> ignored this story completely.
<i>datum</i>	<i>data</i>	The <i>data</i> on my computer <i>have</i> been corrupted.
<i>criterion</i>	<i>criteria</i>	Such a <i>criterion</i> <i>has</i> yet to be met.

Lesson 2: Trimming Sentences

As we just discussed, spotting subject-verb problems is easier when you ignore the “nonessential” parts of a sentence. At College Hill Coaching, we call this process “trimming,” and we teach it as an essential writing tool. It does more than just help you to spot subject-verb disagreement. Trimming isolates the most important part of each sentence, the subject-predicate “core,” so that you can check whether your writing is clear and effective.

How to trim a sentence

Let’s examine a sentence and see how trimming helps you to improve it.

My chief concern with this budget, which I have not voiced until today, are the drastic cuts in school funds.

Step 1: Cross out all nonessential prepositional phrases.

A **preposition** is a word like *to, from, of, for, by, in, before, with, beyond, or up* that shows relative position or direction. Think of prepositions as words that can be used to complete either of the following sentences.

The squirrel ran _____ the tree.
Democracy is government _____ the people.

A **prepositional phrase** is a phrase that starts with a preposition and includes the noun or noun phrase that follows.

from sea to shining sea
in the beginning
with hat in hand

My chief concern ~~with this budget~~, which I have not voiced ~~until today~~, are the drastic cuts ~~in school funds~~.

Step 2: Cross out all interrupting phrases.

An **interrupting phrase** is a modifying phrase, usually separated from the main sentence by commas, that interrupts the flow of the sentence. In this case, the interrupter is the phrase between the commas.

My chief concern ~~with this budget~~, ~~which I have not voiced until today~~, are the drastic cuts ~~in school funds~~.

Step 3: Cross out any other nonessential modifiers and modifying phrases.

Modifiers are **adjectives** and **adverbs**, as well as modifying phrases like **participial phrases** (see Lesson 5). Most modifiers are not essential to the basic meaning of a sentence, but some are, such as *smart* in the sentence *Martha is smart*. In this case, *smart* is the **predicate adjective** and is therefore essential to the sentence. In our sentence, the non-essential modifiers are *chief* and *drastic*.

My chief concern ~~with this budget~~, ~~which I have not voiced until today~~, are the drastic cuts ~~in school funds~~.

What remains is the essential “core” of the sentence: *My concern are the cuts*. The most obvious problem here is the subject-verb disagreement—*concern* is singular, but *are* is plural. To make it more grammatical, you may want to simply change the verb. *My concern is the cuts*. But this isn’t a great sentence either. The *concern* is singular, but the *cuts* are plural, so equating them seems illogical. Furthermore, the verb *is* is very weak and doesn’t convey much meaning. Trimming the sentence shows us that the core of the sentence is weak. It should be reworded with a stronger verb.

Although I have not said so until today, I object to the drastic cuts in school funds that are proposed in this budget.

Who kicked whom?

Trimming helps you to strengthen your sentences. When writing an important sentence in an essay, play the “who kicked whom?” game. That is, trim the sentence, look at the subject-verb-object (*Who kicked whom?*) core, and check that it conveys a clear and forceful idea.

Original: The lack of economic programs and no big country being ready to join it symbolized the problems the League of Nations had in getting established.

Trimmed: The lack and no country being ready to join it symbolized the problems. X

Yikes! That does *not* convey a clear and forceful idea. Revise it using a stronger subject-verb-object.

Revised: The League of Nations never established itself because it lacked viable economic programs and the support of the larger countries. ✓

Lesson 3: Parallelism

Whenever a sentence contains a list or comparison, the items in that list or comparison should be **parallel**; that is, they should have the same grammatical form. This rule is called the *law of parallelism*.

Gina hated to take charge, draw attention to herself and she hated seeming like a know-it-all. X

This sentence lists three things that Gina hated, but those things have different forms. The phrases *to take charge*, *draw attention*, and *she hated seeming like a know-it-all* are not parallel. The sentence sounds much better if the three items are phrased as **gerunds**.

Gina hated *taking charge*, *drawing attention* to herself, and *seeming* like a know-it-all. ✓

The italicized words all have the same form, so the sentence reads more smoothly.

Comparisons should be parallel also.

Believe it or not, I like to read more than I like going to parties. X

This sentence compares two things: *to read* and *going to parties*. The first phrase is an **infinitive**, but the second contains a **gerund**. The sentence reads more smoothly if the items have the same form.

Believe it or not, I like to *read* more than I like to *go* to parties. ✓

Believe it or not, I like *reading* more than I like *going* to parties. ✓

Infinitives and gerunds

As the previous examples show, using the law of parallelism often involves choosing between **infinitives** and **gerunds**. Infinitives are phrases like *to run*, *to see*, and *to think*. Although they are the basic forms of verbs, they usually serve as nouns when they are used in sentences. Gerunds are words like *running*, *seeing*, and *thinking* when they are used as nouns. To understand how infinitives and gerunds work, consider the following sentences.

Like pizza. Like to swim. Like swimming.

These sentences all have the same basic structure. In the first sentence, *pizza* is a noun serving as the object of the verb *like*. In the next two sentences, *pizza* is replaced by *to swim* (an infinitive) and *swimming* (a gerund). In other words, these words play the same

grammatical role as *pizza* did in the first sentence, so they must also be nouns. Often, gerunds and infinitives are interchangeable. For instance, the second and third sentences above seem to say the same thing. If you swim all the time and enjoy it, then both sentences convey that idea. But what if you are unable to swim, but enjoy watching swim meets? In this case, you can say *I like swimming* but not *I like to swim*.

