The Simple Digital SAT® Reading & Writing Standard English Conventions Cheat Sheet

Overview & Clause Basics

What It Tests

Standard English Conventions: grammar & punctuation edits; ~26% of R&W (11–15 Qs).
2 skills: **Boundaries** (punctuation) & **Form, Structure & Sense** (agreement, verbs).
Stem: "Which choice ... conforms to the conventions of Standard English?"

Clause Vocabulary

Independent clause (IC): subject + verb; works alone as a sentence: "The bees returned."
Dependent clause (DC): starts w/ because, although, when, which → can't stand alone.

Tools That Join 2 ICs

Tool	Pattern	OK?
Period	IC. IC.	✓
Semicolon	IC; IC.	✓
Comma + and	IC, and IC.	✓
Colon	IC: IC.	✓
Dash	IC—IC.	✓
Comma alone	IC, IC.	× splice
Nothing	IC IC.	× run-on

FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so): the only words that join 2 ICs after a comma.

⚠ Period, semicolon & ", and" are equal links; if 2 show up as choices, neither is right.

✓ Before any punctuation Q, mark where each clause starts & ends; that decides it.

Boundaries: Linking Clauses

Splices & Fragments

Comma splice: 2 ICs joined w/ only a comma: "The lab closed, the staff left." × Wrong.
Fix: use a period, a semicolon or ", so": "The lab closed; the staff went home." ✓
Fragment (incomplete sentence): "Because the dam failed." → attach it to an IC.

However, Therefore, Thus

However, therefore, thus are NOT FANBOYS; a comma alone can't join 2 ICs w/ them.

Pattern	Correct?
IC; however, IC.	✓
IC. However, IC.	✓
IC, however, IC.	× splice
Subject, however, verb.	✓ interrupter

Subordinators

DC first → comma after it: "Although it rained, the race went on." DC second → no comma.
Subordinators (although, because, while, if): never put a semicolon before them.

Colons

Colon: needs a full IC before it; then a list, example or explanation follows: "one goal: speed."

⚠ "However" after a comma between 2 full sentences is the #1 splice trap.

✓ 2nd clause starts w/ a FANBOYS word → a comma is enough; else use ; or .

Boundaries: Supplements

Nonessential (Extra) Info

Nonessential info is set off on BOTH sides w/ matching marks: 2 commas or 2 dashes.
Removal test: delete the phrase; if the sentence still works & means the same, set it off.
Match the marks: a dash that opens must close w/ a dash, not a comma. × "—...,"

Element	Example	Marks
Appositive	Kim, a chef,	2 commas
Which clause	Rome, which...,	2 commas
That clause	the law that	none
Aside	(see Fig. 2)	( )
Strong break	—not once—	2 dashes

Essential vs. Nonessential

Essential info tells WHICH one, so no commas: "Students **who study** pass" (only those).
Nonessential info adds detail about a known noun: "My sister, who lives in Ohio, called."
Title + name: "physicist Lise Meitner" (no commas); "Meitner, a physicist," (commas).
Check: never split subject & verb w/ 1 comma: "The fossil, found in 1998, is rare."
Where it ends: put the 2nd mark right where the extra info stops & the main sentence resumes.

⚠ The opening mark is often in the passage; scan back for a lone comma or dash.

✓ Cross out the extra phrase in your head; what's left must be a correct, complete sentence.

Boundaries: Unneeded Marks & Series

Never Put a Comma Between...

Between	Wrong	Right
Subject+verb	data, show	data show
Verb+object	found, that	found that
Prep+object	of, the	of the
Adj+noun	rare, bird	rare bird
2 items	A, and B	A and B

Long subjects tempt a comma: "The number of birds on the cliffs has grown." No comma.
That: no comma before "that": "She found that the soil was dry," not "found, that."
Compound verb: "She sampled the soil and tested it." No comma; 2nd part has no subject.

Punctuating a Series

Simple list: commas between items: "maps, logs, and photos" (the last comma is OK).
Complex list (items have commas) → semicolons: "Lima, Peru; Quito, Ecuador; and Cali."
Parallel items: list items take the same form: "reading, writing, and coding" (all -ing).

Introductory Phrases

Opener: a comma after "In the late 1800s," is fine; never put a comma right before the verb.

⚠ When unsure, pick less punctuation. Extra commas are the most common wrong choices.

✓ Read it w/ no pause at the comma; if nothing breaks, the comma doesn't belong.

