ACT ENGLISH

Mastering ACT Punctuation Rules

Much of the English section of the ACT tests your knowledge of punctuation, which is, in many ways, a test of sentence structure. In real-life English, punctuation rules are expansive, covering all kinds of nuanced, specific rules. Fortunately for us, the ACT's punctuation questions are limited and repetitive. If you learn these question types, how to spot them, and how to process them, it's very simple. This guide will explain exactly how to do so.

By Majid Hasan, ACT & SAT tutor · Updated October 21, 2026

PREREQUISITE

What counts as a complete sentence?

To use these processes, you need to be able to discern between a complete and incomplete sentence and independent and dependent clauses. If you can read a phrase and determine if it's a complete sentence, everything else will fall into place. So what is a complete sentence, or rather, how should we think about them on the ACT? Think of them like this: a complete sentence is exactly one Independent clause + Literally any number of dependent clauses, including zero dependent clauses.

Independent clauses

An independent clause has a subject and a verb. You can usually just tell: if it sounds like it could stand on its own, or like a complete thought, it's an independent clause and therefore a complete sentence by itself. A few examples:

- The committee reached a compromise after weeks of unproductive debate.
- The engineer revised the design so that it could withstand greater pressure.
- The student who had submitted her essay late asked for additional feedback.

Dependent clauses

Dependent clauses can't stand on their own. You don't need to memorize grammar terminology; just learn to recognize these four common patterns.

1

Phrases that set time or place

Prepositional phrases are phrases that set time and place by starting with words like "As," "While," "In," "At," "Near," "Above," "Below," and similar words.

- In the 1950s
- While the board members debated the merits of the proposal
- Over twenty years ago
- Above the building
- Formed in 1967 to foster political and economic stability within the Asia-Pacific region
- When the manuscript was returned to the author with extensive notes and corrections

2

Conditional phrases

Phrases that start with words like "Because," "If," "Although," "Since."

- Since the creation of the oversight committee
- If the leverage ratio reaches a certain point
- Because these organisms are so tiny

3

Phrases that start with an "ing" word.

A very common pattern that's easy to spot once you're looking for it.

- ..., starting with the lowest number.
- ..., solidifying her position within the organization.
- ..., forming a layer of sedimentary bedrock.
- ..., ensuring that proteins retain their original configurations.

4

Interjections

A dependent clause tucked inside another clause. If you can remove the phrase and the sentence still flows, it's an interjection. They're usually found inside independent clauses, but on harder questions can appear inside a dependent clause too. They're explicitly tested with commas and dashes, and recognizing — then mentally removing — them makes many questions far easier.

- The company, ***though battered by years of declining profits***, announced an ambitious new initiative.
- In The Book of Salt, **for example**, the exiled character of Bình connects to his native Saigon through the food he prepares
- The artwork, ***though controversial at its unveiling***, has since become widely celebrated.
- The invention, ***which transformed communication across continents***, changed history.

Common sentence-structure patterns

These are the shapes you'll see over and over on the ACT. Getting fast at spotting them makes every boundary question easier.

> **INDEPENDENT CLAUSE ONLY**
>
> - The engineer revised the design so that it could withstand greater pressure.
> - Beatrix Potter is perhaps best known for writing and illustrating children's books such as The Tale of Peter Rabbit (1902).
> - The orchestra performed a piece that blended classical structure with modern dissonance.

DEPENDENT, INDEPENDENT

- In 1933, the Twentieth Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified.
- In her poetry collection Thomas and Beulah, Rita Dove interweaves the titular characters' personal stories with broader historical narratives.
- In a study of the cognitive abilities of white-faced capuchin monkeys (Cebus imitator), researchers neglected to control for the physical difficulty of the tasks they used to evaluate the monkeys.

INDEPENDENT, DEPENDENT

- The intense pressure found in the deep ocean can affect the structure of proteins in fish's cells, distorting the proteins' shape.
- The cognitive abilities of monkeys given problems requiring little dexterity were judged by the same criteria as were those of monkeys given physically demanding problems, such as unscrewing a bottle and inserting a straw.

DEPENDENT, INDEPENDENT, DEPENDENT

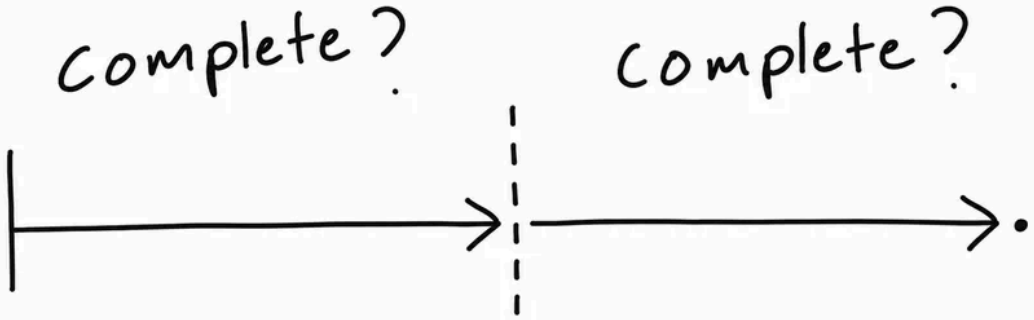
- In the 1950s, a man named Joseph McVicker was struggling to keep his business afloat when his sister-in-law Kay Zufall advised him to repurpose the company's product — a nontoxic, clay-like substance for removing soot from wallpaper — as a modeling putty for kids.
- Compiled in the late 1500s largely through the efforts of Indigenous scribes, Cantares Mexicanos is the most important collection of poetry in Classical Nahuatl, the principal language of the Aztec Empire.