Although infinitives and gerunds are often interchangeable, here are some simple rules to help you to choose between them in certain situations.

The gerund is usually better for indicating a general class of activity, while the infinitive is often better for indicating a specific activity in which someone actively participates.

Good: *Kayaking* is a healthful sport, but can sometimes be dangerous.

Good: Curtis and Dan want to *kayak* this afternoon.

The infinitive indicates **purpose** more strongly than does the gerund.

Maia went to the store to *buy* groceries.

Notice that replacing the infinitive with the gerund *buying* would make the sentence illogical. Maia had a *purpose* in going to the store, and this purpose is conveyed by an infinitive and not by a gerund.

Comparison idioms

The English language contains many **comparison idioms**. These are the common ways of phrasing comparisons.

A is like B	A more than B	prefer A to B
neither A nor B	either A or B	both A and B
the more A,	the better A,	not only A
the less B	the better B	but also B
not A but B	less A than B	more A than B

When you use any of these idioms, make sure of two things: that you phrase the idiom correctly and that the A and B parts of the comparison are parallel. If you ever struggle with parallelism in your writing, you should practice underlining the A's and B's when you use comparison idioms, and you should make sure that they have the same form.

We should be concerned *more*

about saving the planet than

A

about making higher profits.

B

LESSON 4: COMPARISON ERRORS

On the PSAT Writing, always pay close attention to **comparisons** in sentences. We have just discussed the fact that a comparison must have the correct idiomatic phrasing and parallel structure, but comparisons can have other problems as well.

Illogical comparisons

Any items being compared in a sentence must be logically comparable; that is, they must be in the same general category. For instance, comparing *apples* to *apples* is much more logical than comparing *apples* to *the increase in the price of apples due to an unforeseen climatological disaster*.

Her chances of passing that test aren't much better than the lottery. X

The comparison here is illogical: *chances* are not in the same category as *lottery*, so the comparison doesn't make sense. The sentence should compare *chances* to *chances*.

Her chances of getting an A aren't much better than her chances of winning the lottery. ✓

Nothing can be different from itself. Any sentence that suggests otherwise should be revised.

Elisa has sung in more concerts than any singer in her school. X

This sentence suggests that Elisa is a singer who goes to school. So *any singer in her school* includes Elisa herself. Of course, she could not have sung in more concerts than herself, so the comparison is illogical.

Elisa has sung in more concerts than any other singer in her school. ✓

Countability: fewer/less, number/amount, and many/much

When should you use *less* and when should you use *fewer*? Use *fewer* (or *number* or *many*) only when comparing countable things like *cars*, *dollars* and *popsicles*. Use *less* (or *amount* or *much*) when comparing uncountable or continuous quantities like *traffic*, *money*, and *food*.

There have been a lot less fans at the games ever since ticket prices were increased. X

Since fans can be counted and don't come in fractional parts, using *less* is incorrect. Use *fewer* instead.

There have been a lot *fewer* fans at the games ever since ticket prices were increased. ✓

Remember that the same rule applies to the choice between *number* and *amount* or between *many* and *much*.

The team owners showed concern about the increasing *number* (not *amount*) of rowdy fans.

The situation is trickier when the quantity is both **countable and continuous**. For instance, units like *miles* and *pounds* and *gallons* are countable, but they can also come in fractional parts, such as *1.23 miles*. **The PSAT Writing avoids such tricky cases.** When confronted with this issue in your own writing, however, consider whether you want to emphasize the countability of the quantity (in which case you should use *fewer*, *number*, or *many*) or the continuity of the quantity (in which case you should use *less*, *amount*, or *much*).

Two or more: *more/most*, *between/among*, and *-er/-est*

When should you use *more* and when should you use *most*? The rule is simple. Use *more* (or *between* or an *-er* adjective) whenever you are comparing exactly two things. Use *most* (or *among* or an *-est* adjective) when comparing more than two things.

The two superpowers seemed to be in a constant battle to see who was the strongest. X

Since there are only two superpowers, the superlative *strongest* is incorrect.

The two superpowers seemed to be in a constant battle to see who was the *stronger*. ✓

Remember that the same rule applies to the choice between *more* and *most* or between *many* and *much*.

Of the dozens of students in the club, Deborah was the more popular. X

Since there are more than two students, the comparative *more* is incorrect.)

Of the dozens of students in the club, Deborah was the *most* popular. ✓

Lesson 5: Pronoun Agreement

A pronoun is a word such as *it*, *he*, *she*, *what*, or *that* that substitutes for a noun. Some pronouns—like *it*, *you*, *she*, and *I*—are **definite** because they refer to a specific thing. Other pronouns—like *anyone*, *neither*, and *those*—are **indefinite** because they do *not* refer to a specific thing.

Every definite pronoun must have a clear antecedent with which it agrees in number and kind. In other words, every definite pronoun must “point” unambiguously to a noun, called the *antecedent*, in the sentence. If the antecedent is singular, the pronoun must be singular also. If the antecedent is personal, the pronoun must be personal also.

Roger told Mike that he was going to start the next game. X

This sentence contains the definite pronoun *he*. Whom does it refer to, Roger or Mike? The sentence could make sense either way, so the pronoun is **ambiguous**. You must revise the sentence to eliminate the ambiguity.

