

Guide to
SAT[®]
Writing and Language

by David Lynch

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For information, contact StudyLark at info@studylark.com
www.StudyLark.com

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For Hope & Julia

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☺ Introduction ☺

How to Improve Your Writing Score

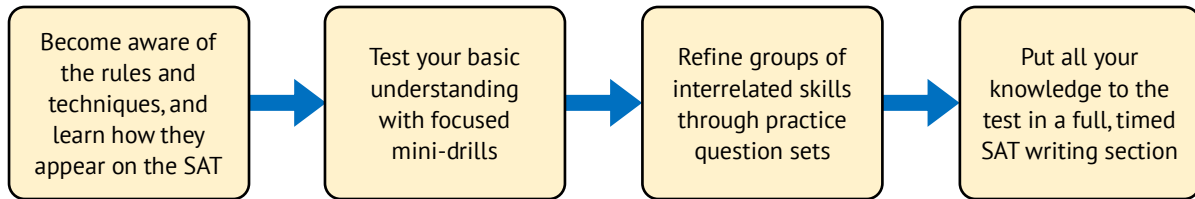
This book contains everything you need to know for the SAT Writing and Language section. It's based on years of research, and it provides clear, detailed explanations for all the rules and techniques, along with hundreds of drill and practice questions. We've done our part.

Now it's your turn.

The bad news about the SAT is that it really takes a lot of hard work to achieve mastery. The rules are here in this book, but they won't do you much good unless you put in the many hours it takes to understand, internalize, and master them. You can't cram for the SAT. You have to dedicate yourself to the lengthy process of doing mountains of practice, and you have to make sure you're learning from each question—gaining insights, noticing patterns, and building the skills you need to answer future questions. It takes time and effort. There are no shortcuts. In a nutshell, get ready to work.

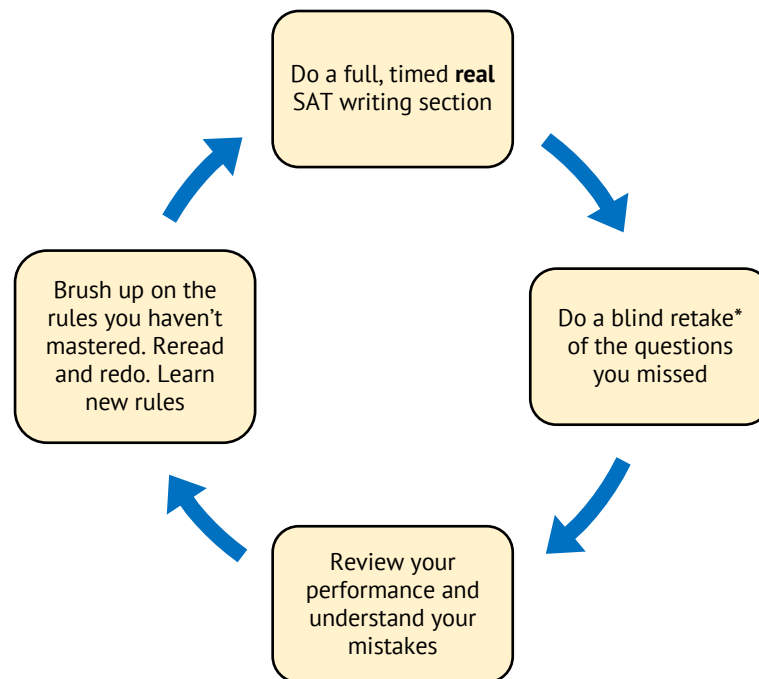
But the good news is that, with the right preparation materials, *all* it takes is a lot of hard work to make a big difference in your score. It's not magic. The test is repetitive and predictable, and while it covers a non-trivial amount of material, it's a finite amount of material. After enough practice, you'll start to see the same types of questions over and over, and getting them right will become a matter of reflex. The points are yours for the taking. If you put in the work to master the content, you can improve your score considerably.

The process for getting really good at the SAT writing section looks like this. First you have to achieve **proficiency**:



The first three steps are the main concern of this book. This is where you'll learn about everything that shows up on the SAT, and we'll do our best to give you the **knowledge** you need to master it.

But after you've achieved proficiency with that knowledge, you'll have to *keep* working to reach **mastery**. To do that, you need lots of **practice**:



The cornerstone of your practice must be real SAT writing sections. This book has hundreds of practice drills and questions, and they are carefully written to be as realistic as possible. But it does not contain simulated full writing sections, and that is very much on purpose. **There is no substitute for the real thing.** No strategy book or website in the world has questions as good as those on the real SAT. Don't practice on fake tests. To get good, use the good stuff.

* Blind retakes are explained on page 15

There are several dozen real SAT and PSAT tests that you can use, which should be enough for even the most thorough study regimen. Some tests are available for free download from the College Board website. Others have been released to the public by the College Board after official test administrations—these are known as “QAS” tests. They can be found online without too much trouble, and any decent tutor will be able to provide copies as well.

PSATs are just as good as SATs when it comes to practicing for the Writing and Language section.