Form: Subject-Verb Agreement

Find the Real Subject

Rule: singular subject → singular verb (is, has); plural → plural verb (are, have).
Interrupters: cross out prep phrases: "The **list** [of rare species] **is** long," not "are."
Inverted order: "Among the finds **were** 2 **coins**." The subject comes after the verb.

Tricky Subjects

Subject	Verb	Example
A and B	plural	Ann & Bo are
A or B	nearer one	or kids are
Each, every	singular	Each one is
Team, group	singular	Team wins
The number	singular	The number is
A number	plural	A number are
-ing subject	singular	Hiking helps

Indefinite pronouns (everyone, each, neither, nobody) are singular: "Neither **works**."
Along with / as well as don't make it plural: "The mayor, along w/ aides, **was** there."

Spotting It

Clue: choices differ only by -s (is/are, has/have, shows/show) → find the subject first.

⚠ The noun right before the blank is often a decoy inside a prep phrase; trace back.

✓ Strip the sentence to bare subject + verb ("list...is") and say it in your head to check.

Form: Pronouns, Plurals & Possessives

Pronoun Agreement

Match number: the pronoun matches its noun: "The **museum** updated **its** hours."
Groups & companies (firm, team, agency) are singular → it / its, not they / their.
Look back: the noun a pronoun replaces may sit 1–2 sentences before the blank, not next to it.

Plurals vs. Possessives

Form	Example	Meaning
Plural	the artists	2+ artists
Sing. poss.	the artist's	1 artist owns
Plural poss.	the artists'	2+ artists own
Irregular	children's	kids own

Ownership test: noun followed by a thing it has ("the bird's nest") → apostrophe.
Plural only: nothing owned after it → no apostrophe: "The **researchers** found..."

Pronoun Look-alikes

Word	Means
its / it's	owns / it is
their / they're	owns / they are
whose / who's	owns / who is

Expand test: swap "it's" → "it is"; if the sentence breaks, use the possessive **its**.

⚠ Possessive pronouns (its, theirs, hers, whose) NEVER take apostrophes; "it's" = "it is."

✓ On author / authors / author's / authors': decide 1 vs 2+, then owns or not.

Form: Verbs (Tense & Finiteness)

Every Sentence Needs a Main Verb

Finite verb (shows tense: walked, is, has found): every sentence needs 1 in its main clause.
Nonfinite (-ing, to + verb): "walking," "to walk" can't be the main verb on its own.
Fragment trap: "The rover, which landed in 2021, **collecting** rocks." × → **collected** ✓

Tense

Form	Use for	Example
Simple past	Done, past	She wrote
Pres. perfect	Past → now	has written
Past perfect	Earlier past	had written
Present	Facts, texts	The poem uses

Match the passage: check nearby verbs & time words (in 1850, today, since, by then).
Since / for + time up to now → present perfect: "has studied bats since 2015," not "studied."
Literary present: texts & authors "do" things in the present: "In *Emma*, Austen **depicts**..."
Past perfect: "By 1900, the town **had grown**": done before another past moment.

Conditionals

If...had: "If she **had** tested it, she **would have** known." Never write "would of."

⚠ Don't pick -ing b/c it sounds smooth; the clause still needs a main verb.

✓ Same verb in 4 forms? Find its subject & the passage's time frame before you choose one.

Form: Modifiers & Test Strategy

Modifier Placement

Rule: an opening phrase describes the noun right after the comma; it must be the doer.
Dangling: "Walking home, the rain soaked Ana." × → "Walking home, **Ana** got wet." ✓
Test: ask "Who is walking?" The answer must be the 1st noun after the comma, not "rain."
Possessive trap: "Raised in Kyoto, **Mori's** art..." × The art wasn't raised; Mori was.

Read the Choices First

Choices differ by...	Tested skill
. ; , : —	Linking clauses
Comma pairs, dashes	Supplements
is / are, has / have	S-V agreement
it / they, its / their	Pronouns
's / s' / s	Possessives
-ing / -ed / to ...	Verbs

Pacing & Habits

Speed: aim for ~30–45 sec per Q; save the extra time for the harder reading Qs.
Read the whole sentence, not just the blank; the subject or clause break may be far from it.
Trust rules, not your ear: a pause in speech ≠ a comma; decide by clause structure.

⚠ Answers that "sound fine" are often comma splices; prove each choice by rule.

✓ Rules repeat on every test; drill each type in Bluebook & on Albert until it's automatic.