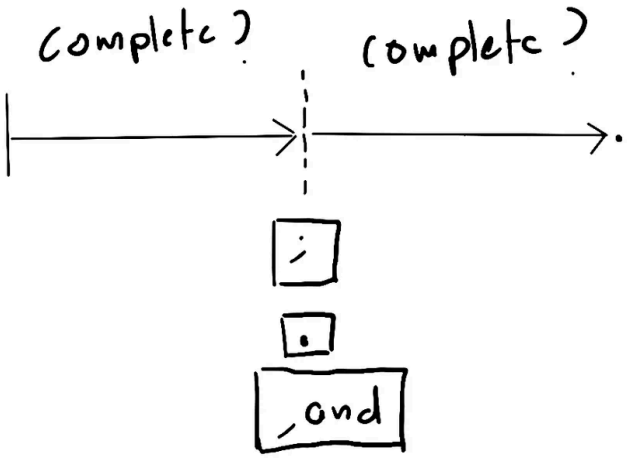
THE CORE RULE

"Complete|Complete"

These three types of punctuation marks require complete sentences before them AND after them: periods, semicolons, and comma+FANBOYS ("`,and`" "`,but`"). Not just a comma, and not just a FANBOYS, but a comma right before a FANBOYS together forms one punctuation mark, equal to a period and semicolon.

So, whenever you're testing one of these three, read up to the point and check if it's a complete sentence. If it's not, then it's incorrect. Then read from that point to the end of the sentence and do the same check. Let's work through some examples.





I took the ACT, and crushed it. ✗

I took the ACT, and I crushed it. ✓

Here we see a semi-colon in answer choice C. Read from the beginning of the sentence up to the semi-colon. We see that it's the only answer choice with a complete sentence before AND after the semicolon.

throw—seemed to be having fun. Spectators didn't talk on their phones; they talked to each other. Following their lead, I turned my own phone off. [20]

D. 3, 2, 1

19. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

A. No Change
B. phones, instead, they talked
C. phones, they were talking
D. phones instead talking

20. Which of the following sentences, if added here, would most effectively suggest that at this moment the narrator intends to connect with others in person rather than

- Let's test answer choice A).
- Read up to the [;] & see if it's complete.
- Then read from the [;] to the period & see if it's complete.

A) phones; they talked

Spectators didn't talk on their phones; they talked to each other.

Complete? ✓ Complete? ✓

Here we see a comma+FANBOYS ("`,but`") in answer choice D. Read from the beginning of the sentence up to the "`,but`". We see right away that it's not a complete sentence so D is out, since a comma+FANBOYS requires a complete sentence before and after.

by solar panels and irrigated by rainwater. For White, it's been revelatory, he's learning about eco-friendly methods[39] that he didn't know existed.

And White isn't an outlier. In four years, over thirty

39. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

A. **No Change**
B. revelatory, he has learned
C. revelatory; he's learning
D. revelatory; to learn

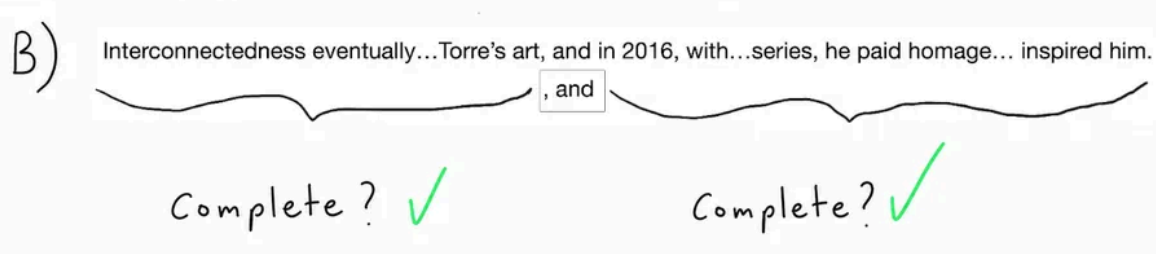


Here's an example when a comma+FANBOYS is correct, answer choice B

past. Interconnectedness eventually became the central theme of Torres's art[21] in 2016, with his *Sun Light* series, he paid homage to the people and place that first inspired him. Torres created sixteen oil portraits of friends and family from Bermeja,

21. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

A. **No Change**
B. art, and
C. art and
D. art,



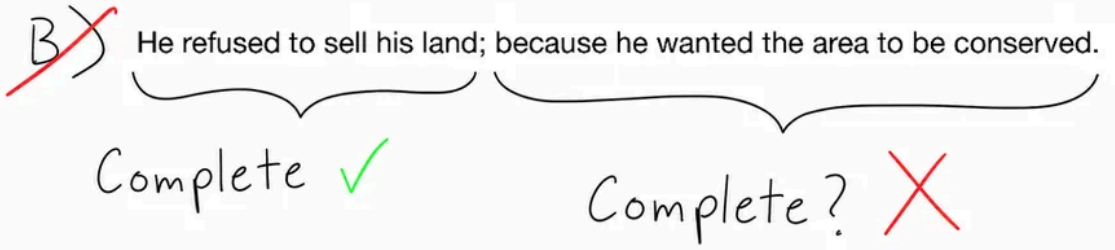
Here we see an example of a question where the Complete Complete punctuation mark, here a semicolon, does not work. Reading up to the semicolon in choice B, we see it's complete. However, from there to the period is not, so B is out.

the land. [2] Jones abstained from voting. [3] He refused to sell his land because he wanted the area to be conserved. [38]

37

37. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. land; because
C. land,
D. land

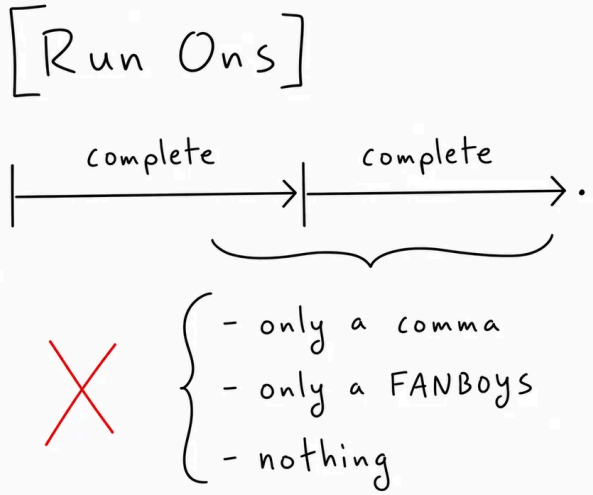
38. Which of the followin
this paragraph most lo