The SAT has been slowly evolving since its modern format was introduced in 2015. This evolution includes changes to the test content and especially the scoring scales. Thus, the most recent tests are most representative of what you can expect to see on your test day. Use the freshest tests you can get.

If you somehow manage to do every single real test in existence, then what? Should you do the fake tests in commercially available books? We advise against it. It’s probably better to just go back and do the same real tests over again. Fake tests can’t give you reliable scores anyway, so it’s not as if you’re missing out on accurate information about how your score is moving.

Students often can’t tell the difference, but after years of living and breathing the SAT, we’ve never seen fake questions that weren’t “off” in some subtle (or egregious) way. And there’s nothing worse than banging your head against the wall trying to figure out what your mistake is on a question you don’t understand, only to find out that the question is poorly written. You don’t want to practice using material that isn’t representative of what you’ll see on test day.

Use the good stuff.

Basic Information

We assume you’ve got a basic understanding of what the SAT Writing and Language section looks like. So we won’t go into detail explaining the mechanics of how the section is structured and how the questions work. If you’ve never seen a test before, go to the College Board website, download one, and take a look.

We also assume you understand basic grammar terms such as *noun* and *preposition*. But if you’re a little rusty, take a look at the appendix on page 236 for a refresher.

The Pillars of Good Preparation

You've got real tests and the right book, and you're ready to work hard. But you also have to make sure you're studying the right way. These are the pillars of good preparation.

Think About the Process Before You Start

All too often, students just jump mindlessly into studying before they have even strategized what to use, without understanding why they are using each resource, and without planning out how they would use the resource to learn effectively. This undermines their own potential to learn well and perform well.

Metacognition is the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes. Studies have shown that those who reflect on how they want to perform and what they need to do outperform those who do not. The questionnaire on page 18 will help lead you through the metacognitive process.

Establish Good Habits

You're going to do a lot of practice questions, but there is more to preparation than burning through questions. You have to make sure you're getting a good return on your investment each time you sit down to do work. When you understand the pillars listed below, turn them into **habits**. Make sure your study sessions are scheduled, consistent, organized, and deliberate.

Eliminate Distractions

In a recent study, researchers asked subjects to complete a series of tests that required serious concentration to score highly. All the volunteers were told to put their phones in silent, non-vibrating mode or turn them off. Some were asked to put the phone face down on the desk, some kept the phone hidden in a pocket or bag, and others put the phone in another room.

The participants who left their phones in another room **significantly outperformed** those with their phones on the desk, and even outperformed those with their phones in a pocket or a bag. The researchers demonstrated that phones within sight or within easy reach inevitably use up some of our brainpower as we try not to be distracted. In a follow-up survey, the participants themselves didn't feel the location of their phones had any effect on their ability to concentrate on the test. But their cognitive capacity was reduced even without their noticing.

Other research has clearly established that phones, music, television, noise, and other distractions drain energy, decrease performance, and hinder long-term retention and learning. When you study, put yourself in a situation in which the one and only thing available for your attention is the SAT.

Remember: **multitasking is the enemy of accuracy**. The best way to get things done right is through monotasking. This applies to studying and practicing, and even to question and section strategy within the test. Your mantra should be, "Do one thing until it's done."

Know the Purpose of Untimed Practice

This book contains some practice questions sets that are to be completed without time limits. What's the point of doing SAT questions without a timer when the real test has a ticking clock? Your goal is to build accuracy and transferrable skills. That means a big part of what you do must be process-driven. Getting the right answer is meaningless if it came from a wild guess. Instead, you want to make sure you're correctly identifying the issue being tested, correctly recalling the relevant grammar or rhetorical rules, and eliminating wrong choices for concrete reasons, not just because they "sound wrong." You want to look for patterns that you can apply to future questions, and notice similarities between the question and others you have seen in the past. When you're down to two choices, you want to keep scrutinizing them until the right answer becomes crystal clear, not just a hunch. If this process takes 10 minutes per question, then so be it. Don't worry about trying to drive speed—speed comes through repetition, not through rushing.

Take Practice Tests as if They Are the Real Thing

It's easy to slack off a little on a practice test and tell yourself that you'll really be locked in when the real thing comes around. For example, you may allow some distractions, be loose with the timing and breaks, eat or drink during the test, not make the extra effort to fully think through a question, or end a section early without using the remaining time to check your work.

It's true that you'll probably get an adrenaline surge when the real test comes, and it's true that such a surge might help your score. But it's a mistake to count on that surge putting you over the top if you haven't been practicing as if each practice test were the real thing.

The hardest thing to control might be your schedule—sometimes you'll be unable to avoid having to do a test late at night or in pieces. That's life. It's better to do a test across several days than to skip it.

But you should definitely carve out as many occasions as you can in which you simulate the real testing experience as closely as possible. Do the test on a Saturday morning when you're well-rested, well-fed, appropriately caffeinated, and undistracted. Get amped up and trick yourself into thinking that you're taking the real test. Imagine that *this is the score* you're going to submit to colleges.

