

Chapter 15

Writing and Language: Standard English Conventions

The preceding chapter focused on Expression of Ideas, the rhetorical part of the Writing and Language Test. In Expression of Ideas questions, you'll recall, the emphasis was on development, organization, and effective language use, with questions asking you to revise passages in order to achieve particular writerly purposes, such as adding support, clarifying the relationship between and among sentences and ideas, and eliminating unnecessary repetition. In this chapter, we turn to the other part of the Writing and Language Test: Standard English Conventions. Before delving in, though, we should briefly consider what we mean by "conventions" and why they're important (and not just picky "rules" that we have to learn and follow).

Standard English Conventions: The Craft of Language

"Conventions" is just another way of referring to standard practices and expectations that we follow in all sorts of areas of our lives, not just in language. We rely on conventions in most of life: driving in the correct lane, waiting our turn to pay at the store, making room for people on the sidewalk or in an elevator, and so much more. Conventions aren't just about etiquette; they're the customs we use and rely on throughout the culture in order to make our dealings with other people function more smoothly.

Language conventions are much like conventions in other parts of our lives. Language conventions offer a standard (typical, broadly agreed-upon) way to construct written expression in a manner that meets people's expectations and thereby helps ensure that our spoken and, especially, our written utterances are received and understood. To take a simple but important example, we commonly agree that in most cases a "sentence" in writing consists of a more or less complete thought, that a sentence will have certain parts (at least a subject and a verb), that the start of a new sentence should be

signaled by a capital letter, and that the end of a sentence should be indicated with punctuation (a period, question mark, or exclamation point).

Of course, people violate conventions all the time. When the violation is against the law, there are generally clear and obvious penalties. But what's the "penalty" if you break a language convention?

Sometimes there's none at all. It could be that your reader or listener fully understands what you mean and can essentially skip over the irregularity. Sometimes you may even intentionally deviate from a convention to achieve a particular purpose. You may remember our discussion of sentence fragments in Chapter 14. A sentence fragment breaks convention by lacking key elements of a typical sentence but, in certain cases, can be very effective in creating emphasis, reflecting surprise or shock, or the like.

In most cases, though, following language conventions proves highly useful. When a writer observes them, the reader's attention can be focused on the message being sent. When a writer fails to observe them, the reader is likely to be distracted, annoyed, or confused.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that observing language conventions is about more than just following rules for rules' sake. Part of the craft of using language skillfully is following conventions. Conventions aren't truly separate from the meaning that you as a writer are trying to convey; they're part and parcel of it, a critical means by which you ensure that the message you intend to convey is the same as what the reader understands.

As is the case for Expression of Ideas, Standard English Conventions on the Writing and Language Test is an overarching category that includes three subcategories, each of which contains several testing points. Standard English Conventions questions require you to edit passages for sentence structure, usage, and punctuation. (Spelling and capitalization aren't directly tested.) In list form, the conventions category looks like this:

- ▶ **Sentence Structure:** Recognizing and correcting sentence formation problems and inappropriate shifts in sentence construction, including:
 - *Sentence boundaries:* Recognizing and correcting grammatically incomplete sentences that aren't rhetorically effective (like the "good" — clearly deliberate — sentence fragments we spoke of earlier)
 - *Subordination and coordination:* Recognizing and correcting problems in how major parts of sentences are related
 - *Parallel structure:* Recognizing and correcting problems with parallelism
 - *Modifier placement:* Recognizing and correcting problems with modifier placement, including dangling and misplaced modifiers

REMEMBER

Observing standard English conventions is about more than ticking off items on a long list of grammar, punctuation, and usage rules; rather, it's closely tied to the meaning a writer wishes to convey.

