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



## Overview & Clause Basics

### What It Tests

**Standard English Conventions**: edit for grammar & punctuation; ~26% of R&W, about 11–15 of 54 Qs.

**2 skills**: **Boundaries** (punctuation) & **Form, Structure & Sense** (agreement, verbs, nouns, modifiers).

**Stem**: "Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?"

**Position**: these Qs come after Info & Ideas and before Expression of Ideas in each 27-Q, 32-min module.

### Clause Vocabulary

**Independent clause (IC)**: subject + finite verb; stands alone as a sentence: "The bees returned to the hive."

**Dependent clause (DC)**: starts w/ a subordinator (because, although, when, which, who) → can't stand alone.

**Phrase**: no subject-verb pair, e.g., "after the storm," "a retired pilot"; can't stand alone as a sentence.

### Tools That Join 2 ICs

| Tool | Pattern | Legal? |
|---|---|---|
| Period | IC. IC. | ✓ |
| Semicolon | IC; IC. | ✓ |
| Comma + FANBOYS | IC, and IC. | ✓ |
| Colon | IC: IC (explains) | ✓ |
| Single 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 can join 2 ICs w/ just a comma before them.

⚠ . ; and ", + FANBOYS" are equal links; if 2 of them appear as answer choices, neither one is right.

✓ Before any punctuation Q, mark where each clause starts & ends; the boundary decides the answer.

## Boundaries: Linking Clauses

### Splices, Run-ons & Fragments

**Comma splice**: 2 ICs joined by only a comma: "The lab closed, the staff left." Fix w/ ; or . or ", so".
**Fragment**: a DC or phrase punctuated as a sentence: "Because the dam failed." → attach it to an IC.
**Test**: cover the punctuation & read each side alone; 2 complete sentences need a strong link (. ; : —).

### Conjunctive Adverbs

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

| Pattern | Correct? |
|---|---|
| IC; however, IC. | ✓ |
| IC. However, IC. | ✓ |
| IC, however, IC. | × splice |
| IC; and, IC. | × double link |
| Subject, however, verb. | ✓ interrupter |

**Mid-clause however**: "The plan, however, failed." Commas on both sides b/c it sits inside a single IC.

### Subordinators

**DC first**: comma after it: "Although it rained, the race went on." **DC second**: usually no comma before it.
**Subordinators**: although, because, since, while, when, if, unless, whereas; never use ; before them.

### Colons & Dashes

**Colon**: needs a complete IC before it; after it comes a list, example, explanation or a 2nd IC that explains.
**Bad colon**: "The kit includes: a map and a lamp." × "includes" needs its object, so drop the colon.
**Single dash** = colon in function: after an IC, it sets off a final example, list or reveal ("...one culprit—salt.").

⚠ "However" after a comma between 2 full sentences is the #1 splice trap; it needs a semicolon or a period.

✓ If the 2nd clause begins w/ a FANBOYS word, a comma is enough; any other word, look for ; or .

## Boundaries: Supplements

### Nonessential Elements

**Nonessential** (extra) info is set off on BOTH sides by matching marks: 2 commas, 2 dashes or 2 ( ).

**Removal test**: delete the phrase; if the sentence still works & keeps its meaning, it's nonessential → set off.

**Match the marks**: "Ada Lovelace—a mathematician, wrote..." × dash opens, comma closes → use 2 dashes.

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

### Essential vs. Nonessential

**Essential** (restrictive) info tells WHICH one, so no commas: "Students **who study** pass" (only those who study).

**Nonessential** info adds detail about an already-known noun: "My sister, who lives in Ohio, called me."

**Title + name**: "physicist Lise Meitner" (no commas) but "Lise Meitner, a physicist, split atoms" (commas).

**Unique noun**: "Her only novel, *Beloved*, won." Commas b/c "only" already tells the reader which novel.

### Where the 2nd Mark Goes

**Find the end**: the closing mark goes right where the extra info stops & the main sentence resumes.

**Check**: subject ... closing mark ... verb. "The fossil, found in 1998, is rare." Never split subject & verb w/ 1 comma.

⚠ The opening mark is often in the passage, not the choices; scan back for a lone comma or dash.

✓ Cross out the extra phrase in your head; what's left must be a correct sentence w/ no stray marks.

## Boundaries: Unneeded Marks & Series

### Never Put a Comma Between...

| Between | Wrong | Right |
|---|---|---|
| Subject & verb | The data, show | The data show |
| Verb & object | found, that | found that |
| Prep & object | of, the | of the |
| Adj & noun | rare, bird | rare bird |
| 2 items w/ and | A, and B | A and B |

**Long subjects** tempt a comma: "The number of birds nesting on the cliffs has grown." No comma before "has".

**That / such as**: no comma before "that" or before a short "such as" list that's essential to the noun.

**Compound verb**: "She sampled the soil and tested it." No comma b/c the 2nd part has no own subject.

### Punctuating a Series

**Simple list**: commas between items: "maps, logs, and photos" (SAT accepts the serial comma).

**Complex list**: items that contain commas → separate items w/ semicolons: "Lima, Peru; Quito, Ecuador; and Cali."

**Parallel items**: keep list items in the same form, e.g., all nouns or all -ing verbs: "reading, writing, and coding."

### Other Boundary Marks

**Quotation**: "called it 'a triumph'" needs no comma when the quote blends into the sentence's grammar.

**Question mark**: only for a direct question; "She asked why it failed." is indirect, so it ends w/ a period.

**Introductory phrase**: a comma after a long opener ("In the late 1800s, ...") is fine; never one before the verb.

⚠ When unsure, choose less punctuation. Extra commas are the most common wrong choices on this domain.