It's a mistake to think you'll do things right for the first time on test day if you haven't been doing them right beforehand. If you skip steps now, you'll skip them later. Cut corners now, you'll cut them later. You get used to what you do most of the time.

Do Concrete Things to Eliminate Careless Errors

Everybody makes careless errors. They're one of the most frustrating parts of the SAT. A careless error is the worst way to lose a point because you really *knew* what you were doing, and you should have gotten credit for the question—but you didn't.

Careless mistakes are probably more common on the math sections of the test, but they happen on the verbal portion as well. When people realize they've made a silly mistake, the first response is frustration and annoyance, of course. That's usually followed closely by one of two responses. Sometimes, people just mentally give themselves "credit" for the question.

“OK, I bubbled C when the answer was B, but I really knew what they were testing! I just overlooked something, or I mis-bubbled. I don’t need to study or worry about this because I *would have* gotten it right...”

The second common response is to say, “Well yes, I got it wrong, but that’s only because it was practice, so I was rushing or not paying very close attention. When the real test comes, I’ll be more locked in, and I’ll be more careful.” The promise to *be more careful* is such an easy thing to say, and such a hard thing to do. But you can take steps to make it happen.

For one thing, you need to get into the habit of practicing as if it’s the real test, as we just discussed. Second, there are actually **concrete things** you can do to help minimize careless mistakes, and you need to make these practices a habit.

- ⦿ **Circle your answer on the page.** This is probably the single most effective thing you can do to eliminate bubbling errors. It gives you a written record of what you were thinking, so if something gets off with your bubbling, you don’t have to rethink any questions to get back on track. It also allows you to double-check your bubble sheet.
- ⦿ **Transfer your answers to the bubble sheet in batches.** Do a full page or two facing pages, and then fill in all your answers on the bubble sheet at once.
- ⦿ **Double-check your bubbles and the question numbers.** Once you’ve filled in a batch of bubbles, double-check right away. Read your answers off the bubble sheet and then make sure they match the test booklet (in other words, transfer your answers “back” from the bubble sheet to the booklet). At the same time, make sure the question numbers match up. Check everything again at the end of the section.
- ⦿ **Articulate a reason for eliminating each wrong choice.** Don’t get rid of things because they “sound wrong.” Name the grammar, logical, or rhetorical rule that the choice violates. If you can’t do this for every wrong choice, then you don’t know the rules well enough yet, so keep studying!
- ⦿ **Cross out wrong answers.** Don’t just cross out the letter; draw a line through the entire choice.
- ⦿ **Don’t rush through the easy questions.** And by the time you know all the rules, they should all be easy questions, so this becomes, “don’t rush at all.” Unless you’re scoring perfectly, it’s better to finish with no time left over—or even to run out of time before you’ve answered all the questions—than to finish early. Slow down and focus on accuracy.
- ⦿ **When the question asks you to do something specific, underline what it’s asking for.** Don’t answer the wrong question or misunderstand what they want you to do.

Know the Rules and Techniques

People who write test preparation books (like this one!) love to categorize things and list seemingly endless rules. It can be easy for a student to dismiss all this labeling as an exercise in pedantry without any practical implications for how to approach the test. Does it *really* matter whether a conjunction is coordinating or subordinating? Is it *worth* caring about whether an action word is a verb or a participle? Is there *really* anything wrong with just going by ear?

In short, YES! The SAT is an incredibly predictable and rule-based test, which is to your advantage—if you know the rules. These rules are not extraneous to the real-time approach. The theory and techniques associated with each question type should be the things running through your mind every time you sit down to do a new set of questions. It's not enough to just pick whatever choice "sounds right."

The easiest way to get a question wrong is to misunderstand what the test writers are asking you to do. Your ultimate goal is to develop a process whereby whenever you see a question on a test, you correctly identify what it's testing, and a summary of all the relevant grammar rules and rhetorical techniques immediately pops into your head. When that starts happening, you'll know you're approaching true SAT expertise.

Think Ahead

Expert SAT takers are always thinking ahead. This means **pausing** as you work to anticipate and predict what will come next.

Did you just read the title of a passage? Before you jump into the reading, think about what the passage is likely to be about.

Did you just finish reading a paragraph? Before you dive into the next one, think about what happened in that paragraph and how it's likely to relate to the next one.

Most importantly, did you just encounter a question? Before you dive into the choices, figure out what issue the question is testing and what rules you'll need to use to answer it. Then **identify the error** in choice A (if there is one) and **predict** how you would fix it. This gives you a target to seek in the choices.

Pausing as you work to think ahead is an investment of time. But that investment will pay off with increased accuracy and speed when you allow your brain to absorb the information you've just read. When you plunge ahead without letting the question content sink in, you create extra work for yourself because each answer choice becomes something you have to consider and think through. If you instead have a target already in mind, right answers jump off the page and wrong ones can be quickly discarded.

When we say **rhetorical techniques**, we're talking about what the SAT calls **Expression of Ideas**. These questions ask about writing strategy, organization, style, and the flow of ideas within the passage, not grammar.

Aim for Quantity

Much of the discussion so far has been about good *quality* preparation.