WHAT TO AVOID

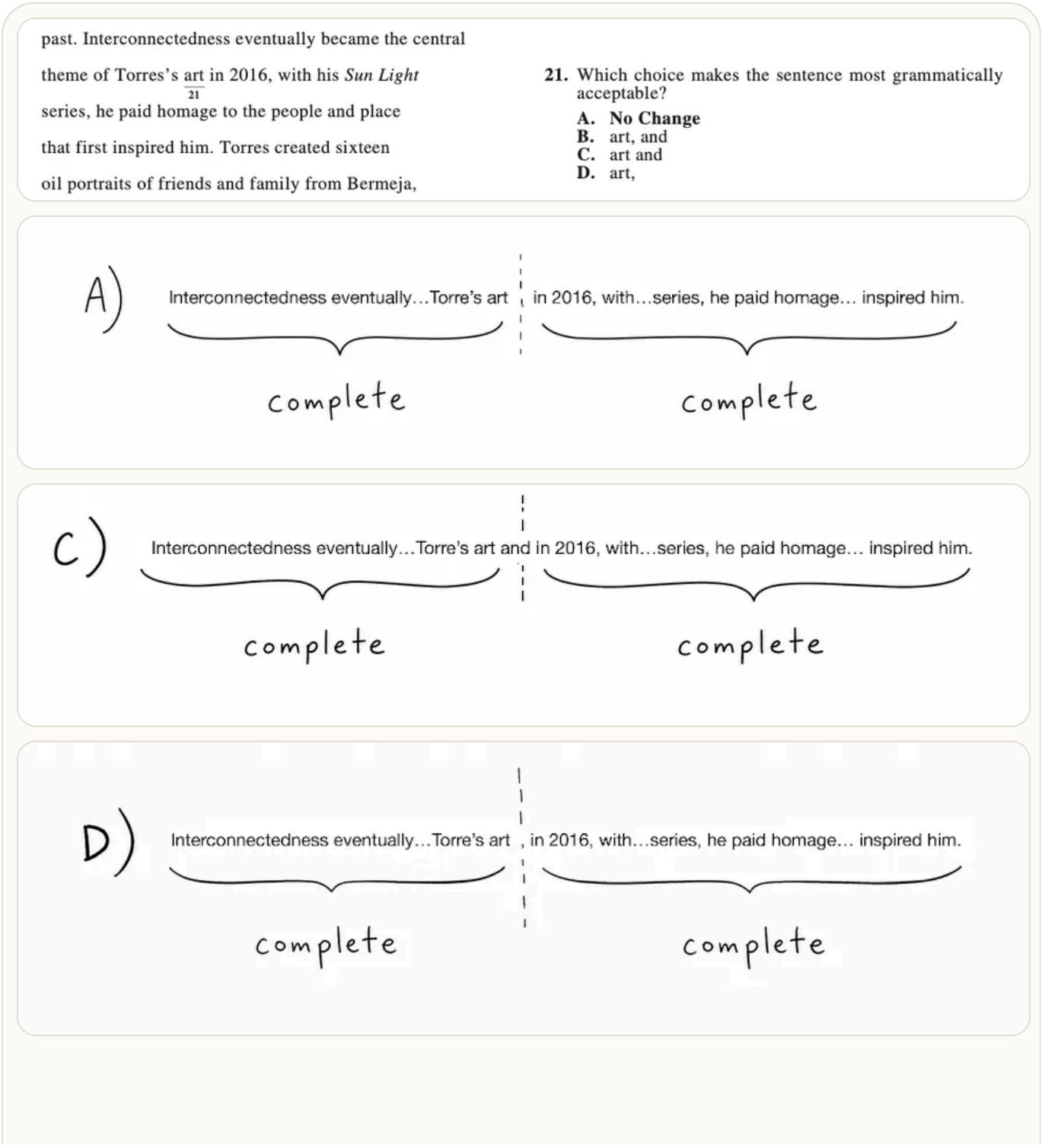
Run-ons

What they are. Run-ons are where you have two complete sentences connected by only a comma, only a FANBOYS, or by nothing.



On the ACT, they're usually tested as incorrect answers when you see that there are answers with periods, semicolons, comma+FANBOYS, or colons (which we'll talk about soon). However, we'll see some where they're testing on their own.

Let's revisit this problem. We already saw that there were two complete sentences. One up to the word "art" and another from "in 2016" to the period. A separates them with nothing, C with only a FANBOYS ("and"), and D with only a comma.



21. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

~~A.~~ **No Change**
B. art, and
~~C.~~ art and
~~D.~~ art,

A) nothing

C) only a FANBoys

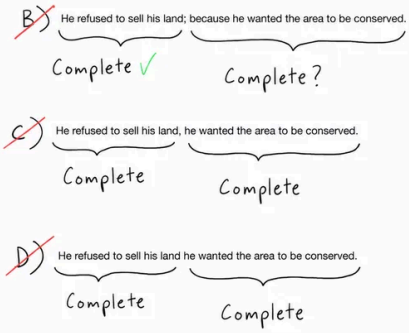
D) only a comma

Revisiting another problem. We already know that B is an incorrect use of a semicolon, but notice that C and D create Run Ons.

the land. [2] Jones abstained from voting. [3] He refused to sell his land because he wanted the area 37 to be conserved. 38

37. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. land; because
C. land,
D. land

38. Which of the followin this paragraph most lo



B) a [;] w/out 2 completes

C) 2 completes with only a comma (run on)