- *Inappropriate shifts in verb tense, mood, and voice* (e.g., changing inappropriately from past to present tense)
- *Inappropriate shifts in pronoun person and number* (e.g., changing inappropriately from second person “you” to third person “one”)
- ▶ **Conventions of Usage:** Observing standard usage practices, including:
 - *Pronoun clarity:* Recognizing and correcting ambiguous or vague pronouns (pronouns with more than one possible antecedent or no clear antecedent at all)
 - *Possessive determiners:* Distinguishing between and among possessive determiners (“its,” “your,” “their”), contractions (“it’s,” “you’re,” “they’re”), and adverbs (“there”)
 - *Agreement:* Ensuring grammatical agreement between subject and verb, between pronoun and antecedent, and between nouns
 - *Frequently confused words:* Distinguishing between and among words that are commonly mistaken for one another (e.g., “affect” and “effect”)
 - *Logical comparison:* Recognizing and correcting cases in which unlike terms are compared
 - *Conventional expression:* Recognizing and correcting cases in which, for no good rhetorical reason, language fails to follow conventional practice
- ▶ **Conventions of Punctuation:** Observing standard punctuation practices, including:
 - *End-of-sentence punctuation:* Using the correct form of ending punctuation (period, question mark, or exclamation point) when the context makes the writer’s intent clear
 - *Within-sentence punctuation:* Correctly using and recognizing and correcting misuses of colons, semicolons, and dashes
 - *Possessive nouns and pronouns:* Recognizing and correcting inappropriate uses of possessive nouns and pronouns and deciding between plural and possessive forms
 - *Items in a series:* Using commas and sometimes semicolons to separate lists of items
 - *Nonrestrictive and parenthetical elements:* Using punctuation to set off nonessential sentence elements and recognizing and correcting cases in which punctuation is wrongly used to set off essential sentence elements
 - *Unnecessary punctuation:* Recognizing and eliminating unneeded punctuation

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As you can see, there are a lot of English conventions that may be tested on the SAT. Spend ample time practicing standard English conventions, especially those that you know you tend to struggle with. Check out khanacademy.org/sat for help.

Three general observations are in order before we discuss the three subcategories in some detail. First, while many Expression of Ideas questions specify what to consider as you answer them, many Standard English Conventions questions don't. You'll most often be presented with an underlined portion of the passage and four choices, generally consisting of a "NO CHANGE" option and three alternatives. Choose "NO CHANGE" if you find no conventions problem; otherwise, choose the alternative that follows the conventions of standard written English. Each question tests one concept or at most two closely related concepts, so you should find it pretty easy to figure out what's being assessed. (Plus, in real life, you're not always told what to look out for when you're editing a piece of writing.)

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For more practice with the standard English conventions tested on the SAT, visit Khan Academy at khanacademy.org/sat.

Second, the main purpose of this chapter is to familiarize you with what's tested in the Standard English Conventions questions on the Writing and Language Test. While you may learn a thing or two about those conventions from reading this chapter, it's beyond the chapter's scope to teach the knowledge and skills you'll need to do well on the test. If a particular concept touched on in this chapter is unclear, take a look at the sample questions in Chapter 16 — each question identifies what's being tested — or consult other sources, such as your teachers, textbooks, or high-quality print and digital reference materials. As always, Khan Academy provides an outstanding resource for SAT readiness at khanacademy.org/sat.

Finally, while you may be used to thinking of language conventions as absolute rules, in reality linguists, educators, writers, and authors of style manuals debate quite a few of these issues. For example, while many books and experts advise using a comma before a coordinating conjunction in a list of three or more items (x , y , and z), others suggest that it's often not necessary (x , y and z). Although the Writing and Language Test includes questions about items in a series, we don't directly test this particular comma usage. In general terms, the test stays away from assessing what's sometimes called "contested usage" — those issues that experts disagree about. There's no definitive list of what we don't test — indeed, that list changes over time as some issues get settled and new ones crop up — but if good reference books disagree on a particular point, it's likely that we don't test the matter directly.

In the following sections, we'll describe the general features of each of the three conventions subcategories and touch on the specific knowledge and skills addressed in each. To keep things manageable, we won't go into detail on each possible testable issue.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

In Chapter 14, we introduced the concept of syntax, defining it as the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Syntax in the Effective Language Use questions is about finding the most effective arrangement of words to accomplish a specific rhetorical purpose. Sentence

Structure questions, in contrast, address syntax from a conventions perspective. You'll have to recognize and correct problems in how sentences are formed as well as identify and fix cases in which constructions shift inappropriately within or between sentences. For discussion purposes, let's divide this subcategory into two basic groupings: sentence formation and inappropriate shifts in construction.