The sad truth about SAT prep is that you're going to need a hefty dose of **quantity** too. Doing 2 or 3 practice tests before the real thing is simply not enough. To achieve real mastery, you need to get through dozens of full, real practice tests and hundreds of drill questions.

The SAT is indeed repetitive, but it covers a non-trivial amount of information. You'll need to do lots of practice before you start noticing the same patterns repeating themselves.

The first few times you work on a skill, you're going to be slow and inaccurate. It's only when you see something for the 100th time that it becomes second nature. When you reach the point where every new SAT question seems eerily familiar, you're getting close. Your ultimate goal is to experience some serious *déjà vu* when you sit down for the real test: "This stupid question again?! I've seen these all before!" That's when you know you're prepared.

Start to study well in advance of the test administration, and set aside enough time each week for practice. This raises an important question: **what is enough?**

The answer depends on what you need from the SAT. When we first meet students, we always ask what score they're aiming for. The question often surprises people. The obvious answers that spring to mind are "as high as possible" or "1600—what else?" But these answers miss the point of what the SAT is for.

The SAT is simply a tool, and the purpose of that tool is to get you into the college of your choice. If a 1300 would make you a competitive candidate at the college of your choice, then aiming for a 1600 is foolish because there is a serious cost in aiming for a 1600. You would have to put your life on hold and dedicate all your time to studying for the SAT. Why do that if you don't need to? It would be like using a backhoe to plant petunias.

If you're scoring about average and need a 50-point boost to your writing score, a half-dozen practice tests along with some of the low-hanging fruit grammar topics will probably be enough. If you're looking for some quick grammar rules that can easily give you a little boost, check out the first four chapters of this book, along with the chapter on Redundancy.

On the other hand, you might be aiming for a highly competitive school or even one of the top few schools in the country. In that case, you still don't need a 1600, but you might need to be well above 1500. If that's your situation, then you really do need absolute mastery of the writing section, and that calls for maximum quantity. Set a goal of doing 20-30 practice tests and working through this book two or three times. Do as much as possible, up until the point of diminishing returns. When your brain is full, you're bleary-eyed, and the words are just washing over you, then stop, sleep, and get up and do it again.

Practice Blind Retakes

Whenever you complete a practice question set or test, you'll of course need to check how you performed. The whole purpose of practice is to learn from your mistakes. To that end, the first part of your review should be to do **blind retakes** of the questions you missed.

To carry out a blind retake, mark in your book or on your test which questions you got wrong, but **do not indicate the correct answer**. (You'll have to grade your work in chunks, instead

of checking each question as you complete it, to avoid letting the right answer stick in your mind and spoil the exercise. You could even recruit a friend to help.)

Then give yourself a chance to come back and work the question again, knowing that your initial response is wrong, but not knowing which of the three remaining choices is right. There will be many occasions in which you will have narrowed the choices down to two, but if the one you picked was wrong, don't automatically assume the other must be right. Begin the question again and work it through fully.

This allows you to consider the question from a different angle and, crucially, to discover your own mistakes. That's an important part of the learning process.

Once you've tried the question a second time, you can check the right answer and continue with your analysis of the question.

Do a Thorough Performance Analysis

It's not enough to just burn through practice questions. You have to extract something from your work that you can apply to future questions.

As we mentioned earlier, counting the number of questions you get right or wrong in each test and homework set is only a small part of the picture. A larger concern is increasing your understanding of every detail of each question. Go back to each question and examine it closely, whether you got it right or wrong. What additional patterns do you notice? Can you articulate how the grammar or the rhetoric works, and can you spot new details that you didn't see the first time? Can you point to the exact reason why each incorrect choice is wrong? Can you see a more efficient path you could have followed to get the right answer?

An important consideration is that you don't want to simply get to the point where you can accept the right answer. Saying to yourself, "Well, I thought it was D but they wanted B—I guess I can buy that B is an OK choice too," is **not good enough**. Instead, you must get to the point at which it becomes **crystal clear** why your choice is absolutely 100% wrong, and the correct choice is utterly and completely right. You have to say to yourself, "Oh. My. God. How could I be so foolish as to pick D?! It is now unmistakably obvious that B is right!"

There are some questions for which you won't be able to reach that level of understanding on your own. That brings us to...

Use Tutoring Sessions Effectively

If you're working with a tutor, it's essential to get the most out of the sessions. This is what I tell my students:

One of the great advantages of personalized individual tutoring is that we can identify your specific weaknesses and address them in an effective way. I can examine your particular methods of reasoning on a question and see where they fell short. I can propose a fix that is aimed at your exact mistake, and if it doesn't click, I can try to present the same idea in a different way that may make better sense to you. We can move at the right pace and give each topic exactly as much time as it needs.

So don't waste that valuable opportunity! When we start each tutoring session, I'll ask if you have any lingering questions from the homework. I'm hoping that you'll have a list of

questions that you reviewed thoroughly but still don't feel perfectly clear on. Those represent the most valuable learning opportunities because they identify manifest gaps in your knowledge and abilities, and fixing those gaps will produce a meaningful step forward in your capacity to get a better score.

