SAT Reading and Writing: Standard English Conventions, study guide and worked solutions

What the SAT asks

Standard English Conventions questions ask you to edit one sentence so that it follows the rules of written American English: punctuation that joins and separates ideas, and grammar that is consistent and clear. The domain has two skills, Boundaries and Form, structure and sense, each worth about 7% of the whole test, so together they make up about 14 of the 54 Reading and Writing questions, roughly one in four. The four options use almost the same words, so once you know the rules these are the fastest questions in the section and the best place to bank time.

Boundaries

Punctuate between and within sentences: commas, semicolons, colons, dashes and apostrophes

The idea. The words are fixed; you decide which mark, if any, goes in the gap. Before you look at the options, find the clauses on each side of the blank. An **independent clause** has a subject and a verb and can stand alone: "The river flooded." A **dependent clause** has a subject and a verb but starts with a word such as "because," "when," "which" or "who," so it cannot stand alone. Most boundary questions become simple once you ask about each side of the blank: *could this part stand alone as a sentence?*

Rule 1: joining two independent clauses. When both sides can stand alone, only these joins are correct:

- a period: "The river flooded. The farmers moved their animals."
- a semicolon: "The river flooded; the farmers moved their animals."
- a comma plus a joining word (and, but, or, so, yet, for, nor): "The river flooded, so the farmers moved their animals."
- a colon or a single dash, when the second clause explains the first: "The farmers had one worry: the river was rising."

A comma alone between two independent clauses is a **comma splice**; no mark at all is a **run-on**. The SAT always marks both wrong. A semicolon has the same test as a period: both sides must stand alone. Between two clauses, choose a semicolon or a comma plus "and," never a semicolon plus "and."

Rule 2: "however," "therefore" and similar words. However, therefore, moreover, instead, meanwhile and as a result are transition words, not joining words. When one starts the second clause, put a semicolon (or period) before it and a comma after it: "The bridge was finished early; however, it did not open until May." A comma before "however" makes a comma splice. When "however" sits inside one clause, it takes a comma on both sides: "The bridge, however, did not open until May."

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Rule 3: colons. A colon must come after a complete sentence. What follows can be a list, a word, an example or an explanation. Never put a colon after "such as," "including" or a verb: "The kit included: a pump and a filter" is wrong because "The kit included" is not complete. The comma before "and" in a list (the serial or Oxford comma) is a style choice that usage guides disagree on; the SAT does not test it.

Rule 4: extra information. If you can lift some words out and the sentence still makes sense with the same meaning, they are **nonessential** (extra) and need a matching pair of marks: two commas, two dashes or two parentheses. Do not mix them: open with a comma, close with a comma; open with a dash, close with a dash.

- "Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan, sits on the Arabian Sea."
- "The engine — which had not been serviced in years — stopped on the hill."

Essential information tells you which one you mean, so it takes no commas: "Students who finish early may leave" (only those students). A title or job directly before a name, with no "a" or "the," also takes no commas: "chemist Rida Hassan." But "The team's leader, Rida Hassan, spoke first" is correct, because "The team's leader" already names one person and the name is extra.

Rule 5: no mark where nothing breaks. A single mark never goes between a subject and its verb, a verb and its object, or a preposition and its object. "The old map of the region shows two roads" has no comma before "shows," however long the subject is. Many correct SAT answers have no punctuation at all.

Rule 6: apostrophes. An apostrophe shows ownership or a missing letter, never a plain plural.

- One owner: 's ("the city's walls"). Several owners ending in s: ' only ("the cities' walls"). Plurals without s: 's ("the children's books").
- Plain plural: no apostrophe ("The cities grew").
- Possessive pronouns never take one: its, their, whose. "It's" = it is or it has; "who's" = who is.

To check, turn it into an "of" phrase: "the walls of the city" (city's) or "the walls of the cities" (cities').

Worked example 1: joining two clauses

"Desert locusts usually live alone. After heavy rain, however, they crowd together and change _____ a few weeks, millions of them may form a single swarm."

A) color, within
B) color within
C) color. Within
D) color within,

1. Before the blank: "they crowd together and change color." Subject "they," verbs "crowd," "change." It stands alone.
2. After the blank: "within a few weeks, millions of them may form a single swarm." Subject "millions," verb "may form." It stands alone.
3. Two independent clauses need a period, a semicolon, a colon or a comma with a joining word.
4. A is a comma splice. B is a run-on. D is a run-on and puts a comma between "within" and its object.

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5. C uses a period. Correct.

Check: read C as two sentences; both make sense alone.