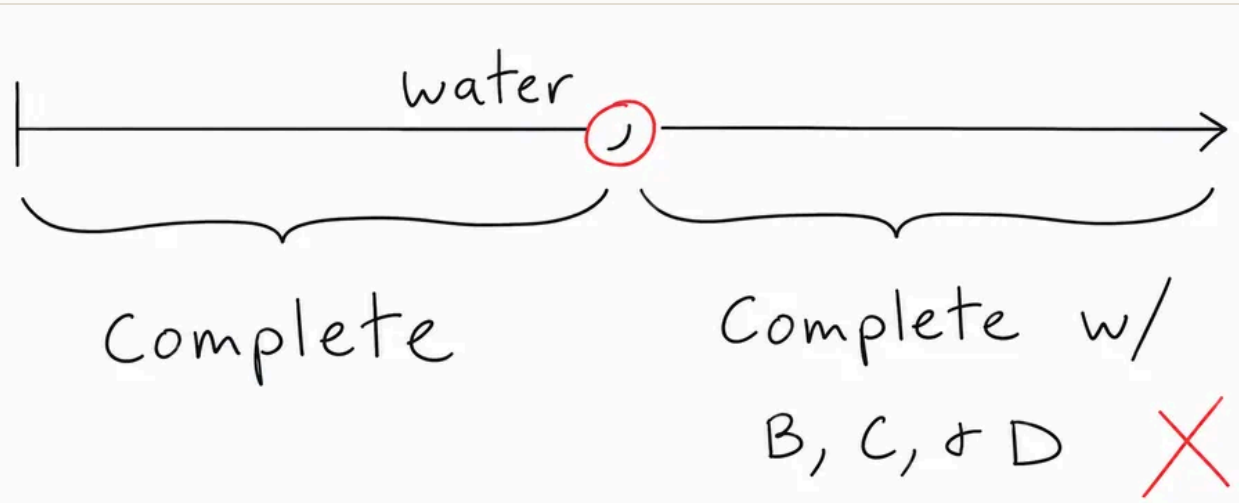
D) 2 completes with nothing (Run on)

Here we see an example of a question where there are no 'Complete Complete' punctuation options nor a colon. You can identify that B, C, and D create Run Ons, while A creates a common sentence structure of Independent – Dependent as we saw at the beginning of this guide.

to land. Its flippers reverse direction in shallow water,

pushing the robot up onto sturdy, arched legs. The
23

23. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. by doing so, they push the robot
C. then, the robot is pushed
D. this pushes the robot



And another nearly identical problem.

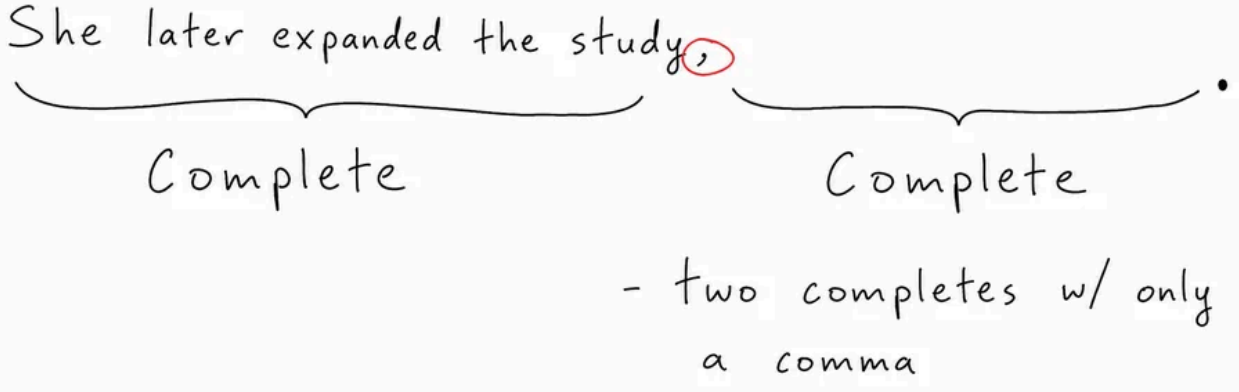
to press an underwater target to obtain food. She

later expanded the study, teaching sharks to visually
50

distinguish between targets of varying shapes, and colors.
51

50. **F.** NO CHANGE
G. this time, she taught
H. she was teaching
J. she taught

51. **A.** NO CHANGE
B. distinguish—between targets of varying shapes
C. distinguish between targets, of varying shapes,
D. distinguish between targets of varying shapes



A DIFFERENT PATTERN

Colons

The rule for the ACT. Colons can be used in many different ways, but on the ACT, it goes like this: you MUST have a complete up to the colon, but what comes after just has to be an example or explanation of what came before it. It can be complete or incomplete. So notice it can have two completes but doesn't have to. Just make sure they're two different statements before and after.

Let's test answer choice A. From "The display" to "mission" is complete, so we're good so far. Then what follows the colon to the end of the sentence is an explanation of the first phrase. A it is.

to be relocated to inner-city London. The display was

emblematic of Clarke's mission: making green spaces
38

more sustainable and accessible.

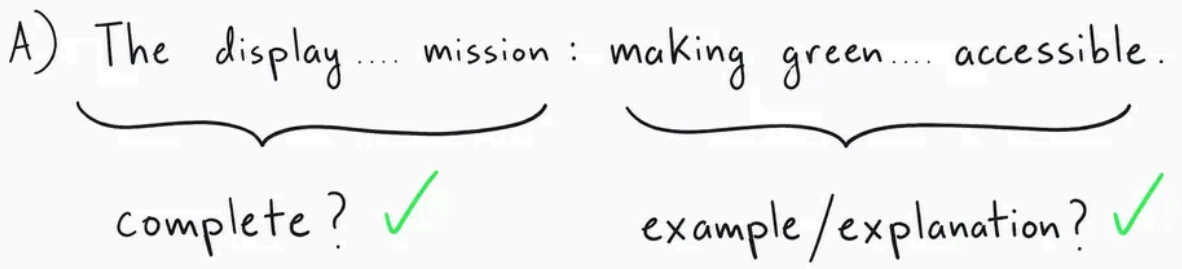
Calling himself "The Black Gardener" to highlight

the lack of diversity in his profession, Clarke uses his

B. Its design centered
C. It centered
D. Centering

38. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

F. No Change
G. mission, which is:
H. mission;
J. mission



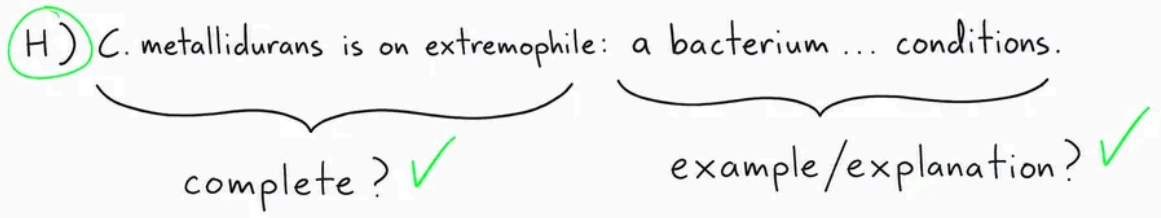
Running the same test, we see that H is correct.

the bacterium's hardiness. *C. metallidurans* is an
33

extremophile; a bacterium capable of surviving
34
in extreme chemical conditions. [C] The professors

D. C. *metallidurans* also
hardiness performed by
C. the bacterium also had
ness done by Kashefi a
D. the bacterium also go
Kashefi and Brown.