It's often the highest-scoring students who have the longest lists of questions. When someone scoring near the middle reports that they don't have any questions, it makes me think one of three things is true:

- ⦿ The person doesn't have any questions because they didn't do the homework at all
- ⦿ The person doesn't have any questions because they didn't do a thorough review of their work
- ⦿ The person is pretending that everything in the homework made perfect sense in an effort to please me or make me think that they're progressing beautifully

Impressing me should be the least of your concerns. I'll see that you're progressing beautifully when your score starts going up! My one and only goal is to help you get the score you want, and the best way to do that is to identify your problematic areas so we can work on them together.

Revisit Old Material

Some people make it through all the real practice tests and wonder what to do next. The best strategy is to do the same tests again! Of course, when you revisit old material, you may remember some of the passages or questions, which would skew your score. So the point of repeating an assignment is not to get a representative or predictive score out of it. Instead, the act of retracing the same familiar pathways reinforces your knowledge and allows you to discover lingering bad habits or areas of weakness. You don't even have to wait until you've done all the tests to start revisiting. You can go back and redo things at any time.

You'd expect to get a higher score when doing the same test a second time—but did you? Were there some questions you got wrong both times? Those are especially important to study. How about something you got right the first time but missed the second time? What changed? Was the first time just luck?

It's a great idea to revisit previous chapters, drills, and practice question sets in this book as well. As the test approaches, go back and take a second look at some of the earliest topics you worked on. That was material you completed when your level of expertise was lowest. So how do you fare on those same crucial questions now that you're more experienced?

You can also pick out individual questions to set aside for later review. Flag anything from a question set or a test that really gave you a lot of trouble. Get an explanation for it, and then look at it a week later. Can you re-create the solution and justification for it yourself? Keep revisiting the question until you can.

Looking for a tutor?

There are great tutors all over the country. You can even work online with David Lynch, author of this book and founder of StudyLark—go to StudyLark.com for details. We can also provide guidance on how to find a good local tutor or an online study group.

Metacognition Questionnaire

Sit down with a pencil and take the time to write out your answers to the following questions.

Which colleges are you targeting? _____

What SAT score do you need in order to be competitive with other applicants to those schools? _____

How likely do you think it is that you will get that score? _____

How important to you is it that you get that score? _____

What aspects of the SAT do you think will be most challenging for you?

What aspects of SAT *preparation* do you think will be most challenging for you?

How will you address these challenges? What will you do when you encounter a setback?

If you have prepared for a standardized test like this before, how can you do a better job this time around?

What are the first few goals you want to accomplish at the beginning of your preparation?

What habits should you cultivate as you prepare to best support your learning?

What should you *avoid* doing as you prepare?

What strategies will you use to study?

How much time (per week and overall) do you plan to devote to studying?

Where and when will you study?

How are you going to actively monitor your progress?

What information will you seek in order to learn whether your progress is on track or needs adjustment?

What are the different components and steps of your study plan?

What is the purpose or goal of each of those components or steps?

What resources do you need to prepare for the SAT?

How will each resource be useful, and how will you make sure you're getting the most out of it?

🌀 Verb Form 🌀

Subject-Verb Agreement

Whenever you see a question that gives you several options for an underlined verb, you have to figure out the right **form** of the verb. This means checking for verb **agreement** and for verb **tense**.

What do we mean by verb agreement? This means that the verb has to match the subject's **person** and **number**. On the SAT, you'll really only have to pay attention to number. You have to ensure that singular subjects get singular verbs, and plural subjects get plural verbs.

Ensuring the right **person** means saying "she is" instead of "she am," for example. This isn't really tested on the SAT.

Sounds easy, right? Well, the test writers have a few tricks to make this task more difficult. Their main trick is to put the subject and verb far apart from each other in the sentence and to stick a bunch of distracting nouns—especially ones with a different number—in between to make you misidentify the subject. Let's take a look:

- ❌ Pollution from cars in cities where people have long commutes worsen on hot days.

The verb in this example is *worsen*. What's the subject for that verb? There are lots of plural nouns floating around, but the actual subject is the singular noun *pollution*. If you put the subject immediately next to the verb, it becomes easy to see that they don't match. Would you say *pollution worsen*? That sounds all kinds of wrong. The correct verb, of course, is *worsens*:

Throughout this book, we'll use ❌ next to examples sentences that have an error, and ✅ next to those that are completely correct.

- ✅ Pollution from cars in cities where people have long commutes worsens on hot days.

Once you've found the subject, putting it right next to the verb is a great trick. Your ear will always tell you whether they match. (This is easier than asking yourself whether the verb is singular or plural. That's because singular verbs, such as *worsens*, often end in -s, which confuses the heck out of people.)

Finding the Subject

Picking the right verb once you've found the subject is actually the easy part. The hard part is **finding** the subject in the first place. The test writers will insert all sorts of misleading words in an effort to sidetrack you. But your secret weapon is this: **cross out** any prepositional phrases, parenthetical comments, or extra clauses. None of them can contain the subject. Pay extra close attention to prepositional phrases, because it's an unbreakable grammar law that **nothing inside a prepositional phrase can ever be the subject of the sentence**. Get those things out of there!