Fastest route: if both sides stand alone, cross out every option with only a comma or nothing.

Worked example 2: a pair of commas

"The Shandur Pass, one of the highest places in the world where polo is played every _____ hosts a festival that draws teams and visitors from across the region."

A) summer
B) summer,
C) summer;
D) summer —

1. Subject: "The Shandur Pass." Verb: "hosts."
2. "one of the highest places... every summer" describes the pass. Lift it out: "The Shandur Pass hosts a festival." Still works, so it is extra.
3. It opens with a comma after "Pass," so it must close with a comma.
4. A never closes the pair. C puts a semicolon between subject and verb. D closes with a dash, mixing marks.
5. B is correct.

Check: the words between the two commas lift out cleanly.

Fastest route: look left of the blank for an opening comma or dash, then choose its twin.

Worked example 3: a colon after a complete sentence

"The first printing presses in the region were small and slow, but they changed one thing at _____ a pamphlet could now reach readers in many towns within a week."

A) once:
B) once,
C) once
D) once; and

1. Before the blank is a complete sentence ending "one thing at once."
2. After the blank is a complete sentence that explains what the "one thing" was.
3. A colon after a complete sentence can introduce an explanation, so A works.
4. B is a comma splice. C is a run-on. D adds "and" after a semicolon, which the SAT treats as wrong.

Check: "one thing" sets up a reveal; the colon delivers it.

Fastest route: "one reason," "a single goal" or "two problems" before the blank often signal a colon.

Worked example 4: apostrophes

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"The survey asked shopkeepers in three markets about their sales. All three _____ busiest days fell in the week before Eid."

A) market's
B) markets
C) markets'
D) markets's

1. The days belong to the markets, so we need a possessive.
2. "The busiest days of all three markets": several owners.
3. A plural ending in s takes only an apostrophe: "markets'."
4. A shows one market. B is a plain plural. D adds 's to a plural ending in s.
5. C is correct.

Check: "All three" confirms several owners.

Fastest route: count the owners first, then pick the form.

SAT trap: the "it feels long, so add a comma" error

The most common wrong answer is a comma the sentence does not need. In "The decision of the three judges to award the prize to a first-time writer _____ surprised many readers," the subject runs to "writer" and the verb is "surprised," so there is no mark at all. Before choosing a comma, name the rule that needs it: a pair around extra information, a comma before a joining word between two sentences, a comma after an opening phrase, or a list. If you cannot name the rule, choose no punctuation. Also watch for the lonely closing mark: a comma or dash that closes extra information needs a matching opening mark to its left.

Form, structure and sense

Use subject-verb and pronoun agreement, verb tense and form, and placement of modifiers

The idea. These questions test grammar, not punctuation. The options are usually forms of one word ("is" or "are," "its" or "their," "studied" or "had studied") or the same ending in different orders. Read the whole passage, because the clue is often a sentence away. Four checks solve nearly all of them.

Check 1: subject-verb agreement. Singular subject, singular verb ("the bridge is"); plural subject, plural verb ("the bridges are"). The hard part is finding the real subject.

- Cross out the middle: "The list of names on the walls *is* long." The subject is "list."
- Always singular: each, every, either, neither, one ("one of the engines *was*"), everyone, "the number of." But "a number of" means "many" and is plural.
- Two subjects joined by "and" are plural: "The map and the compass *were* in the bag."
- Collective nouns (team, council, committee, family, company) are singular in American English: "The committee *has* decided."
- Reversed sentences put the subject after the verb: "On the shelf *were* two old radios."
- An -ing activity used as a subject is singular: "Collecting seeds *takes* patience."

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Check 2: pronouns and nouns. A pronoun must match the noun it stands for (its antecedent): it/its for one thing, they/their for more than one. A collective noun takes "its": "The company opened its office." Possessive pronouns have no apostrophe; "it's" means "it is" and "they're" means "they are." Nouns follow the apostrophe rules above: "the rivers flow," "the river's banks," "the rivers' banks."

Check 3: tense and verb form. Keep the passage's tense unless a time word shows a change.

- Simple past for a finished event: "In 1998, the school *moved*."
- Present perfect (has/have + past participle) for something that runs from the past to now, often with "since": "Since 2015, the school *has grown*."
- Past perfect (had + past participle) for an event before another past event: "By the time the doctor arrived, the fever *had broken*."
- Correct participles: "had gone," not "had went"; "has written," not "has wrote."