34. F. NO CHANGE
G. extremophile, and
H. extremophile:
J. extremophile



An example where the colon test does not work.

Using these findings about shark

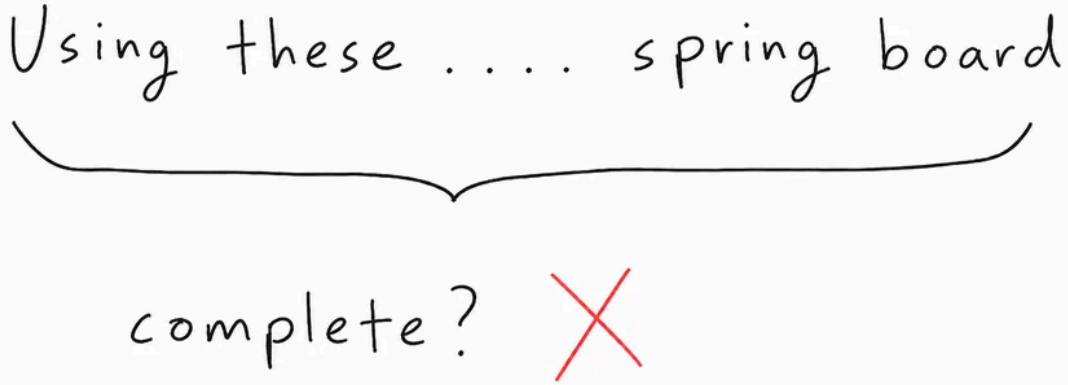
intelligence as a springboard: Clark began
53

publicly advocating for the misunderstood animal.
54

J. were later conduc
bar sharks.

53. A. NO CHANGE
B. springboard;
C. springboard,
D. springboard

54. The writer wants to em
ing actively on behal

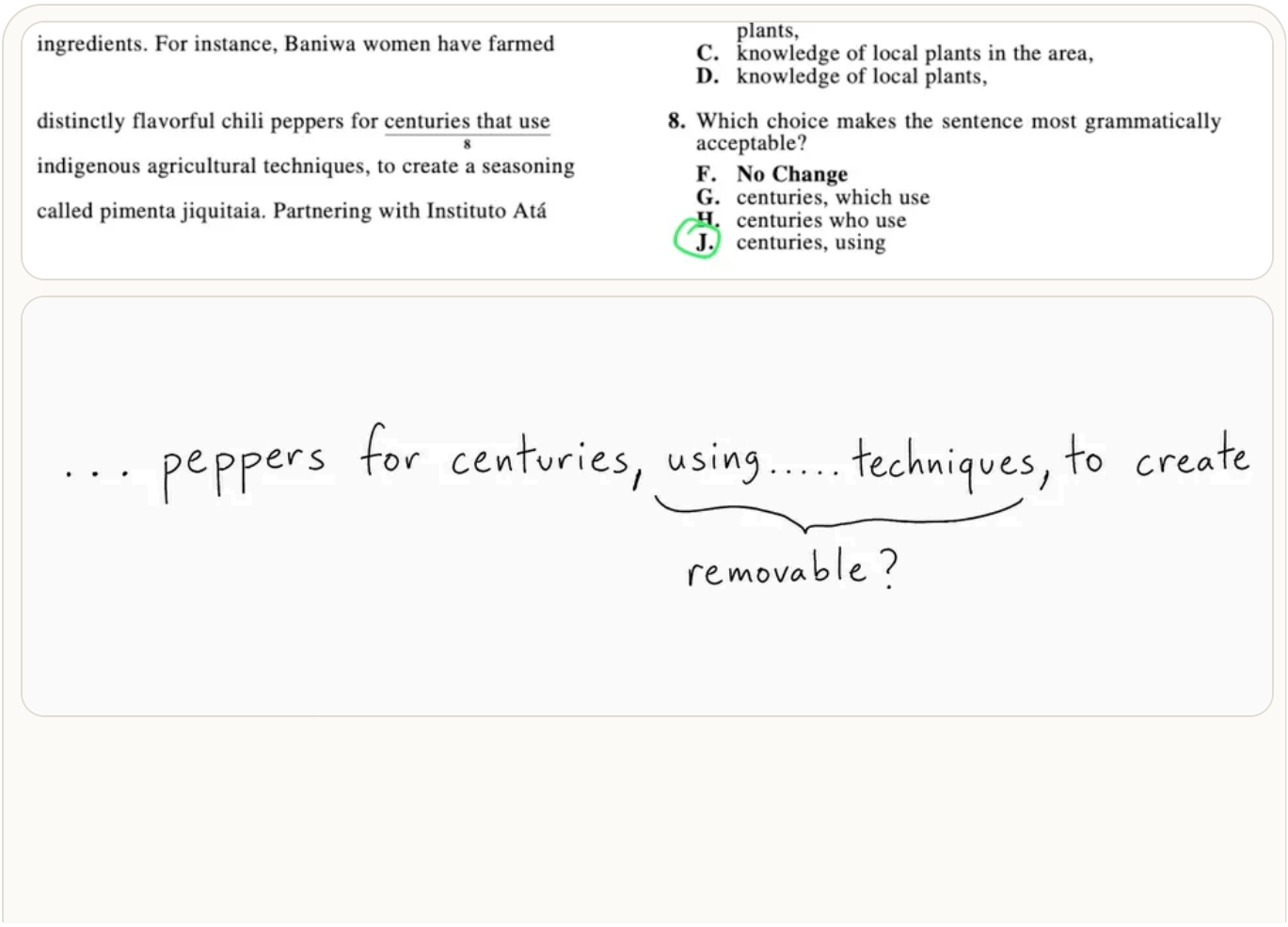


Commas

Commas are mostly tested in two different ways: to bookend interjections and to separate independent and dependent clauses. Interjections have to be surrounded by two commas, or as we'll see, with dashes. However, it's much more common to see this done with commas.