Roger told Mike that Mike would start the game. ✓

The policy of the bank is to maintain the confidentiality of their clients. X

This sentence contains the definite pronoun *their*, which is plural. What does it refer to? It must refer to *bank*, because the clients are the bank's clients. But *bank* is singular, so the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent.

The policy of the bank is to maintain the confidentiality of its clients. ✓

David was the one that first spotted the error. X

This sentence uses an impersonal pronoun, *that*, to refer to a person, *David*. This is a disagreement in **kind**.

David was the one *who* first spotted the error. ✓

An interrogative pronoun like *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, *who*, or *how* must agree in **kind with its antecedent**. Use *what* only to refer to a thing, *where* to refer to a place, *when* to refer to a time, *why* to refer to a reason, *who* to refer to a person, and *how* to refer to an explanation.

A filibuster is where senators extend a debate in order to delay a vote. X

Even if you don't already know what a filibuster is, the sentence makes clear that it isn't a *place*, but rather an event or action. Therefore, you shouldn't refer to it as a *where*.

A filibuster is *when* senators extend a debate in order to delay a vote. ✓

Or more specifically

A filibuster is a *procedure by which* senators extend a debate in order to delay a vote. ✓

A pronoun in a modifying phrase usually takes the closest preceding noun as its antecedent.

The actors will design their own sets, who are participating in the workshop. X

The modifying phrase *who are participating in the workshop* modifies *actors*, not *sets*. Move it over.

The actors *who are participating in the workshop* will design their own sets. ✓

Pronoun consistency

Be consistent with any pronouns that refer to the same noun.

Even when one is dieting, you should always try to get enough vitamins. X

Make up your mind about who you're talking to! Even when *you are* dieting, *you* should always try to get enough vitamins. ✓

Lesson 6: Pronoun Case

The case of a pronoun indicates its role within the sentence. English uses four common cases. **Subjective** pronouns like *I, you, he, she, we, they*, and *who* are usually subjects of verbs. **Objective** pronouns like *me, you, him, her, them*, and *whom* are usually objects of verbs or prepositions. **Possessive** pronouns like *my, mine, her, hers, their, theirs*, and *whose* indicate attribution or ownership. **Reflexive** pronouns like *myself, yourself, himself, herself*, and *themselves* usually show that the object of a verb is the same as the subject.

Subjective pronouns

If a pronoun is the subject of a verb or is equated with the subject of a verb, it must take the subjective case. Choosing the proper case can be tricky when the sentence contains a **compound subject**, an **implied verb**, or a **predicate nominative**.

A compound subject is a subject involving *and*.

Jenna and me were the only two at the meeting. X

The subject of this sentence is *Jenna and me*, a compound subject. But *me* is in the objective case, not the subjective case. To catch such errors easily, "isolate" the pronoun in the subject. You would never say *Me was at the meeting*.

Jenna and I were the only two at the meeting. ✓

Sometimes a pronoun is the subject of an implied verb, and so must take the subjective case.

My brother is taller than me. X

You can say this in conversation, but not in formal writing, because the sentence suggests an implied verb. It is really saying that *My brother is taller than I am*. The verb *am* is omitted because it is understood by the reader even if it is not stated. The pronoun, however, should still take the subjective case.

My brother is taller than I. ✓

A pronoun may also be equated with the subject in a predicate nominative. Such pronouns must take the subjective case.

The winner of the prize was her. X

The subject of the sentence is *winner*, and the verb is *was*. But this verb is a **linking verb**, which links

the subject to a noun or adjective, rather than conveying an action. Since this linking verb equates the subject and the pronoun, the pronoun should take the subjective case.

The winner of the prize was she. ✓

Objective pronouns

If a pronoun is the object of a verb or preposition, it must take the objective case.

My father raised my brother and I all by himself. X

This sentence contains a very common mistake. The object of the verb *raised* is the compound object *my brother and I*. But *I* is in the subjective case, not the objective case. As we discussed above, you can catch such errors easily by "isolating" the pronoun. You would never say *My father raised I*.

My father raised my brother and me all by himself. ✓

This should be a great opportunity for you and she. X

The verb of this sentence is *should be*, the subject is *this*, and the object is *a great opportunity*. So it seems as if the pronouns *you* and *her* are neither subjects nor objects. But in fact they are objects of *for*, which is a preposition. **All objects of prepositions must take the objective case.**

This should be a great opportunity for you and her. ✓

Possessive pronouns

Don't confuse the objective and possessive cases within an object. Analyze the object logically to determine which pronoun to use.

Mrs. Brown enjoyed him taking such an interest in literature. X

What is the object of the verb *enjoyed*? In other words, *what* did Mrs. Brown enjoy? Since the pronoun *him* is in the objective case, the sentence suggests that Mrs. Brown enjoyed *him*. But that isn't what the sentence really means. Mrs. Brown actually enjoyed the *interest* he took in literature. To avoid this confusion, put the pronoun in the possessive case.

Mrs. Brown seemed to enjoy *his* taking such an interest in literature. ✓

Number shift

Items being compared or equated should, if possible, be either both plural or both singular.

