SAT READING & WRITING

Mastering SAT Punctuation (Boundaries)

Many of the Standard English Conventions questions on the Reading and Writing modules of the SAT are what the College Board calls “Boundaries” (the other known as “Form, Structure, and Sense”). These are essentially questions about punctuation. This guide explains how to handle all boundaries/punctuation problems. Instead of just the blanket-term “boundaries,” we’ll break down each and every specific type of these questions, how to spot it, and the process to handle it.

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 SAT? 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 SAT. 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

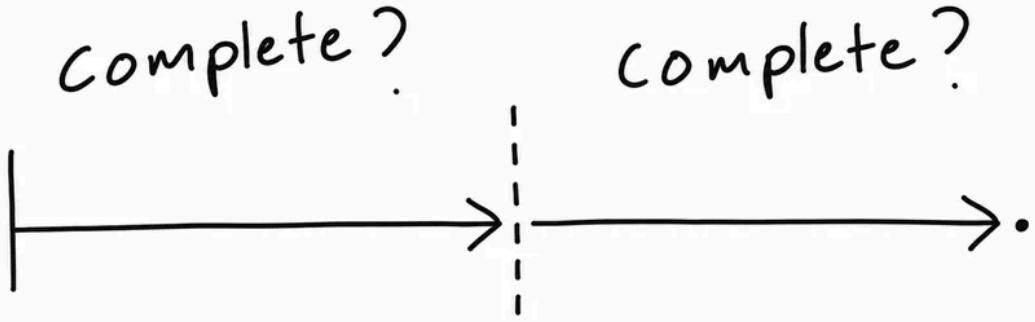
- In the 1950s, a man named Joseph McVicker was struggling to keep his business afloat when his sister-in-law Kay Zufall advised him to repurpose the company's product — a nontoxic, clay-like substance for removing soot from wallpaper — as a modeling putty for kids.
- Compiled in the late 1500s largely 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.

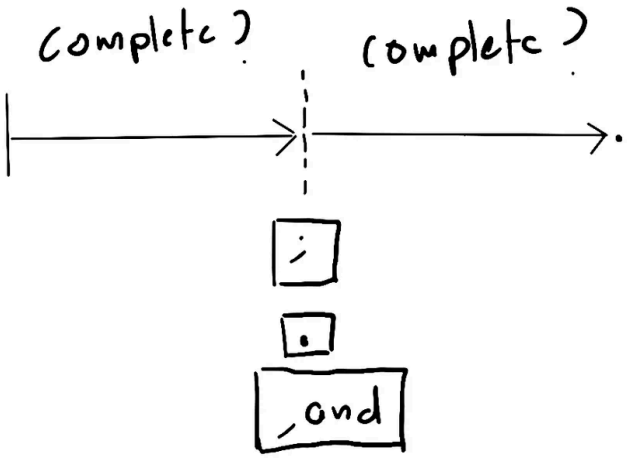
THE CORE RULE

"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.

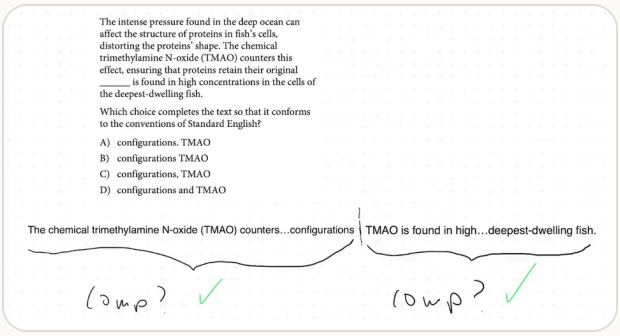
So, whenever you're testing one of these three, read up to the point and check if it's a complete sentence. If it's not, then it's incorrect. Then read from that point to the end of the sentence and do the same check. Let's work through some examples.

