SAT Grammar Rules

Grammar-only revision guide

Learn the formulas. Identify what the question tests. Apply the rule.

IC = independent clause · DC = dependent clause · NE = non-essential element

1. Verbs: classify the question first

Verbs form 80% of the questions in Form, Structure, and Sense. Tense is rarely tested. What is usually tested is subject-verb agreement and finite versus non-finite verbs (participles and infinitives). Always classify the question before solving it: subject-verb agreement, finite versus non-finite verb, or tense.

The most common tense questions test general facts, which take the simple present tense. Any clause can only have one main verb (finite verb). Ask: does the blank need a main verb?

2. Subject-verb agreement

The subject and verb should agree. Find the subject and decide whether it is singular or plural.

If one of the answer choices uses a verb form that can be both singular and plural, the question is probably not testing subject-verb agreement. Identifying whether the subject is singular or plural becomes redundant.

3. Pronoun-antecedent agreement

Focus on it / its and their / them / they. Find the noun the pronoun refers to and match its number.

Answer choices such as he / she / one are usually redundant. The skill being tested is number agreement, not gender agreement.

4. Possessives versus plurals

A's B → B has to be a noun. If B is a verb, conjunction, preposition, etc., then you do not need the apostrophe.

Follow the rule and you will often not even need to read the passage.

5. Subject-modifier placement

Answer choices are usually long and structurally different, almost as though it is a reading question. That is the tell. Read the modifier and ask whether it describes a person, an idea, or a thing. Then read only the subject from each answer choice and pick the answer.

Most answer choices sound grammatically acceptable and mean roughly the same thing. Do not read the entire answer choices. You will often end up choosing the one you read the most times.

6. Independent clauses

Clauses have a subject and a main verb, not just any verb. Learn the formulas and apply them. All three of these boundaries are grammatically equivalent: IC ; IC / IC . IC / IC , FANBOYS IC. FANBOYS stands for for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

IC , for example ; IC is often correct because many students incorrectly think you cannot end a sentence with 'for example.' You can.

7. Dependent clauses

Learn these patterns: DC , IC / IC , DC. IC means independent clause. DC means dependent clause.

Identify the clauses first, then apply the formula.

8. Non-essential elements

Use matching punctuation: , NE , / — NE — / (NE). These elements can also appear at the beginning or end of a sentence: NE , IC / IC , NE. NE means non-essential element.

NE , IC can look similar to DC , IC, but a dependent clause has a main verb. 'Which…' creates a non-essential clause.

9. Essential elements

Essential elements have no punctuation. If you are certain an element is essential, do not hesitate to pick the option with no punctuation.

'That…' creates an essential clause.

10. Simple and complex lists

Simple list: x , y , and z. Complex list: a , x ; b , y ; and c , z.

Seeing '; and' together in either the passage or the answer choices is a major tell that the question is testing complex lists.

11. Wrong use of commas

Subject , main verb → Do not separate. x of , y → Do not disconnect what a preposition is connecting. x and y → Do not separate two simple elements with a comma.

Check what the comma would disconnect before choosing it.

12. Question marks

Subject followed by verb is usually a statement. Verb followed by subject is usually a question. Questions often begin with how, where, why, or what.

On SAT questions, checking the order of the subject and verb is often the fastest way to identify whether a question mark is needed.

13. Colons

IC : … / Setup : Payoff. The setup before the colon must be an independent clause.

Do both checks: grammatical and logical. Does the setup form an independent clause? Does what follows deliver the payoff?

14. Titles and names

A title appearing before a name is essential. Do not place punctuation between them.

Marine Biologist Dr. Albert Johnson

Book Your Free Demo Class

Not a sales pitch. A real class.

Book your free SAT demo at satprepin.com

SATPrepIn