Sentence Formation

Questions about sentence formation try to determine whether you can recognize and correct fundamental (but not always simple) problems with how sentences are constructed. Some of these questions may ask you to identify and fix (rhetorically ineffective) sentence fragments (incomplete sentences), run-ons (independent clauses fused together without punctuation or conjunction), and comma splices (independent clauses joined by only a comma).

Other questions will ask you to identify and fix problems in how the various phrases and clauses within a sentence are related. Sometimes the problem will be the coordination or subordination of clauses, as when a coordinating conjunction such as “and” or “but” is used when the logic of the sentence calls for a subordinating conjunction such as “although” or “because.” In other cases, the problem will be a lack of parallel structure — a failure to treat grammatically similar structures in a series in the same way. The sentence “She likes running, swimming, and to go on hikes,” for example, exhibits flawed parallelism because the pattern of gerunds (“running,” “swimming”) is broken by an infinitive phrase (“to go on hikes”). In yet other instances, a sentence will include a dangling or misplaced modifier — a word, phrase, or clause that doesn't modify what it's supposed to. For example, the sentence “Even after paying for costly repairs, the car still broke down” has a dangling modifier because presumably a person, not the car, paid for the repairs.

Inappropriate Shifts in Construction

Sometimes sentence structure problems emerge because of a failure to be consistent either within or between sentences. If a writer has been using past tense and for no clear reason suddenly (and often illogically) switches to using present tense, an inappropriate shift in construction has occurred. On the Writing and Language Test, such problematic shifts can happen with either verbs or pronouns. A question about verb shifts may ask you to edit an inappropriate shift from, say, past to present tense, indicative to conditional mood, or active to passive voice. A question about pronoun shifts may ask you to recognize and correct an inappropriate shift from, for example, a second person to a third person pronoun (such as from “you” to “one”) or from a singular to a plural pronoun. Of course, not all shifts are inappropriate; some are, in fact, quite necessary. If a writer has been describing his or her present feelings and then flashes back to the events that led to those feelings, a shift from present to past tense is perfectly warranted. It's when

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When a sentence includes a series of items, each item must possess parallel structure. For instance, the sentence “She likes running, swimming, and hiking” exhibits basic but sound parallelism.

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The Writing and Language Test may include questions on consistent verb tense, mood, voice, and pronoun person and number.

these shifts happen inappropriately, or for no clear reason, that they become fodder for questions on the Writing and Language Test.

CONVENTIONS OF USAGE

“Usage” is a technical term used to describe a range of language practices that are widely accepted and understood by people speaking and writing the same language within a particular culture or community. Particular “rules” for speaking and writing solidify over time (often over many generations) and become the standard by which formal speech and writing are judged. Often these “rules” develop without conscious thought. You’d be hard-pressed to find a rational reason for why native speakers of English would recognize the phrase “A big red balloon” as standard but “A red big balloon” as nonstandard, but nearly all would immediately notice the difference (and probably consider the second an error). It’s a little circular, but usage conventions are, ultimately, conventions regarding how particular groups of people customarily use language.

On the Writing and Language Test, the subcategory Conventions of Usage calls on a variety of skills associated with common practices in English writing. We’ll treat each of these briefly now.

Pronoun Clarity

In well-written and well-edited writing, all pronouns have a clear and appropriate antecedent, or noun to which they refer. Because writers generally know their subjects better than their audiences do, however, sometimes vague or ambiguous pronouns creep in. These are pronouns that have no clear and appropriate antecedent or that have potentially more than one antecedent. To cite one example: In the sentence “Michael gave Steven his book,” the pronoun “his” is ambiguous. Does the writer mean that Michael gave Steven one of Michael’s own books or that Michael returned Steven’s own book to him? It’s not possible to know from the sentence alone. Even if the surrounding text made the intended antecedent clear, it’s still not good practice to leave vague or ambiguous pronouns in a text. The Writing and Language Test will sometimes present you with such problematic pronouns and ask you to correct the situation (in many cases by replacing a vague or ambiguous pronoun with a noun).