✓ Read the choice w/ no pause where the comma is; if nothing breaks, the comma doesn't belong.

## Form: Subject-Verb Agreement

### Find the Real Subject

**Rule**: singular subject → singular verb (is, has, -s); plural subject → plural verb (are, have, no -s).

**Interrupters**: cross out prep phrases: "The **list** [of rare species] **is** long"; "species" isn't the subject.

**Inverted order**: "Among the finds **were** 2 **coins**." Subject follows the verb; flip it: "2 coins were..."

**There is / are**: the noun after the verb is the subject: "There **are** many **reasons**"; "There **is** 1 **reason**."

### Tricky Subjects

| Subject | Verb | Example |
|---|---|---|
| A and B | plural | Ann & Bo are |
| Either A or B | nearer | or the kids are |
| Each, every | singular | Each one is |
| Team, group | singular | The team wins |
| The number of | singular | The number is |
| A number of | plural | A number are |
| Gerund (-ing) | singular | Hiking helps |

**Indefinite pronouns**: everyone, someone, nobody, each, either & neither are all singular: "Neither **works**."

**Along w/, as well as, together w/** don't make a subject plural: "The mayor, along w/ aides, **was** there."

**Relative clause**: "the **cells** that **divide**": the verb after who/that/which agrees w/ the noun it refers to.

### Spotting It

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

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

✓ Strip the sentence to bare subject + verb ("list...is") and say it aloud; the right form becomes clear.

## Form: Pronouns, Plurals & Possessives

### Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

**Match number**: pronoun agrees w/ the noun it replaces: "The **museum** updated **its** hours," not "their".

**Groups & companies**: the SAT treats agency, firm, team & council as singular → it / its, never they / their.

**Find the antecedent**: look back 1–2 sentences; the right pronoun can depend on a noun far from the blank.

### Plurals vs. Possessives

| Form | Example | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| Plural | the artists | 2+ artists |
| Sing. possessive | the artist's | 1 artist owns |
| Plural possessive | the artists' | 2+ artists own |
| Irregular plural | children's | kids own |

**Ownership test**: if the noun is followed by a thing it has ("the bird's nest"), you need an apostrophe.

**Plural only**: no owned noun after it → no apostrophe: "The **researchers** found that the samples..."

**Count the owners**: 1 owner → 's; 2+ owners ending in s → s'; irregular plurals (women, mice) → 's, e.g., women's.

### Pronoun Look-alikes

| Word | Means |
|---|---|
| its / it's | possessive / it is |
| their / they're | possessive / they are |
| whose / who's | possessive / who is |

**Expand test**: swap "it's" → "it is" (or who's → who is); if it breaks, use the possessive **its** / **whose**.

⚠ Possessive pronouns NEVER take apostrophes: its, theirs, hers, whose. "It's" is always "it is".

✓ On a 4-way choice (author / authors / author's / authors'), decide 1 vs 2+ first, then owns vs not.

## Form: Verbs (Tense & Finiteness)

### Finite vs. Nonfinite

**Finite verb**: shows tense & has a subject (walked, is, has found); every sentence needs 1 in its main clause.

**Nonfinite**: -ing (walking), to + verb (to walk), -ed participle (walked by...); can't be the main verb alone.

**Fragment trap**: "The rover, which landed in 2021, **collecting** samples." × → "**collected** samples." ✓

**Already has a main verb?** Then the blank in a modifier spot needs a nonfinite form: "Built in 1890, the bridge..."

### Tense & Aspect

| Form | Use for | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Simple past | Done, past | She wrote |
| Present perfect | Past → now | has written |
| Past perfect | Earlier past | had written |
| Present | Facts, texts | The poem uses |
| Future perfect | Done by future | will have written |

**Match the passage**: look at nearby verbs & time words (in 1850, today, since, by the time) → pick the tense.

**Since / for** + span up to now → present perfect: "has studied bats **since** 2015"; not "studied since".

**Past perfect**: "By 1900, the town **had grown**"; the action finished before another past moment.

**Literary present**: describe what a text, chart or author does in present tense: "In the novel, Austen **depicts**..."

### Mood & Form

**Conditional**: "If she **had** tested it, she **would have** known." Never "would of" or "if she would have".

⚠ Don't choose -ing to "sound smooth"; check the clause still has a finite main verb after your choice.

✓ If all 4 choices are the same verb in different forms, find its subject & the passage's time frame first.

## Form: Modifiers & Test Strategy

### Subject-Modifier Placement

**Rule**: an opening modifier describes the noun right after the comma; that noun must be who/what does it.

**Dangling**: "Walking home, the rain soaked Ana." × The rain wasn't walking → "Walking home, **Ana** got soaked." ✓

**Test**: ask "Who is [modifier]?" The answer must be the 1st noun after the comma, not a possessive.

**Possessive trap**: "Raised in Kyoto, **Mori's** art..." × The art wasn't raised; need "**Mori** made art..."

### 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 | Pronoun agreement |
| 's / s' / s | Possessive / plural |
| -ing / -ed / to ... | Finite verb, tense |
| Which noun starts | Modifier placement |

### Pacing & Habits

**Speed**: aim for ~30–45 sec per conventions Q; bank time for the harder Info & Ideas reading items.

**Read the whole sentence**, not just the blank; the clause boundary or subject is often far from it.

**Trust rules, not ear**: pauses in speech don't = commas; decide by clause structure every time.

**Eliminate twins**: if 2 choices are grammatically equal (e.g., ", However," & "; however,"), neither is right.

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

✓ Rules repeat on every test; drill each type in Bluebook & on Albert until you spot it in 10 seconds.