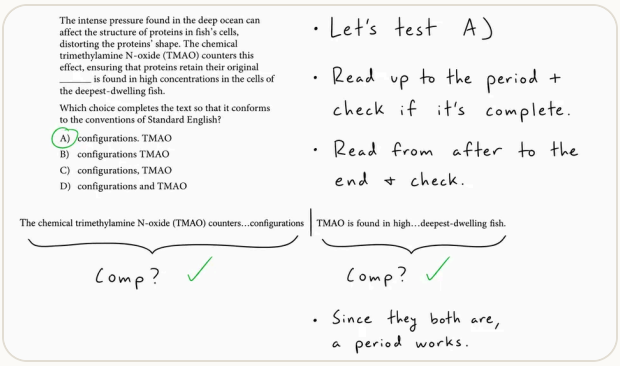




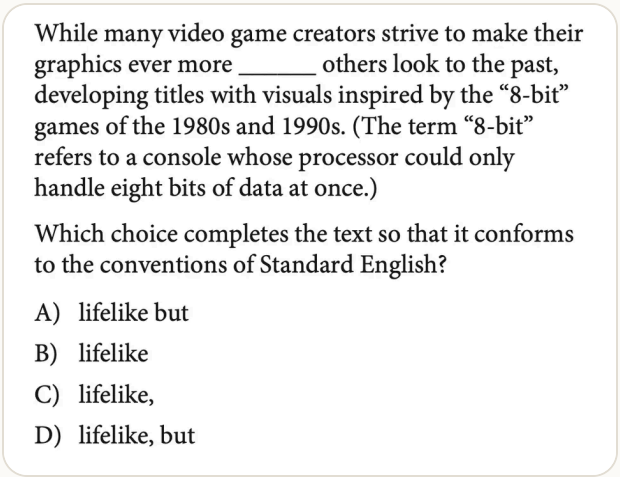


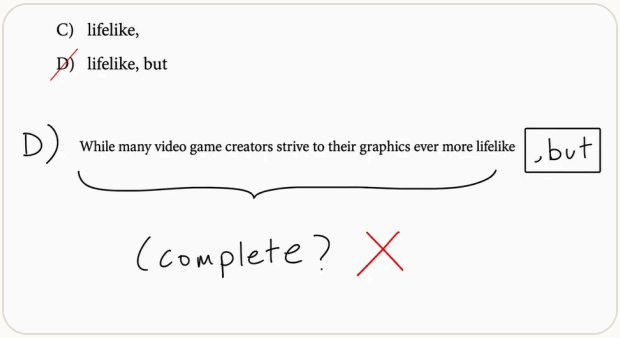
Let's test the period in answer choice A. We read up to the period to see if it's complete, which it is. Read from after the period to the end of the sentence to see if that's complete, which it is. Therefore A works, it's the correct answer.





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.





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

Typically, underlines, scribbles, and notes left in the margins by a former owner lower a book's _____ when the former owner is a famous poet like Walt Whitman, such markings, known as marginalia, can be a gold mine to literary scholars.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) value, but
B) value
C) value,
D) value but

Here's an example where we see that three answer choices contain one of the three "completelcomplete" punctuations. We can see that no other words are changed among those three answers, meaning, logically, none of them can be correct. Indeed, if we were to test the phrase after, starting with "the stitching...", we'd see that it does not create a complete sentence.

From afar, African American fiber artist Bisa Butler's portraits look like paintings, their depictions of human faces, bodies, and clothing so intricate that it seems only a fine brush could have rendered them. When viewed up close, however, the portraits reveal themselves to be _____ stitching barely visible among the thousands of pieces of printed, microcut fabric.