They were both hoping to be a winner. X

They were both hoping to be winners. ✓

The sailors' main point of reference was the two lighthouse beacons. X

The sailors' main points of reference were the two lighthouse beacons. ✓

Lesson 7: Dangling and Misplaced Participles

A participle is a verb form that serves as part of a verb phrase or as an adjective. There are two kinds of participles. Present participles are words like *colliding*, *writing*, and *fighting* whenever they are used in verb phrases like *was fighting* or as adjectives as in *the fighting fish*. They look exactly like gerunds, which we discussed in Lesson 3, but they are used differently. Gerunds are used as nouns, but present participles are used as verb parts or adjectives. Past participles are words like *collided*, *written*, and *fought*. They often end in *-ed* or *-en*, but not always. They are used in verb phrases like *had written* or as adjectives as in *the written language*.

A participial phrase is a modifying phrase that includes a participle but not its subject. It is usually separated from the main part of the sentence by one or more commas.

Eating ravenously, the vultures remained on the carcass until it was picked clean.

The runners, *exhausted from the final sprint*, stumbled through the finish line.

Notice that, in each of these sentences, the participial phrase does not contain the subject of the participle. The subject of *eating* in the first participial phrase is *vultures*, and the subject of *exhausted* in the second participial phrase is *runners*. Although the subject of the participle does not appear in a participial phrase, it must appear elsewhere in the sentence. If it does not, the participle is said to dangle.

Every participial phrase must be near the subject of the participle. If it is not, then the phrase is unclear.

After having studied all night, the professor postponed the test until Friday. X

The participial phrase in this sentence is *having studied all night*. What is the subject of this

participle? In other words, *who* studied all night? Certainly *the professor* didn't study, but the sentence doesn't indicate who did, so the participle *dangles*. One way to fix a dangling participle is to insert its subject next to the participial phrase.

After having studied all night, I learned that the professor had postponed the test until Friday. ✓

You can also fix the dangling participle by incorporating the subject into the phrase, so that the phrase becomes a dependent clause.

After I had studied all night, the professor postponed the test until Friday. ✓

Bob found his watch walking to the bathroom. X

The participial phrase in this sentence is *walking to the bathroom*. Who or what was *walking*? The sentence makes it seem as if the *watch* were walking, but that's absurd. You can fix the problem by just moving the phrase or by turning it into a dependent clause.

Walking to the bathroom, Bob found his watch. ✓

Bob found his watch as he was walking to the bathroom. ✓

It was difficult for William to hear the announcements waiting for the train. X

Were the *announcements* waiting for the train? Of course not.

While waiting for the train, William found it difficult to hear the announcements. ✓

William found it difficult to hear the announcements while he was waiting for the train. ✓

Lesson 8: Other Misplaced Modifiers

Many kinds of modifying phrases other than participial phrases can dangle or be misplaced. Such phrases must obey the same rule that governs participial phrases—the law of proximity. Every modifying phrase should be as close as possible to the word it modifies.

Misplaced prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases, as we discussed in Lesson 2, are phrases that begin with a preposition and include the object of the preposition. **Prepositional phrases can be *adjectival*, meaning they modify nouns, or *adverbial*, meaning they modify verbs, adjectives, or adverbs.**

The dog *in the car* was barking.

David walked *into the pole*.

In the first sentence, the prepositional phrase *in the car* answers the question *which dog?* Since *dog* is a noun, this prepositional phrase is adjectival. In the second sentence, the prepositional phrase *into the pole* answers the question *where did he walk?* Since *walk* is a verb, the prepositional phrase is adverbial.

In an emergency, I am amazed at how calm Juanita can be. X

This sentence suggests that I am only *amazed* in an emergency. What it really means, however, is that Juanita is *calm* in an emergency. To clarify, move the prepositional phrase *in an emergency* closer to the verb it modifies.

I am amazed at how calm Juanita can be in an emergency. ✓

Misplaced appositives

An appositive is a noun phrase that explains an adjacent noun. An appositive is often set off by a comma or commas.

Franklin, *the only one of us who owned a car*, agreed to drive us all to the game.

A splendid example of Synthetic Cubism, Picasso painted *Three Musicians* in the summer of 1924. X

The phrase *a splendid example of Synthetic Cubism* is an appositive, and so it must be adjacent to the noun it explains. But *Picasso* is not an example of Synthetic Cubism, the painting is.

A splendid example of Synthetic Cubism, *Three Musicians* was painted by Picasso in the summer of 1924. ✓

Picasso painted *Three Musicians*, a splendid example of Synthetic Cubism, in the summer of 1924. ✓

Misplaced infinitives

As we discussed in Lesson 3, infinitives are often used as nouns. **However, they are also sometimes used as modifiers, and so can be misplaced.**

We have many more math problems *to do*.
We are working *to earn* money for the trip.

In the first sentence, the infinitive *to do* modifies the noun *problems*. In the second sentence, the infinitive *to earn* modifies the verb *are working*.

To get our attention, we saw Mr. Genovese take out a giant boa constrictor. X

The infinitive *to get* logically modifies the verb *take*. But it is incorrectly placed closer to a different verb, *saw*.

To get our attention, Mr. Genovese took out a giant boa constrictor. ✓

We saw Mr. Genovese take out a giant boa constrictor to get our attention. ✓

Reflexive pronouns

Only use reflexive pronouns to show that the object of a verb is the same as its subject or to emphasize a noun or pronoun. For instance, when you use the reflexive pronoun *myself* in a sentence like *I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming*, you are indicating that you *did* the pinching and you also *received* the pinching. Also, when you use the reflexive pronoun *himself* in a sentence like *She was standing next to Usher himself*, you are emphasizing *Usher*.

My opponent did not prepare his case as diligently as myself. X

Since this sentence does not indicate that the person who performed an action also received it, and since the pronoun *myself* is not used to emphasize an adjacent noun, the pronoun should not take the reflexive case.