Every sentence needs a main verb. An -ing word, "to" + verb or "having" + verb cannot be the main verb alone. "The old fort, built of red stone, standing above the town" is a fragment; "...stands above the town" is a sentence.

Check 4: modifiers. A describing phrase must sit next to what it describes. An opening phrase followed by a comma describes the first noun after the comma. "Tired after the climb, the hikers rested" is right. "Tired after the climb, the tents were put up early" is a **dangling modifier**: tents are not tired.

Worked example 5: agreement with a long middle

"Scientists set up cameras that photograph a glacier every hour. The series of images taken over two winters _____ that the glacier moved forward in short bursts."

A) show
B) shows
C) have shown
D) are showing

1. What shows something? "The series."
2. Cross out "of images taken over two winters." One series: singular.
3. A, C and D are plural, matched to the nearby nouns "images" and "winters."
4. B is correct.

Check: "The series shows that the glacier moved..." reads correctly.

Fastest route: three plural options and one singular (or the reverse) means an agreement question: find the subject at once.

Worked example 6: tense from a time clue

"In 2021, a small clinic opened in the village of Sakhi Kot. By the end of its first year, the clinic _____ more than three thousand patients."

A) treats
B) has treated
C) had treated

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D) will treat

1. "By the end of its first year" is a past point in time (the clinic opened in 2021).
2. The treating happened before that past point: past perfect, had + past participle.
3. A is present. B links to now, but the count stops at a past date. D is future.
4. C is correct.

Check: both events sit in the past, in the right order.

Fastest route: "by the time" or "by the end of" + past points to "had"; "since" + a past date points to "has/have."

Worked example 7: pronoun agreement

"The orchestra had performed only in its home city for twenty years. Last spring, it finally took _____ music on the road."

A) it's
B) their
C) its
D) they're

1. Whose music? The orchestra's: one group, singular. The passage already says "its home city."
2. The singular possessive pronoun is "its," no apostrophe.
3. A means "it is." B is plural. D means "they are."
4. C is correct.

Check: "took the orchestra's music on the road" works.

Fastest route: read "it's" as "it is": "took it is music" is nonsense, so A is out.

Worked example 8: dangling modifier

"Raised in a family of potters in Hala, _____"

A) the clay was something Zubair Shah learned to shape as a child.
B) Zubair Shah learned to shape clay as a child.
C) shaping clay was learned by Zubair Shah as a child.
D) as a child, the clay was shaped by Zubair Shah.

1. Someone was raised in a family. That person must be the first noun after the comma.
2. A starts with "the clay," C with "shaping clay," D with "the clay" after "as a child." None was raised.
3. B starts with "Zubair Shah." Correct.

Check: "Raised in a family of potters in Hala, Zubair Shah learned..." The person follows the comma.

Fastest route: look only at the first noun of each option.

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Worked example 9: the sentence needs a main verb

"The water wheel at the old mill, turned for two centuries by the same stream, _____ the stones that ground the village's wheat."

A) powering
B) to power
C) powered
D) having powered

1. Subject: "The water wheel." "turned... by the same stream" sits between commas: it is extra, not the main verb.
2. So the blank must be the main verb. A, B and D cannot be a main verb alone.
3. C, "powered," completes the sentence. Correct.

Check: without the extra part: "The water wheel at the old mill powered the stones..." Complete.

Fastest route: if the sentence has no main verb yet, the plain tense form wins.

SAT trap: matching the nearest noun

The test puts a noun of the wrong number right before the blank on purpose. In "The cost of the new buses _____ higher than expected," the nearest noun is "buses," but the subject is "cost," so the verb is "was." Pronoun questions use the same trick. For modifiers, watch options that start with "it," "there" or a passive verb ("was found by"): they are often hiding a dangling modifier. Join the opening phrase to the first noun of your choice and say it in your head.

Practice set

Fourteen original questions, seven per skill, mixed in difficulty. For each one, choose the option that completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English. Aim for about 70 seconds each.

Question 1

The Indus river dolphin lives in water so muddy that its eyes are almost useless. Instead of sight, it relies on sound. The dolphin sends out rapid clicks and listens for the _____ method lets it find small fish even in complete darkness.

A) echoes, this
B) echoes; this
C) echoes this
D) echoes and, this

Question 2

Hina Rind, a teacher from Thatta, did not publish anything until she was fifty. Her first book — a slim novel about a family of boat builders in _____ sold only a few hundred copies at first, but it is now read in many schools.

A) Karachi,
B) Karachi;

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C) Karachi
D) Karachi —

Question 3

Where earthquakes are common, a tall building cannot simply be made stiffer, because a perfectly rigid structure may crack when the ground shakes. Engineers who design such buildings therefore follow one basic _____ a structure must be able to sway slightly without breaking.