Possessive Determiners

The bane of many writers’ and editors’ existence is remembering the differences between “its” and “it’s”; “your” and “you’re”; and “their,” “they’re,” and “there.” That so many people — even good writers and editors — have trouble keeping these words straight is probably due of a number of factors. “Its” and “it’s,” for instance, sound the same and have similar spellings; that “its” lacks the apostrophe generally used to signal possession is no help either. Still, these words do have different functions, many people will recognize when they’re confused with one another, and questions about them

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If you have trouble using homophones like “its” and “it’s” or “their” and “they’re” correctly, pay close attention to these words in your everyday writing in school. Becoming more familiar with the proper use of these words will be good practice for the Writing and Language Test (and will serve you well throughout your life!).

are likely to appear on the Writing and Language Test. It's worth the time and effort, therefore, to learn how to use these words in a conventional way if you struggle with them.

Agreement

The Writing and Language Test includes questions that cover a range of agreement issues. A question may ask you to recognize and correct problems in agreement between subject and verb, between pronoun and antecedent, and between nouns. You most likely already understand the conventions for subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement, but the concept of noun agreement may be less familiar. In essence, for related nouns to agree they must have the same number — singular noun with singular noun and plural noun with plural noun. The sentence “Alfredo and Julia became a doctor after many years of study” contains a problem with noun agreement because the compound subject “Alfredo and Julia” is plural but “doctor” is singular. A better version of the sentence would be “Alfredo and Julia became doctors after many years of study.”

Frequently Confused Words

The Writing and Language Test may include questions asking you to distinguish between and among frequently confused words — words that have similar or identical sounds and/or similar spellings but that have different meanings and are used in different ways. The “its”/“it’s” distinction we discussed earlier is really just a special (and particularly troublesome) case of the more general problem of frequently confused words. “Affect” and “effect” is a commonly cited pair of such words because they often show up in writing. In most cases, “affect” should be used as a verb and “effect” as a noun, but even good writers sometimes mistake one for the other due to the words’ similarity in sound and spelling. (We said “most cases” because psychologists sometimes use “affect” as a noun to refer to mood and because “effect” is — infrequently — used as a verb, as in “to effect a change.”) If you feel that you often get words such as these mixed up, consider consulting one of the many lists of frequently confused words available in language handbooks and on the Internet.

Logical Comparison

Problems with illogical comparisons arise when unlike or dissimilar things are treated as equivalent. For example, the sentence “The cost of living in the city differs from the suburb” contains an illogical comparison because instead of comparing the cost of living in the city and in the suburb — two similar concepts — the sentence actually compares a concept (cost of living) with a location (suburb). One easy way to correct the error is to add the phrase “that in,” as in “The cost of living in the city differs from that in the suburb.” Another approach would be to make “suburb” possessive: “The cost of living in the city differs from the suburb’s [cost of living].” Questions on the Writing and Language Test may require you to identify and fix such comparison problems.

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There are many words that sound and are spelled similarly but that have different meanings and uses. Practice identifying the correct uses of these words. Examples include:

affect / effect
accept / except
than / then

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When a sentence compares two or more things, check to make sure that the items being compared are parallel in nature.

Conventional Expression

Conventional Expression questions don't fit neatly into one of the usage types listed earlier, but like them they focus on recognizing and correcting instances in which word choice doesn't conform to the practices of standard written English.

CONVENTIONS OF PUNCTUATION

A number of questions on the Writing and Language Test concern the use and misuse of various forms of punctuation, including end punctuation (periods, question marks, and exclamation points), commas, semicolons, colons, and dashes, to signal various relationships within and between sentences. In many cases, you'll be expected to recognize and correct problematic punctuation; in some cases, you'll be asked to add punctuation to clarify and enhance meaning. There are a number of particular types of Conventions of Punctuation questions, which we'll touch on briefly in the sections that follow.