My opponent did not prepare his case as diligently as I did. ✓

LESSON 9: TRICKY TENSES

The tense of a verb must logically indicate place and extent in time.

Since the early twentieth century, the United States was the world's wealthiest nation. X

The phrase *since the early twentieth century* indicates a condition that has lasted from the distant past to the present. However, the verb in this sentence, *was*, is in the simple past tense. To indicate a condition that extends from the past to the present, you must use the present perfect tense.

Since the early twentieth century, the United States *has been* the world's wealthiest nation. ✓

Fortunately, most of us can spot and correct most tense problems, so we won't discuss every English verb tense in detail. We will discuss just the trickiest situations.

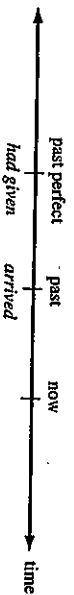
The perfect tenses

The perfect tenses in English use the helping verb *to have* together with a past participle, as in *has eaten*, *have begun*, and *will have swum*. Perfect tense verbs usually indicate that some event or condition is completed before some other point in time. The word *perfect* in this case means *completed*, not *flawless*. Perfect tenses are **relative tenses**; that is, they show a relationship to *another* time reference in the sentence.

The past perfect tense, which uses the helping verb *had*, indicates that an event was completed before another point in the past. You can think of it as the "before the past" tense.

By the time we arrived at the reception, Glen *had already given* the toast.

This sentence contains two verbs: *arrived* and *had given*. The first is in the simple past tense, and the second is in the past perfect tense. This suggests that the second event mentioned, the giving of the toast, was completed before the first event mentioned, the arrival at the reception. It may help to visualize the events on a timeline.



When a sentence contains two past tense verbs, check whether one event was completed before the other. If so, the earlier event should be in the past perfect tense.

We ate the entire pie by the time Ellen realized it was missing. X

This sentence contains two verbs in the past tense: *ate* and *realized*. The sentence suggests, however, that the eating of the pie was completed before Ellen realized it was missing. Therefore you need the past perfect tense to indicate the proper sequence.

We *had eaten* the entire pie by the time Ellen realized it was missing. ✓

The present perfect tense, which uses the helping verb *has* or *have*, indicates that an event or condition either extends from the past to the present or possibly extends from the past to the present or beyond. You can think of it as the "past plus present or future" tense.

She *has been* very nice to me.

We *have taken* only two tests this semester.

The first sentence contains the present perfect verb *has been*. This indicates that something was true in both the past and the present—she was nice to me and she *still is* nice to me. The present perfect tense here combines past and present. In the second sentence, the present perfect verb *have taken* indicates that we took the tests in the past, but also that we might take more in the future.

If a single event or condition starts and finishes in the past, it is best described with the past tense. If an event or condition extends from the past to the present, it is best described with the present perfect tense.

In the short time since her sixteenth birthday, she became a best-selling artist. X

The phrase *since her sixteenth birthday* suggests a condition that is still true in the present. Therefore, the present perfect tense works better than the past tense.

In the short time since her sixteenth birthday, she *has become* a best-selling artist. ✓

Lesson 10: Idiom Errors

Idioms are standard phrases in a language. English has two kinds of idioms. One kind of idiom is a phrase that means something different from what it actually says, such as *carry through*, *across the board*, *come on strong*, *get your feet wet*, *bang for the buck*, *all ears*, *pull your leg*, and *eat crow*. The second kind of idiom is simply a “standard” way of phrasing something. For instance, English idiom requires us to say *in order to see* rather than *in order for seeing* or some other phrasing. For native English speakers, most idioms are so ingrained in our minds that we hardly notice them. When learning a new language, however, idioms are the hardest part of a language to learn.

The house was on fire, so the firemen put it out.

This sentence contains two idioms: *on fire* and *put it out*. Neither of these makes sense *literally*. The house wasn't really *on* a fire, and the firemen didn't put the fire *out* of the house. However, these idioms are necessary to a good sentence because more literal language sounds too formal.

The house was aflame, so the firemen extinguished the blaze.

When we speak so literally, our language sounds unnatural.

Watch your prepositions

The PSAT Writing occasionally includes a sentence with an idiom error. The sentence will use an idiom, but with the wrong preposition. As we discussed in Lesson 2, prepositions are words like *to*, *from*, *of*, *for*, *by*, *in*, *before*, *with*, *beyond*, and *up* that show relative position or direction. Certain idioms require a specific preposition. For instance, English idiom requires us to say *arguing with* a person, but *arguing against* an idea.

When a preposition is underlined in a PSAT Writing sentence, consider whether it is part of an idiomatic phrase, and if so, whether it is the correct preposition for that idiom.

We were no longer satisfied at the level of service we were receiving. X

This sentence contains two idioms: *satisfied with* and *level of service*. Are the prepositions correct? The *of* in *level of service* is correct, but the *at* in *satisfied at* is not. The correct idiom is *satisfied with*.

We were no longer satisfied with the level of service we were receiving. ✓

ESP: eliminate superfluous prepositions

Casual English speakers often use extra prepositions to make their language sound less formal. These prepositions are usually redundant and therefore unnecessary. **In formal writing, you should eliminate any unnecessary prepositions.** Notice that in phrases like the following, the preposition is unnecessary and therefore “nonstandard.”

The pole did not extend ~~out~~ far enough.