A) principle:
B) principle,
C) principle
D) principle; and

Question 4

A team of students spent a month watching four ant colonies in a school garden, noting where each colony stored its food. At the end of the project, they carefully dug up the nests and found that all four _____ queens were living more than a meter below the surface.

A) colony's
B) colonies
C) colonies'
D) colonys'

Question 5

Whale sharks are the largest fish in the sea, yet scientists know little about where they travel. A new tagging study along the coast of Balochistan aims to change that. The study is being led by marine _____ has spent six years photographing the spot patterns that make each whale shark unique.

A) biologist, Sana Qureshi, who
B) biologist Sana Qureshi, who
C) biologist Sana Qureshi who
D) biologist, Sana Qureshi who

Question 6

Residents of the town had waited nearly ten years for a public library. The new building, with its wide windows and shaded courtyard, opened to the public in _____ the reading room stayed closed until the last of the tables arrived in June.

A) March; however,
B) March, however,
C) March; however
D) March however,

Question 7

Archaeologists at a farming site found dozens of broken clay pots with small holes drilled through their sides. Similar holes appear in strainers used today to separate milk solids from liquid. The pattern of tiny holes in the ancient clay _____ suggests that the pots may have been used to make an early form of cheese.

A) pots,

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B) pots;
C) pots —
D) pots

Question 8

Three sisters who ran a printing shop in the early twentieth century wrote to one another almost every day when they were apart. The collection of letters they left behind _____ stored in a cool, dark room at the city archive, and researchers must apply weeks in advance to see it.

A) are
B) were
C) is
D) have been

Question 9

Streetlights in the older part of the city use bulbs that waste much of their power as heat. Last month, the city council voted to replace them with LED lamps. The council expects _____ new lamps to cut the yearly cost of street lighting by nearly half.

A) its
B) their
C) it's
D) they're

Question 10

Museums sometimes need an expert who understands both how a painting was made and what the paint itself contains. When a city museum doubted the age of several portraits, it turned to such a specialist. Trained in both chemistry and art history, _____

A) the museum hired Dr. Farah Javed to test the age of its portraits.
B) Dr. Farah Javed was hired by the museum to test the age of its portraits.
C) the age of the museum's portraits was tested by Dr. Farah Javed.
D) the portraits were tested for age by the museum's new expert, Dr. Farah Javed.

Question 11

Heavy rain upstream sent a wall of water down the valley late at night. A rescue team set out at dawn, but the road was blocked in two places. By the time the team finally reached the village, the floodwater _____ already begun to fall, and most families were waiting on their rooftops.

A) has
B) is
C) will have
D) had

Question 12

When workers lifted the wooden floor of an old house in the walled city, they made a surprising discovery. Beneath the boards, in a space that no one had opened for more than a century, _____ two clay lamps and a small chest full of letters.

A) was

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B) lies
C) were
D) has been

Question 13

Before the city added a lane only for buses, the trip from the northern suburbs to the center could take more than an hour. Since the bus lane opened in 2019, the number of people who ride the route each day _____ from about 4,000 to more than 9,000.

A) has grown
B) have grown
C) grow
D) had grown

Question 14

The old maple tree in the college courtyard is easy to miss for most of the year. Each autumn, however, the tree turns bright red and then drops _____ leaves within a single week, covering the stone paths in color.

A) it's
B) its
C) their
D) its'

Solutions

Question 1. Answer: B

Before the blank: "The dolphin sends out rapid clicks and listens for the echoes" (subject "dolphin," verbs "sends," "listens"), which can stand alone. After it: "this method lets it find small fish..." (subject "this method," verb "lets"), which can also stand alone. Two independent clauses can be joined with a semicolon, so B is correct.

A is a comma splice. C has no mark, so it is a run-on. D puts the comma after "and," cutting "and" off from the clause it joins.

Skill: Boundaries

Question 2. Answer: D

The subject is "Her first book" and its verb is "sold." Between them is extra information: "a slim novel about a family of boat builders in Karachi." Lift it out: "Her first book sold only a few hundred copies at first." Still works. The extra part opens with a dash after "book," so it must close with a dash. D is correct.

A closes with a comma, mixing a dash and a comma. B puts a semicolon between subject and verb, and the words before it are not a complete sentence. C never closes the dash, so the reader cannot tell where the extra detail ends.