The other test of commas follows this rule: on the ACT we ALWAYS separate independent and dependent clauses.

Check out this question. If we plug in answer choice J, we see that we add a comma after "centuries". The sentence then reads "For instance, Baniwa women have farmed distinctly flavorful chili peppers for centuries, **using indigenous agricultural techniques**, to create a seasoning called pimenta jiquitaia." When we take out the bolded text now surrounded by commas, the sentence flows: ***Baniwa women have farmed distinctly flavorful chili peppers for centuries to create a seasoning called pimenta jiquitaia.***



peppers for centuries to create a seasoning called...

Another quick example. B) Since we can remove the phrase "a medieval author and dramatist" choice B is correct. Notice that A) has a dash after “dramatist”. As we’ll see, that would have worked if there were also a dash after “author”.

Hrosvitha, a medieval author and dramatist—is
11
one of the earliest known European women playwrights.

Although little is known about her life, scholars agree

Hrosvitha was born to a noble family around 935 CE.

11. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

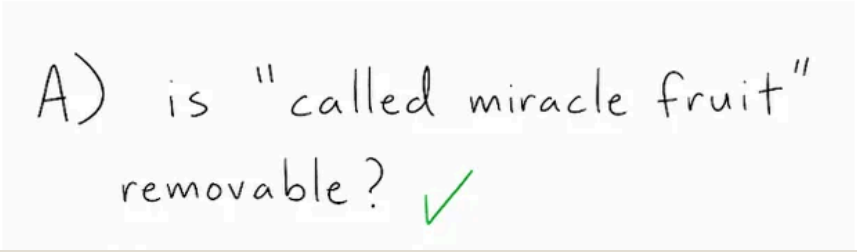
A. **No Change**
B. author and dramatist,
C. author, and dramatist
D. author and dramatist

B) is "a medieval author and dramatist" removable? ✓

Here's two more examples that work the exact same way.

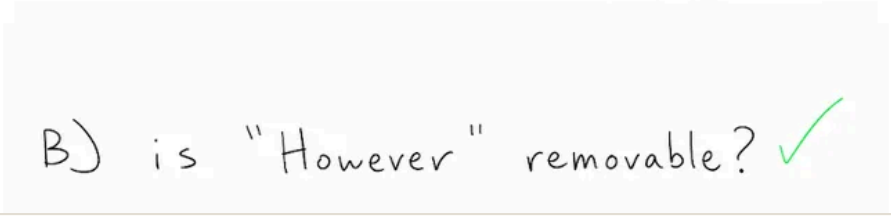
Synsepalum dulcificum, called miracle fruit, may not
47
seem particularly impressive at first. Its mildly sweet
tang is often compared to that of a cranberry. But within

47. A. NO CHANGE
B. *dulcificum* called, miracle fruit,
C. *dulcificum* called miracle fruit,
D. *dulcificum*, called miracle fruit



through the depths. Such equipment, however can alarm
21
or even harm sea life. The engineers developing the robot

21. A. NO CHANGE
B. equipment, however,
C. equipment however,
D. equipment however



Let's check out an example of the second way the ACT tests comma usage: separating Independent and Dependent clauses. Notice that with A) and B) we do not have a required complete up to the colon or up to the semicolon. We can see the common dependent-independent structure of the sentence, which need to be separated. Thus C) is correct.

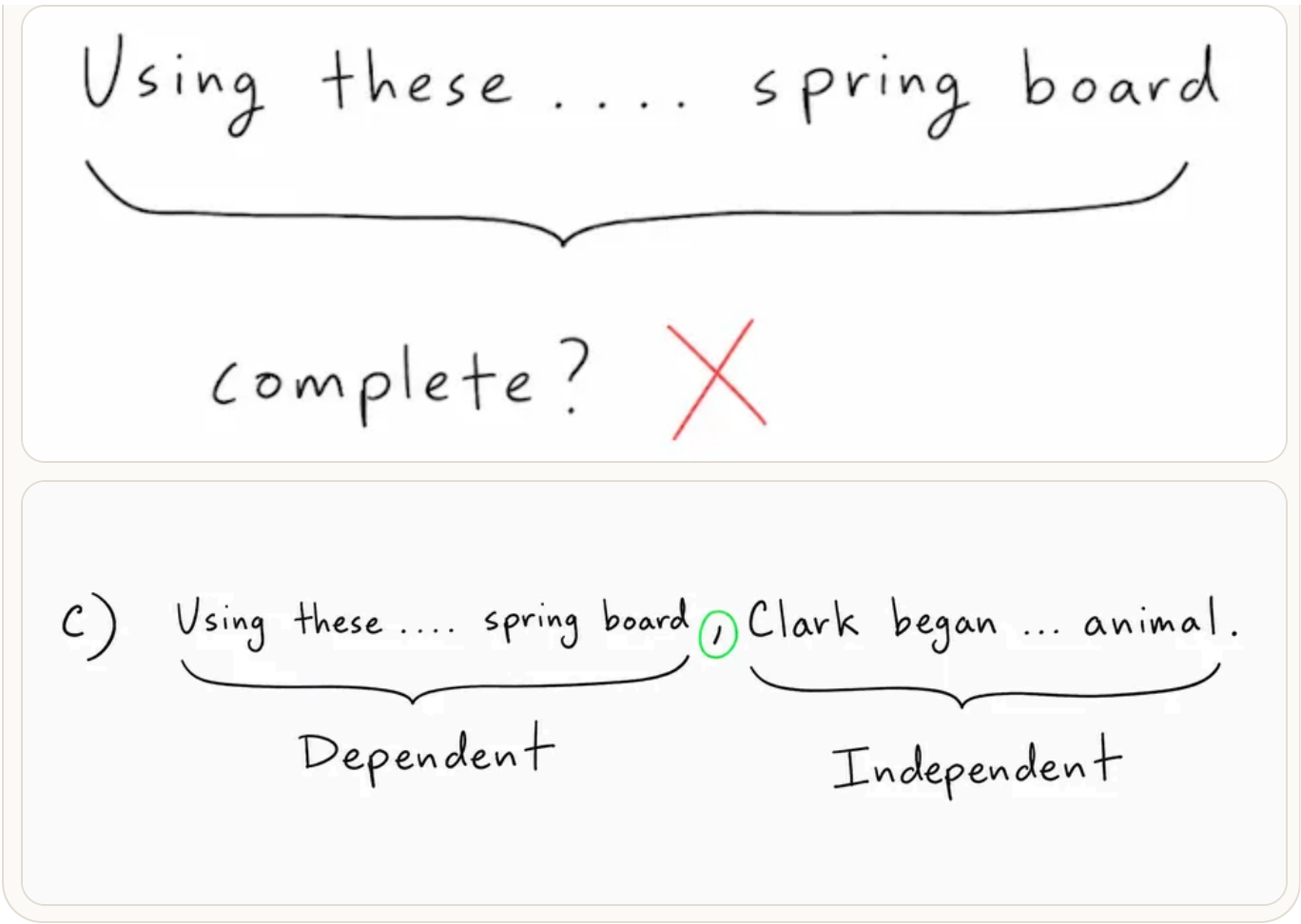
Using these findings about shark
intelligence as a springboard: Clark began
53