Ever since I was injured, it hurts to climb ~~up~~ the stairs.

Although clearly angry, the students were not yet ready to fight ~~against~~ the ruling.

We were unsuccessful in our attempt to extract ~~out~~ the chemical from the venom.

The illness can make one dizzy and prone to falling ~~down~~.

If you don't hurry, you'll miss ~~out~~ all the fun!

There were plenty of volunteers to help ~~out~~ with the race.

Before we prepare the steaks, we should fry ~~up~~ some peppers.

Her speed and strength helped her to dominate ~~over~~ her opponents.

Lesson 11: Diction Errors

Some PSAT Writing sentences contain errors in diction, or “wrong word” errors. Typically, such errors involve using a word that *sounds* like the correct word, but is in fact wrong, for instance saying we *interviewed* *perspective candidates* instead of we *interviewed prospective candidates*. *Perspective* means *point of view*, but *prospective* means *potential*.

Common diction errors

accept/except	<i>accept</i> (v) agree to take < <i>accept</i> an offer>
adapt/adopt/adept	<i>except</i> (prep) excluding <everyone went <i>except</i> him>
	<i>adapt</i> (v) make suitable for a particular purpose (from <i>apt</i> , which means <i>suitable</i>)
	<i>adopt</i> (v) choose as one’s own < <i>adopt</i> a child>
	<i>adept</i> (adj) highly skilled <an <i>adept</i> soccer player>
affect/effect	<i>affect</i> (v) influence <it <i>affected</i> me deeply>
	<i>effect</i> (n) result or consequence <it had a good <i>effect</i> >
allude/elude/illusion	<i>allude</i> to (v) make an indirect reference to
	<i>elude</i> (v) escape from capture <the suspect <i>eluded</i> us>
	<i>illusion</i> (n) indirect reference <i>illusion</i> (n) deception or misconception
ambivalent/ambiguous	<i>ambivalent</i> (adj) having conflicting feelings <I feel <i>ambivalent</i> about going to the party>
	<i>ambiguous</i> (adj) unclear or having more than one interpretation <the message was <i>ambiguous</i> >
compliment/complement	<i>compliment</i> (v) to make a praising personal comment <I <i>complimented</i> her on her performance>
	<i>complement</i> (v) to make complete <the jacket <i>complemented</i> the outfit nicely>

cite/site/sight

	<i>cite</i> (v) mention as a source of information < <i>cite</i> an article> or <i>commend publicly</i> < <i>cite</i> her <i>heroism</i> >
council/counsel	<i>site</i> (n) a place where something occurs
	<i>sight</i> (v) see at a specific location < <i>sight</i> a new galaxy>
	<i>council</i> (n) a consultative committee <the executive <i>council</i> >
	<i>counselor</i> (n) member of a committee

counsel (v) to give advice <he *counseled* me on how to act>

counselor (n) advisor

discrete/discreet

discrete (adj) distinct <another *discrete* item>

discreet (adj) prudently modest
<please conduct yourself *discreetly*>

elicit/illicit

elicit (v) cause to come forth
<the joke *elicited* laughter>

illicit (adj) illegal <*illicit* behavior>

eminent/imminent

eminent (adj) prominently distinguished <an *eminent* historian>

imminent (adj) about to occur
<*imminent* doom>

phase/faze

phase (n) stage in a process
<third *phase* of the project>

faze (v) disturb someone’s composure <I was a bit *fazed* by the interruption>

flaunt/flout

flaunt (v) show something off
<*flaunt* your talents>

flout (v) show contempt for
<flout the rules>

gambit/gamut

gambit (n) careful strategy or opening move

gamut (n) complete range <ran the *gamut*>

Lesson 12: Other Problems With Modifiers

We have already discussed dangling and misplaced modifiers, but modifiers can be misused in other ways as well. Make sure that you know the proper form that modifiers should take and that you know how to eliminate redundant modifiers.

Using adjectives for adverbs

Don't use an adjective to do the job of an adverb.

Adjectives like *green*, *generous*, and *gargantuan* modify nouns. Adverbs like *gently*, *globally*, and *grossly* modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.

I was impressed by how cogent his argument was presented. X

The modifier *cogent* is intended to answer the question *how* was it *presented*? Therefore it modifies a verb and so should take the adverbial form *cogently*.

I was impressed by how *cogently* his argument was presented. ✓

Some modifiers can be used as either adjectives or adverbs. For instance, *fast* and *well* can be used either way. In the phrase *the fast car*, the word *fast* is used as an adjective modifying the noun *car*. But in the clause *he ran fast*, it is an adverb modifying the verb *ran*. In the clause *I haven't been well lately*, the word *well* is an adjective meaning *healthy* modifying the pronoun *I*. But in the clause *she sings very well*, it is an adverb modifying the verb *sings*.

I couldn't write fast enough to finish the essay on time.

I feel pretty good.

Although some people might tell you these sentences are incorrect, they are actually both fine. In the first sentence, the word *fast* is an adverb meaning *quickly* modifying the verb *write*. In the second sentence, the word *good* is an adjective modifying the pronoun *I* and joined to it by a linking verb *feel*. It is also fine to say *I feel well*, but only because *well* in this case is also an adjective meaning *healthy*.

Comparative adjectives and adverbs

Use the proper form when using comparative modifiers. **Comparative adjectives** come in one of two forms. For instance, *fast* becomes the comparative *faster* by adding *-er*, but *adorable* becomes the comparative *more adorable* by adding *more*. (*Adorabler* just doesn't sound

right, does it?) **Comparative adverbs** almost always include *more*, as in *more rapidly*, but some irregular adverbs can take *-er*, as in *she runs faster than her brother*.