For example, in our sentence above, how did we know that the subject was *pollution* and not something else, such as *cars*, *cities*, *people*, or *commutes*? The answer is that all those words appear inside prepositional phrases or modifying clauses.

- ⊙ *from cars* - prepositional phrase
- ⊙ *in cities* - prepositional phrase
- ⊙ *where people have long commutes* - modifying clause

Some Common Prepositions:

of	by
in	at
to	from
for	as
with	into
on	about

Find a longer list on page 108

If you cross out all those sentence elements, the only sensible thing left to be the subject is *pollution*.

That's the grammatical method for finding the subject: use your knowledge of phrases and clauses to eliminate things that can't be the subject. Unfortunately, people don't always have a great command of phrases and clauses, so you may not be able to use this technique with complete accuracy (yet). But there is another technique you can also try: the **logic method**.

To use the logic method, find the verb and then ask yourself, "Which noun is actually *doing* this action?" Use logic and common sense, and if there is only one reasonable possibility, you've found the subject.

In our example, it doesn't make sense to say that *cars* are worsening, or that *cities* are worsening, or that *people* are worsening. Thus, none of those nouns can be the subject. It is, however, possible that *commutes* could worsen, so that's why the logic method isn't foolproof. You'll probably want to use a mixture of grammar and logic to find subjects.

Drill: Ignoring Prepositional Phrases

Find and cross out all the prepositional phrases in the sentences below. If you need more information about recognizing and understanding prepositional phrases, look ahead to the chapter on phrases.

1. The degree program is open to graduates in all fields of engineering.
2. Request–reply is a method whereby a first computer sends a request for data and a second responds to the request.
3. Saraswati remained significant as a goddess from the Vedic period through the modern era of Hindu traditions.
4. He often employs elements from his own life in his work, and he has incorporated representations of himself throughout the series painted for the most recent exhibition.
5. The ruins of Basima Castle, located near the cliffs above a waterfall, were converted to a tourist attraction in 2002.
6. Julia Chandler made her living as a writer, submitting frequent papers on horticultural and agricultural practices to the principal periodicals of the day.

Ignoring prepositional phrases is useful when you're looking for a verb's subject. But if a question asks you to complete some different task, then you may need to pay attention to the prepositional phrases.

Answers to all drills are found at the back of the book, starting on page 240.

Compound Subjects and Inverted Word Order

The test writers have some other tricks up their sleeves as well. Something else that can affect verb agreement is a **compound subject**. A compound subject is composed of two or more nouns working together for a single verb. The nouns are typically joined by a conjunction or presented as a list. A compound subject is **always plural**, even if the nouns within it are singular. Here's an example:

- Its rising population and confined geography has impacted the city's home prices.

The verb is *has impacted*, and the two nouns associated with it are *population* and *geography*. Use the ear test again, and to make it even more clear, replace *population and geography* with the phrase *two things*. Would you say *two things has impacted*? Not unless you were crazy. Saying *two things have impacted* makes a lot more sense. The correct version is:

- Its rising population and confined geography have impacted the city's home prices.

Another possible trick is the use of **inverted word order**. This occurs when the subject appears **after** the verb. A sentence with inverted word order will often begin with a bunch of prepositional phrases. If you cross them all out, there won't be anything left in front of the verb that could act as the subject. This indicates that the subject must follow the verb.

- ✓ Around the edge of the bay were the cottages of local fishermen.
- ✓ There is no reason to buy a robot to mow a lawn the size of yours.

As you can see from the second example above, another situation with inverted word order is a sentence that begins with *there is* or *there are*. The word *there* is an adverb; it can't be the subject. So you have to look after the verb to see whether the subject is singular or plural.

Drill: Finding Subjects

Each sentence below has one verb marked in **bold** (it may have other verbs as well). Circle the subject of the **marked** verb. In some cases, there is a compound subject, so be sure to circle all parts of it.

1. The challenges of raising a child without any help from nearby family **have taught** me much about resilience.
2. Margo, like the managers who held the position before her, **came** into the job full of optimism and new ideas.
3. Released earliest in the year **are** the wines made from white grapes.
4. On the album's first track, the bass and the piano **begin** the song, followed by the guitar.
5. In checkers, a move in which a player jumps several opposing pieces to land in one of the back rows **can turn** the tide of the game.
6. Hexagons, triangles, or squares arranged in a repeating pattern **will cover** a surface completely, a phenomenon known as tiling the plane.
7. Into the buckets under the eaves **fell** the rain from the summer storms.
8. The languages spoken in regions as far from each other as southern India and the western part of Europe **derive** from a single common ancestor.
9. There **is** one main area in the region prone to flooding, located to the west of town and inconveniently close to the only highway.
10. Olivia Barber, a chef and entrepreneur with restaurants in several cities across the country, **took** home the top prize.