J. were later conduct
bar sharks.

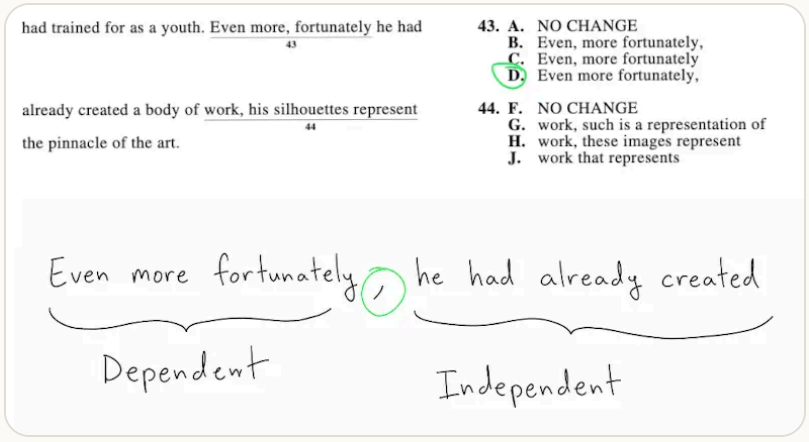
53. A. NO CHANGE
B. springboard;
C. springboard,
D. springboard

publicly advocating for the misunderstood animal.
54

54. The writer wants to em
ing actively on behal



If we read the sentence, we can see that structure again goes Dependent-Independent. “Even more fortunately” is dependent and “he had already created…” is independent. Thus, we need a comma between the two, and D) is correct.