The briefcase feels more light than it did this morning. X

The phrase *more light* is in the incorrect comparative form.

The briefcase feels *lighter* than it did this morning. ✓

Please try to hold the baby gentler next time. X

The word *gentler* is a comparative adjective, not a comparative adverb. Most comparative adverbs use *more*.

Please try to hold the baby *more gently* next time. ✓

Some modifiers should never take the comparative form because they are absolute modifiers. For instance, one thing cannot logically be *more unique* than another thing, because *unique* means *one of a kind*, which indicates an absolute quality. Nothing can be *somewhat unique*; it either *is unique* or *isn't unique*.

The loss was made more inevitable by the injury to our starting pitcher. X

The concept of 'inevitability' doesn't come in degrees. Either something is *inevitable*, or it's not. There is no in-between, so the phrase *more inevitable* is illogical.

The loss was made *inevitable* by the injury to our starting pitcher. ✓

Redundancy

The PSAT Writing will occasionally test your ability to eliminate redundancy. A redundancy is an unnecessary repetition of an idea. To check whether a word or phrase is redundant, reread the sentence without that word or phrase. If the meaning of the sentence remains unchanged, the word or phrase is redundant.

With only seconds remaining to go in the game, Michael sped quickly down the court. X

Since *remaining* means roughly the same as *to go*, we don't need to say both. Also, *to speed* means *to move quickly*, so *sped quickly* is redundant. Eliminate the redundancies.

With only seconds remaining in the game, Michael sped down the court. ✓

imply/infer

imply (v) suggest or hint at <she *implied* that she was bored by staring upward>

infer (v) conclude from evidence <I *infer* from your yawn that you are bored>

**its/it's,
their/they're,
whose/who's,
your/you're**

Apostrophes can show possession (as in *David's bike*) or indicate missing letters in a contraction (as in *can't* as a contraction of *cannot*). In each of the word pairs listed here, the words with apostrophes are **contractions**, and those without apostrophes are **possessives**.

it's = it is or *it has* *they're = they are* *you're = you are* *who's = who is*

morale/moral

morale (mor-AL) (n) shared enthusiasm for and dedication to a goal <the team's *morale* was very high>

moral (MOR-al) (n) lesson or principle about good behavior <the story had a good *moral*>

**precede/
proceed/
proceeds**

precede (v) come before (*pre-* before) <the ceremony *preceded* the game>

proceed (v) go on, usually after a pause (*pro-* forward) <it was hard to *proceed* after the interruption>

proceeds (n) funds received from a charity drive <*proceeds* from the raffle>

**principal/
principle**

principal (n) head of a school <*principal* Skinner> or the initial investment in an account

principle (n) guiding rule <the company is guided by sound business *principles*>

**reticent/
reluctant**

reticent (adj) reserved or reluctant to talk

reluctant (adj) resistant by disposition or mood (The phrase *reticent to speak* is redundant.)

LESSON 13: Irregular Verbs

Don't confuse past tense verbs with past participles. The perfect tenses and past participial phrases require the past participle of the verb, not the past tense form of the verb. For some verbs, both forms look the same. But for many irregular verbs, these forms are different. You should know the irregular past participle forms of common verbs. Perhaps you should put these on flashcards.

Common irregulars

Infinitive	Past tense	Past participle
to arise	arose	arisen
to awake	awoke	awoken
to beat	beat	beaten
to begin	began	begun
to blow	blew	blown
to break	broke	broken
to burst	burst	burst
to cast	cast	cast
to come	came	come
to creep	crept	crept
to do	did	done
to draw	drew	drawn
to drink	drank	drunk
to drive	drove	driven
to forsake	forsook	forsaken
to get	got	got, gotten
to go	went	gone
to hurt	hurt	hurt
to kneel	kneeled, knelt	knelt
to know	knew	known
to lay (to put or place)	laid	laid
to lie (to recline)	lay	lain
to ride	rode	ridden
to run	ran	run
to shrink	shrank, shrunk	shrank, shrunk
to sink	sank	sunk
to speak	spoke	spoken
to spring	sprang	sprung
to take	took	taken
to tear	tore	torn
to write	wrote	written

Lesson 14:

The Subjunctive Mood

The mood of a verb indicates the *factuality* or *urgency* of an action or condition. Every verb in English takes one of three moods. Verbs in the **indicative mood** indicate something real or factual, as in *you are going*. Verbs in the **subjunctive mood** indicate something hypothetical, conditional, wishful, suggestive, or counter to fact, as in *I wish you were going*. Verbs in the **imperative mood** indicate a direct command, as in *go!*

The only mood that students occasionally struggle with is the **subjunctive mood**. The PSAT Writing might contain a question or two involving verbs in the subjunctive mood, but they are not very common. You should recognize the common situations in which the subjunctive mood must be used, and know how to change the form of the verb accordingly.

A verb that is in the subjunctive mood is usually accompanied by auxiliaries like *would*, *should*, *might*, and *may*. When the verb *to be* is in the subjunctive mood, it usually takes the form *were* or *be*. Verbs in the subjunctive mood indicate something hypothetical, conditional, wishful, suggestive, or counter to fact.

He *would feel* better if only he would eat.

If I *were* faster, I could play wide receiver.
(hypothetical)

I wish that he *would not act* so superior.