Skill: Boundaries

Question 3. Answer: A

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"Engineers who design such buildings therefore follow one basic principle" is a complete sentence. What follows states the principle. A colon after a complete sentence introduces an explanation, and "one basic principle" sets up exactly that reveal. A is correct.

B joins two complete sentences with only a comma: a comma splice. C has no mark: a run-on. D adds "and" after a semicolon; the semicolon already joins the clauses, so the SAT treats this as wrong.

Skill: Boundaries

Question 4. Answer: C

The queens belong to the colonies: "the queens of all four colonies." Four owners means the plural "colonies," and a plural ending in s takes only an apostrophe: "colonies'." C is correct.

A shows one colony, which contradicts "all four." B is a plain plural that shows no ownership. D misspells the plural: a consonant + y becomes "ies."

Skill: Boundaries

Question 5. Answer: B

Two rules meet here. "Marine biologist" is a job title directly before a name with no "a" or "the," so it takes no comma: "marine biologist Sana Qureshi." Then "who has spent six years..." adds extra information about one named person; it does not tell us which Sana Qureshi, so it needs a comma before "who." B does both: "led by marine biologist Sana Qureshi, who has spent six years..."

A puts commas around the name, splitting the title from the name. C has no comma before "who," treating the clause as essential. D splits title and name and also drops the comma before "who."

Skill: Boundaries

Question 6. Answer: A

"The new building... opened to the public in March" is complete, and so is "however, the reading room stayed closed until... June." "However" is a transition word, not a joining word, so it needs a semicolon before it and a comma after it when it starts the second clause. A is correct.

B uses only commas: a comma splice. C has the semicolon but drops the comma after "however." D has no mark before "however": a run-on.

Skill: Boundaries

Question 7. Answer: D

The subject is "The pattern of tiny holes in the ancient clay pots" and the verb is "suggests." The blank falls between the end of the subject and its verb, so no mark belongs there, however long the subject. D is correct.

A puts a single comma between subject and verb; there is no opening comma, so it is not closing a pair. B uses a semicolon, but the words before it are not a complete sentence. C puts a single dash between subject and verb, again with no opening mark.

Skill: Boundaries

Question 8. Answer: C

What is stored? "The collection." Cross out "of letters they left behind": the subject is one

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collection, so the verb is singular. The sentence is in the present ("researchers must apply... to see it"), and the singular "it" confirms the subject. "Is" is singular and present. C is correct.

A is plural, matched to the nearby noun "letters." B is plural and past. D is plural.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

Question 9. Answer: A

Whose lamps? The council's. "Council" is a collective noun, one body, so in American English it is singular and takes "its." A is correct.

B is plural and does not match "council." C means "it is": "expects it is new lamps" makes no sense. D means "they are" and is plural.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

Question 10. Answer: B

"Trained in both chemistry and art history" describes a trained person, so that person must be the first noun after the comma. Only B starts with "Dr. Farah Javed." In B, "its" refers to the singular "museum," so the pronoun is also correct.

A says the museum was trained. C says the age was trained. D says the portraits were trained; naming Dr. Javed later does not fix the dangling modifier.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

Question 11. Answer: D

The passage is in the past ("sent," "set out," "was blocked"). "By the time the team finally reached the village" names a past moment, and the water began to fall before it. An action finished before another past action takes the past perfect: "had already begun." D is correct, and "most families were waiting" keeps the past.

A gives the present perfect, which links to now, not to a past moment. B, "is begun," is not a correct form here. C is future, but the rescue has already happened.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

Question 12. Answer: C

The sentence is reversed: place phrases come first and the subject follows the verb. What was beneath the boards? "two clay lamps and a small chest full of letters": two things joined by "and," so plural. The passage is in the past ("lifted," "made"). Plural past: "were." C is correct.

A is singular, matched to "chest" or "space." B is singular and present. D is singular and present perfect.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

Question 13. Answer: A

Agreement: the subject is "the number," not "people"; cross out "of people who ride the route each day." "The number" is singular. Tense: "Since the bus lane opened in 2019" describes a change that runs from the past to now, which takes the present perfect. "Has grown" is singular present perfect. A is correct.

B has the right tense but is plural, matched to "people." C is plural present and does not fit "since

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2019." D is past perfect, which needs a later past moment; here the growth runs up to the present.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

Question 14. Answer: B

Whose leaves? The tree's: one thing, so the possessive pronoun "its," with no apostrophe. B is correct.

A means "it is": "drops it is leaves" makes no sense. C is plural and does not match one tree. D, "its'," is not a word in Standard English.

Skill: Form, structure and sense

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