Verb Tense

There are lots of different verb tenses in the English language, and lots of rules governing them. Luckily, you don't really need to spend a lot of time memorizing all those categories and detailed rules. Questions about verb tense on the SAT are mostly about looking at the **context** of the passage and picking a verb tense that makes **logical sense** with the flow of ideas within the story.

OK, so we must admit—there are in fact a couple of rules that are probably worth knowing. You should know when to use **present perfect** vs. simple past. And you should know when the **past perfect** tense is appropriate.

A perfect tense is one that uses *have*, *has*, or *had* as a helper (auxiliary) verb before the main verb. Present perfect uses *have* or *has*, and past perfect uses *had*.

There are several situations in which present perfect is commonly used, but the most important rule here is that present perfect makes sense when you're talking about an **unspecified** time in the past, but the simple past tense should be used when the time is specified.

Unspecified time – present perfect

- ✓ The committee has chosen the winner.
- ✓ They have opened the doors to the dining room.
- ✓ She has received an honorary doctorate from her alma mater.

Specified time – simple past

- ✓ The committee chose the winner yesterday.
- ✓ They opened the doors to the dining room at 5 p.m.
- ✓ She received an honorary doctorate when she spoke at the commencement.

The past perfect (using the auxiliary verb *had*) is appropriate when you're talking about **two different times** in the past. The past perfect indicates which of the two times occurred in the **more distant past**, while the simple past indicates the more recent past.

- ✓ For the sandwiches, we used the bread he had bought the day before.



- ✓ She walked into the room and saw that it had been rearranged.

In the first example, he bought the bread **before** we used it. In the second, the room was rearranged **before** she saw it. So the past perfect tense indicates the more distant time in the past.

But for the most part, getting verb tense questions right is more about looking at the nearby verbs and thinking about the story in the passage. You have to **reason** your way to the right

answer based on contextual clues. Remember: the choice you pick doesn't necessarily have to use the exact same tense as every verb around it. It's perfectly normal for a story to use a variety of tenses in adjacent sentences. Finding the right answer is more about the logic of the situation than about blindly matching up tenses.

Drill: Using Context to Figure Out Verb Tense

Each question below has a blank and is followed by four options for a verb to fill in the blank. Look at the context of the story and circle the appropriate verb.

1. In 2016, an earthquake opened one of the volcano's long-blocked magma tubes. The chamber filled with molten rock, some of which seeped through an opening to the surface and _____ to flow down the side of the mountain.
begins / began / will begin / had begun
2. The new study followed 8,375 people over the course of five years, tracking cardiovascular health and overall mortality rate. It found no benefit to using a standing desk, which came as a surprise to researchers, since previous studies _____ that prolonged periods of sitting were associated with negative health outcomes.
show / showing / had shown / will show
3. The course taught us some of the science behind baking. A longer mixing time builds a stronger network of gluten in the dough. Leavening agents _____ gases that make the dough rise. And sugars are responsible for browning and many other flavors beyond simple sweetness.
release / released / will release / have released
4. There are many sources of information about great authors, but typically historians _____ primarily on the text of the authors' own papers and the accounts left behind by their contemporaries. New techniques, however, are allowing scientists to pull proteins and other molecules from the documents themselves, adding additional details to our understanding of these figures' lives.
are relying / have relied / will rely / relying

A word ending in *-ing* cannot be a verb unless it is preceded by an auxiliary verb—specifically some form of *to be*. For example, *walking* cannot by itself be a verb, but *is walking*, *were walking*, or *will be walking* could all be valid verb phrases.

Spotting the Question Type

You have a different job to do depending on whether a verb-related question is testing agreement or tense. If it's verb agreement, you have to **find the subject** before you can answer. But if it's verb tense, you have to look for surrounding **contextual clues**. So figuring out the question task is an important first step.

Luckily, the test writers often make it easy to determine the question type based on some patterns that show up in the answer choices.

If a question is testing subject-verb agreement, you will almost always see two choices with:

- Ⓐ the same verb
- Ⓑ in the same tense, with
- Ⓒ different number (one singular and the other plural)

If you see that pattern, go find the subject immediately. For example:

Probably testing verb agreement

- A) are following
 - B) follow
 - C) follows
 - D) have followed
- ← same verb, same tense,
← different number

Probably testing verb tense

- A) has included
- B) included
- C) had included
- D) will include

On the other hand, if all the choices use different tenses, then the question is most likely testing verb tense.

There is also another clue to look for in agreement questions. Usually, three of the choices will use one number (plural, for example), and the fourth choice will use a different number (singular). If so, the answer is likely to be the **odd one out**. In the example above, choices A, B, and D (*are following*, *follow*, and *have followed*) are all plural, while choice C (*follows*) is the only singular verb. So choice C would probably be correct.

This "odd-one-out" pattern can be helpful, but don't trust it blindly. Ultimately, you can only determine the right answer by finding the subject. You can't get out of doing that.

Drill: Determining the Question Task

Each question below shows a set of four answer choices from an SAT question. Based on the pattern described above, determine whether the question is more likely testing verb agreement or verb tense, and circle the appropriate option.