End-of-Sentence Punctuation

End punctuation — periods, question marks, and exclamation points — is, of course, used to mark the conclusion of sentences and to offer some clue as to their nature (a question mark signaling a question, and the like). By now, you've doubtless mastered the use of such punctuation in most situations, so questions on the Writing and Language Test are limited to challenging cases. One such case is the indirect question — a question that's embedded in a declarative sentence and that takes a period instead of a question mark. “He asked whether I could come along” is an example of an indirect question. While it could easily be rewritten as a typical question, in its present form the question is phrased more like a statement and should be concluded with a period.

Within-Sentence Punctuation

On the Writing and Language Test, questions about the appropriate use of colons, semicolons, and dashes to signal sharp breaks in thought come under the heading of Within-Sentence Punctuation. You may be asked to recognize when one of these forms of punctuation is misused and to correct the situation, or you may be expected to use one of these forms properly to establish a particular relationship among words and ideas. The best answer to a particular question of this latter sort may involve using a semicolon to connect two closely related independent clauses or a colon to introduce a list or an idea that builds on one previously introduced in the sentence.

Possessive Nouns and Pronouns

In Writing and Language Test questions about possessive nouns and pronouns, you may be asked to recognize and correct cases in which the

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Conventions of Punctuation questions ask you to correct problematic punctuation or to add punctuation to clarify a sentence's meaning.

incorrect form of a possessive noun or pronoun is used, such as when a singular possessive is used when the context calls for a plural possessive. You may also have to edit instances in which a possessive form is incorrectly used in place of a plural form and vice versa.

Items in a Series

Series that contain more than two elements typically require some form of punctuation to separate the elements. In most cases, commas are used as separators, but in more complex situations (particularly when one or more of the elements has its own commas), semicolons may be used instead. On the Writing and Language Test, you may find questions asking you to add or remove commas (and sometimes semicolons) to eliminate ambiguity and to reflect conventional practice. In all cases, the passage context will make clear how many items there are in the series. (As noted earlier, the Writing and Language Test doesn't directly test whether a comma should be placed immediately before the coordinating conjunction in a series of three or more elements.)

Nonrestrictive and Parenthetical Elements

Some questions on the Writing and Language Test may ask you to recognize whether a given part of a sentence is essential or nonessential to the meaning of the sentence and to make punctuation decisions accordingly. Essential (restrictive) sentence elements are critical to the sentence's meaning and aren't set off with punctuation, whereas nonessential (nonrestrictive, parenthetical) sentence elements are set off from the rest of the sentence with commas, dashes, or parentheses. On the Writing and Language Test, you may have to remove punctuation from essential elements, add punctuation to nonessential elements, or correct instances in which nonessential elements are set off with mismatched punctuation (a comma and a dash, for example).

Unnecessary Punctuation

While just the right amount of punctuation can improve the clarity and effectiveness of writing, too much punctuation can slow the reader down and introduce confusion. Some questions on the Writing and Language Test will assess whether you can recognize and remove such extraneous punctuation. Sometimes this stray punctuation will clearly disrupt the meaning and flow of a sentence, as when a comma appears between an adjective and the noun it modifies, but other instances will be trickier to root out because they occur where there seem to be natural "pauses" in a sentence, such as between a subject and a predicate. It's true that writers have some freedom in how much punctuation to use and where, so the Writing and Language Test will only test unnecessary punctuation when it clearly falls beyond what is considered typical in well-edited writing (that is, where the punctuation actually interferes with the meaning).

CHAPTER 15 RECAP

The Standard English Conventions questions on the SAT Writing and Language Test deal with a wide range of sentence structure, usage, and punctuation issues. To answer them correctly, you'll have to apply your knowledge of language conventions and your editing skills to a variety of multiparagraph passages. While the questions on the test deal with matters of standard practice, they focus on more than just correcting surface errors and following "rules" for rules' sake. Instead, Standard English Conventions questions address issues of substance that affect the meaning and communicative power and persuasiveness of text, and answering them correctly goes a long way toward demonstrating that you're ready for the kinds of writing tasks that you'll be expected to undertake in your postsecondary courses of study.