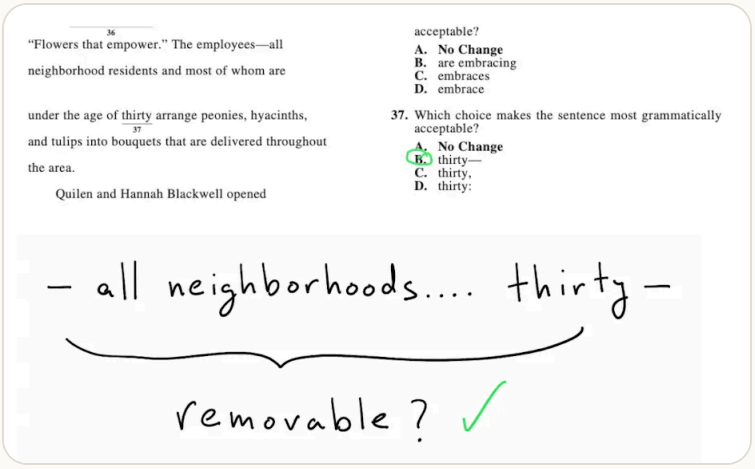


RARER, BUT PREDICTABLE

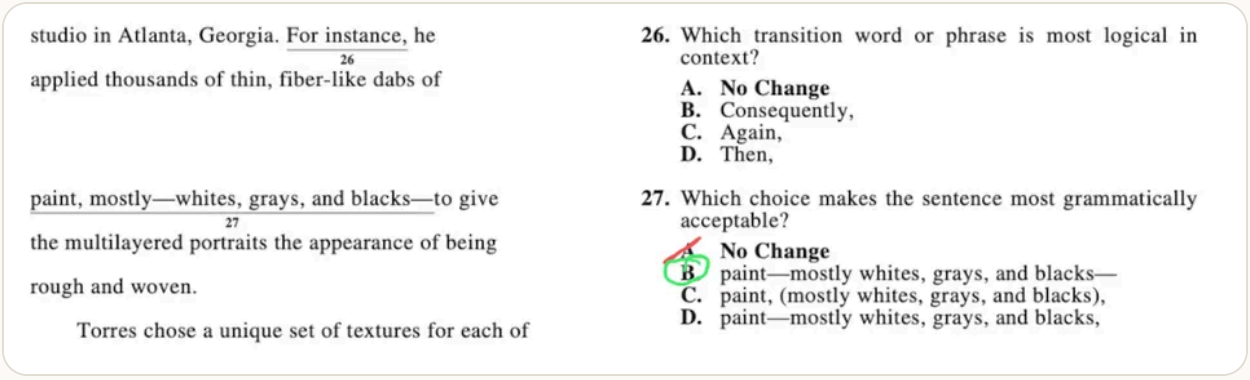
Dashes

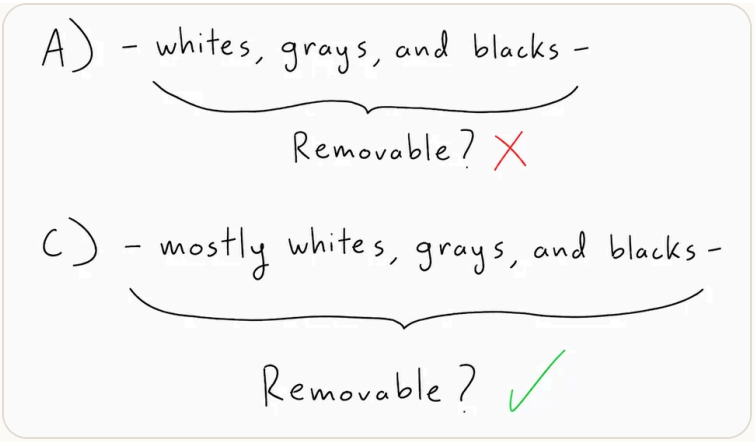
Dashes are tested the exact same ways as the two comma rules we just went over, though they are far less common on the ACT. A sentence can have only 0, 1, or 2 in a sentence. If you have one, it MUST be to separate Independent and Dependent clause. If you have two, they MUST be to bookend interjections. They rarely ask about Ind. and Dep clauses.

Here's an example. Notice there's already a dash in the sentence? A pretty big indicator we should test choice B. Read the sentence without the phrase "all neighborhood residents and most of whom are under the age of thirty" and we see it flows. Choice B it is.



Another example that works the same way.





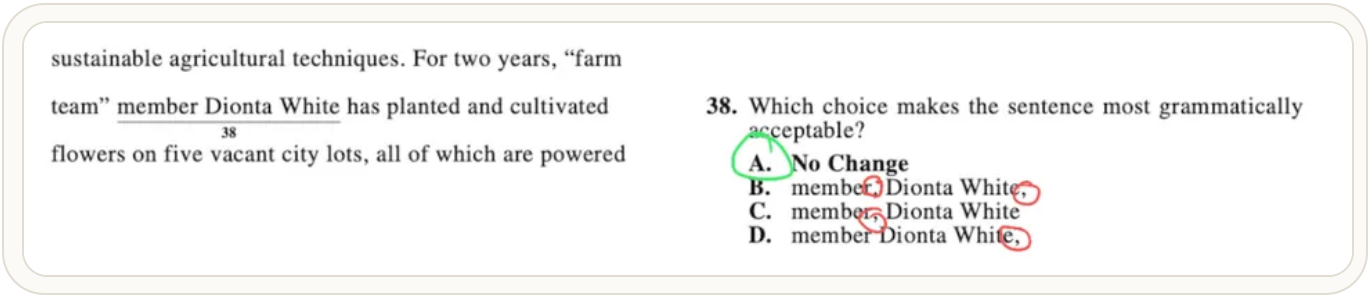
LOOKS LIKE A COMMA QUESTION — ISN'T

Title/Occupation + Name

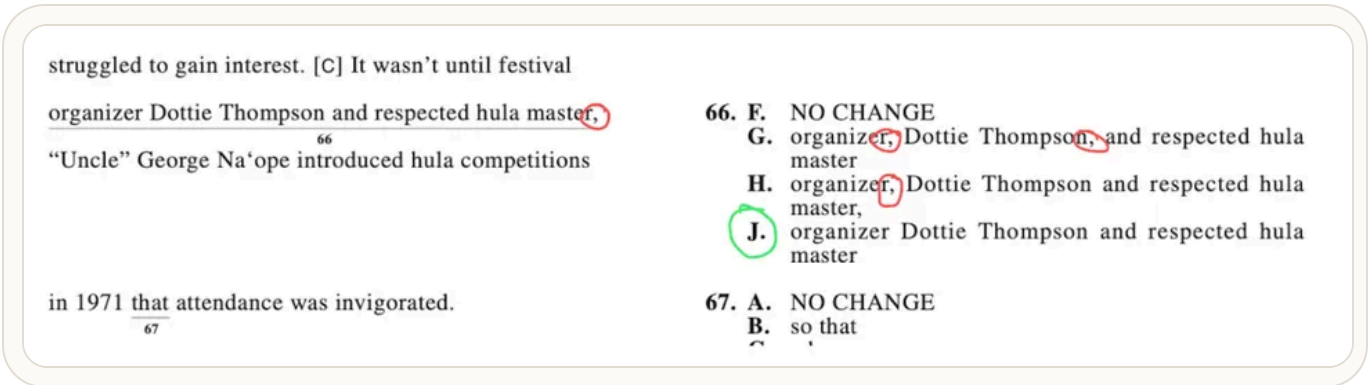
There are their own type of question. Though it looks like it's testing comma usage, you should handle it differently. The name of the question-type tells you exactly what it is: when you see a title/occupation right before a name. "ACT tutor Majid Hasan", "theoretical physicist Robert J. Oppenheimer", "cartoon character Krusty the Clown", etc.

The vast majority of the time, no commas before or after the name.

Check out two examples.


sustainable agricultural techniques. For two years, "farm team" member Dionta White[38] has planted and cultivated flowers on five vacant city lots, all of which are powered

38. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?
A. No Change
B. member Dionta White,
C. member, Dionta White
D. member Dionta White,


struggled to gain interest. [C] It wasn't until festival organizer Dottie Thompson and respected hula master,[66] "Uncle" George Na'ope introduced hula competitions in 1971 that[67] attendance was invigorated.

66. F. NO CHANGE
G. organizer, Dottie Thompson, and respected hula master
H. organizer, Dottie Thompson and respected hula master,
J. organizer Dottie Thompson and respected hula master

67. A. NO CHANGE
B. so that

The exception: every once in a while, you'll need a comma after the name (never before) if there's an interjection right after the name (or maybe a dependant clause). "The book was written by legendary journalist Bob Woodward, who won a Pulitzer prize the following year." Here we'd need a comma after the name to separate the independent and dependent clauses.

Here's an example of an interjection after the name. See the interjection that starts right after "Ien Chi"? So no comma before the name, but we need one right after.