1. A) changes
 B) has changed
 C) change
 D) change's
 More likely to be testing:
 Verb agreement / Verb tense

2. A) lose
 B) lost
 C) will lose
 D) are losing
 Verb agreement / Verb tense

3. A) has stood
 B) have been standing
 C) are standing
 D) have stood
 Verb agreement / Verb tense

4. A) draws
 B) drew
 C) will draw
 D) has drawn
 Verb agreement / Verb tense

5. A) returns
 B) reciprocates
 C) yields
 D) replies

Trick question! Sort of. Question 5 is likely to be testing **word choice** not verb form. That's because you're given a bunch of **different** verbs, all with the same number and tense. Verb form questions will instead give you multiple versions of the **same** verb.

Practice Question Set

The questions in the following practice set test **verb form**. Work on the set without time limits—focus on accuracy alone.

The questions are in the style of real SAT questions, but the formatting is slightly different. Instead of presenting the passage on the left side and the question on the right, we include the relevant sentence(s) from the passage immediately above the answer choices. The underlined text works the same as it does on the SAT—you may choose to leave it unchanged, or you may choose to replace it with a different alternative from the answer choices.

We've worked hard to make these practice questions as realistic as possible. Each one is closely modeled after a real, specific test question and addresses the same grammar topics in the same way. With that in mind, however, remember that **there is no substitute for the real thing**. No strategy book in the world has questions as good as those on the real SAT, so it's vitally important to make sure **real tests are a central part of your preparation**.

1

Some of the first acts of Congress, including one that regulates the manner of administering an oath of office, remains in effect today.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) remaining
- C) remain
- D) has remained

2

A genetic analysis by a team of molecular anthropologists, led by population geneticist Chuan-Chao Wang of Xiamen University in China, provide the best look yet at the herders' genetic history.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) provides
- C) are providing
- D) have provided

3

Data from the investigation helped Parrish convince the city councilmembers that they could reduce expenditures for the public works department if recycling rules were modernized. Encouraged by these possible savings, officials implemented a new single-stream recycling program.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) were implementing
- C) had implemented
- D) would be implementing

4

Most of the original homemade circuit boards no longer function, as replacement parts have become impossible to find, but others had worked perfectly well.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) work
- C) worked
- D) could have worked

5

Advocates of vitamin D would add that, besides bone strength, their are several additional health benefits conferred by this compound.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) there are
- C) there is
- D) their is

6

People who learn to speak a new language gain new perspectives, improved confidence, better decision-making skills, and deeper connections to other cultures.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) to gain
- C) gains
- D) is gaining

7

The houses, made of a type of cinder block known as cincrete, was unique for its small setback from the street and the placement of the living room at the back of the home.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) were unique for their
- C) was unique for their
- D) were unique for its

8

Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge is widely celebrated as the chemist who first discovered the compound of caffeine in coffee beans. More often overlooked but arguably more important were Runge's isolation of quinine from cinchona bark.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are
- C) is
- D) had been

9

To a greater degree than many more costly programs, these simple measures can increase employee engagement, which is important for retaining experienced staff.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are
- C) is being
- D) have been

10

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico released a thick plume of oil, some of which flowed along ocean currents and then settled on the seafloor hundreds of miles away.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) settles
- C) will settle
- D) had settled

11

Convinced that many banks had become too accustomed to steadily rising housing prices and was unprepared for a major shock to the economy, the senator called for new financial sector regulations.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) were
- C) has been
- D) will be

12

Geologists who have studied the new lunar survey hypothesizes that a basketball-sized rock hit the moon during the last eclipse.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) having hypothesized
- C) hypothesizing
- D) hypothesize

13

This technology, along with the increasing willingness of people to piece together the separate components of a trip themselves, has led many to declare that travel agents will soon be a thing of the past.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) have
- C) which have
- D) which has

14

The art installation's mirrored outer walls reflected images of the nearby landscape being transformed by developers and allowing visitors to walk through a kaleidoscopic interior.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) allowed
- C) allows
- D) had allowed

15

The fact that chiropractic jobs must be performed in person by practitioners, not computers, make them mostly immune to replacement by AI.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) are what makes
- C) have made
- D) makes

16

In 2009, a Maryland court ruled in favor of two state's attorney's office employees who are supporting their boss in the election and were fired by his opponent after the challenger won.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) was supporting
- C) had supported
- D) will support

17

Researchers now believe that orcas' ability to process sounds at much higher rates than humans arise from physical adaptations related to echolocation.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) arises
- C) arose
- D) have arisen

18

On January 25, 1919, the delegates to the Paris Peace Conference approved a proposal to create the League of Nations. Nearly a year later, on January 16, 1920, the League hold its first meeting with its stated principal mission of maintaining world peace.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) held
- C) will hold
- D) are holding

19

Knitting not only produces practical goods but also has a therapeutic value, and the way in which knitters come together in social groups contribute to this phenomenon.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) contributes
- C) contributing
- D) which contributes

20

Though the building is completely normal, the photographer has rotated the camera to create the illusion that it is sinking into the ground.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) was
- C) has been
- D) had been

Answers on page 242