I wish I *were* 2 inches taller.
(wishful)

She said that we *should practice* harder.

He asks that we *be* there at six o'clock sharp.
(suggestive)

I truly doubt that she *would ever say* such a thing.

I think she *might be* in over her head.
(doubtful)

We thought that she *might win* the election, but she lost by a lot.

He plays as though he *were* not even injured.
(counter to fact)

Don't overdo it

In English, the subjunctive is a **mood**, not a **tense**. This means that the rules for altering verbs are not as strict as they are with a tense. Sometimes, a sentence gives enough clues about the "subjunctivity" of a verb so that auxiliaries are not necessary. Other times, the subjunctive form just sounds too archaic. **Don't use subjunctive forms if they make the sentence sound awkward or archaic.**

If that be so, we may see dramatic changes in the market. X

The sentence indicates a condition, and the verb *be* is, strictly speaking, in subjunctive form. But today this form is considered to be archaic. It is now standard English to keep the verb in the indicative mood, even though the situation is subjunctive.

If that is so, we may see dramatic changes in the market. ✓

Watch your ifs

One common mistake is using improper idiom in the subjunctive mood. The past subjunctive construction *if...had* is often mistakenly phrased as *if...would have*.

If he would have arrived a minute sooner, he would not have missed her. X

The first verb is subjunctive, but it is not proper idiom to use the auxiliary *would* here.

If he *had* arrived a minute sooner, he would not have missed her. ✓

Lesson 15: Coordinating Ideas

If a sentence contains more than one idea, those ideas must coordinate logically with one other. The main idea must be conveyed with an independent clause, but related ideas may be conveyed with independent clauses, subordinate clauses, or modifying phrases.

In addition to being a best-selling author, Frances Brown is a native New Yorker, and she has written a new book; this new book is likely to cause quite a stir. X

This sentence contains many ideas, but they are poorly coordinated. It contains three independent clauses: *Frances Brown is a native New Yorker, she has written a new book, and this new book is likely to cause quite a stir.* Which of these conveys the main idea? The first idea seems trivial compared with the other two. The second and the third are intriguing, but are so closely related that they perhaps belong in the same clause. A good revision would likely combine the last two ideas into the main clause of the sentence, and relegate the other to a modifying phrase with the other less-important idea that she is *a best-selling author.*

Frances Brown, a native New Yorker and a best-selling author, has written a new book that is likely to cause quite a stir. ✓

Run-on sentences

A run-on sentence is not just a sentence that seems too long. It is a sentence that joins two independent clauses—that is, clauses that could be sentences by themselves—with only a comma between them. This error is also called a **comma splice**. Sometimes two independent clauses are so closely related that they belong in the same sentence, but to join them you must use a **colon** (:), a **semicolon** (;), or a **conjunction** like *but, or, yet, for, and, nor, or so.* (You can remember all of those coordinating conjunctions with the mnemonic BOYFANS.)

I took several science courses last year, my favorite was neuroscience. X

This sentence contains two independent clauses that are joined only by a comma, so the sentence is a run-on. There are many ways to correct this problem. How you fix it depends on what you want to emphasize. For instance, if you want to emphasize the first idea, you should relegate the second idea to a **modifying phrase**.

I took several science courses last year, my favorite being neuroscience. ✓

Now the sentence clearly emphasizes the first idea, that *I took several science courses*, and de-emphasizes the second idea by reducing it to the modifying phrase *my favorite being neuroscience*. However, you may want to emphasize the *second* idea by relegating the first idea to a modifying phrase.

Of the several science courses I took last year, my favorite was neuroscience. ✓

Now the sentence clearly emphasizes the second idea, that *my favorite (course) was neuroscience*. A third way to coordinate these ideas is to emphasize the contrast between the *several* courses and the single course, *neuroscience*, by simply joining the original clauses with the conjunction *but*.

I took several science courses last year, but my favorite was neuroscience. ✓

Using colons and semicolons

The **colon** (:) and the **semicolon** (;) can be used to combine two closely related independent clauses into a single sentence. The colon has a slightly more specific meaning than the semicolon: it usually introduces an **example** or **explanation**. Remember two important rules when using a colon or semicolon to splice clauses: **make sure that the clauses are independent and do not begin with a conjunction, and make sure that the clauses have a strong supporting relationship.**

The test was unbelievably difficult, and hardly anyone finished it on time. X

This sentence uses a semicolon, but the second clause begins with the conjunction *and*. This is redundant. You may use a semicolon *or* a conjunction to join two clauses, but not both. You can fix the mistake by simply removing the conjunction.

The test was unbelievably difficult; hardly anyone finished it on time. ✓

You can also combine the two ideas into a single clause since they are so closely related.

The test was so difficult that hardly anyone finished it on time. ✓

The meeting went well, and everyone was impressed by my presentation. X

This sentence does not contain a blatant grammatical error. However, it is a bit disjointed and ambiguous. How are the *meeting* and the *presentation* related? Did the meeting go well *because* of the successful presentation, or for another reason? If the good presentation *explains* why the meeting went well, the colon works nicely.

The meeting went well: everyone was impressed by my presentation. ✓

The ride was harrowing; several times the car nearly skidded off the mountain. X

This sentence is a run-on. It uses only a comma to join two independent clauses. Since the second clause seems to explain the first, that is, it tells *why* the ride was so harrowing, a colon works well.

The ride was harrowing: several times the car nearly skidded off the mountain. ✓