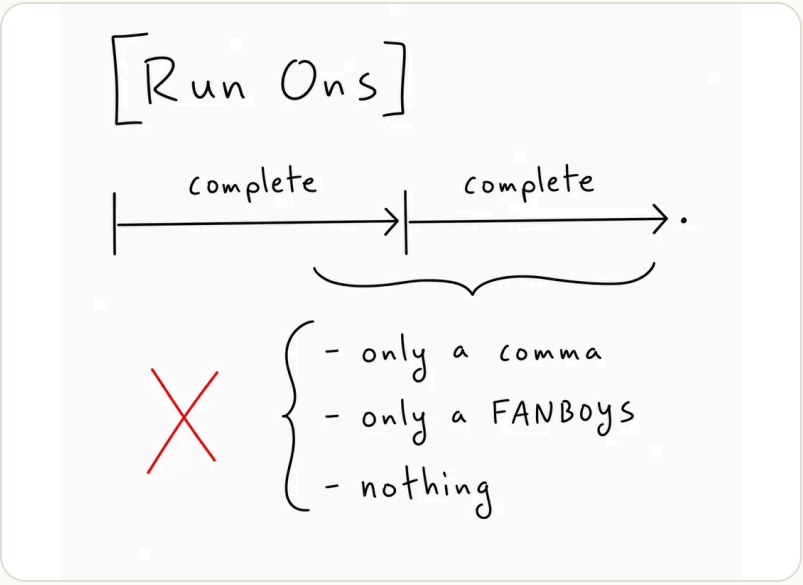
Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) quilts, and the
B) quilts, the
C) quilts; the
D) quilts. The

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.



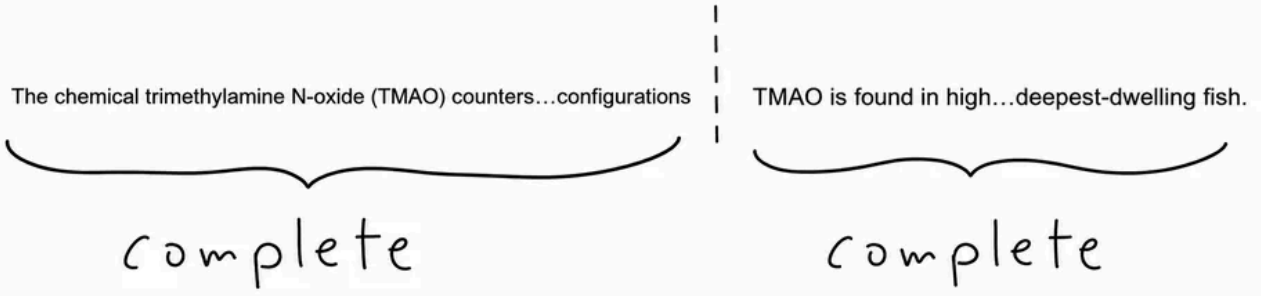
On the SAT, they're almost always tested as incorrect answers when you see that there are answers with periods, semicolons, comma+FANBOYS, or colons (which we'll talk about soon).

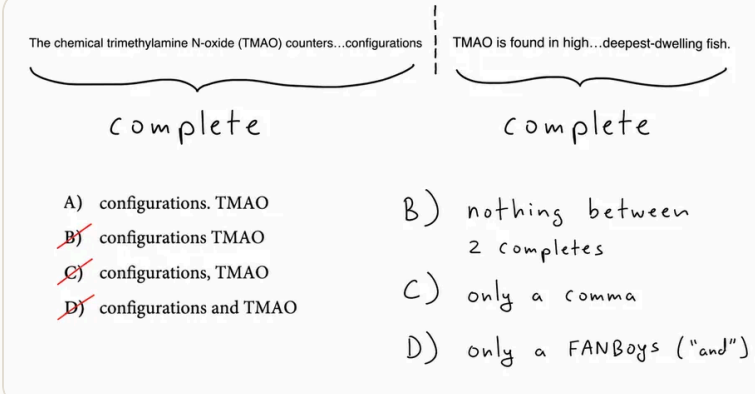
Let's revisit this problem. We already saw that there were two complete sentences. One up to the word "configurations." and another from "TMAO" to the period. B separates them with nothing, C with only a comma, and D with only a FANBOYS ("and").

The intense pressure found in the deep ocean can affect the structure of proteins in fish's cells, distorting the proteins' shape. The chemical trimethylamine N-oxide (TMAO) counters this effect, ensuring that proteins retain their original _____ is found in high concentrations in the cells of the deepest-dwelling fish.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) configurations. TMAO
B) configurations TMAO
C) configurations, TMAO
D) configurations and TMAO





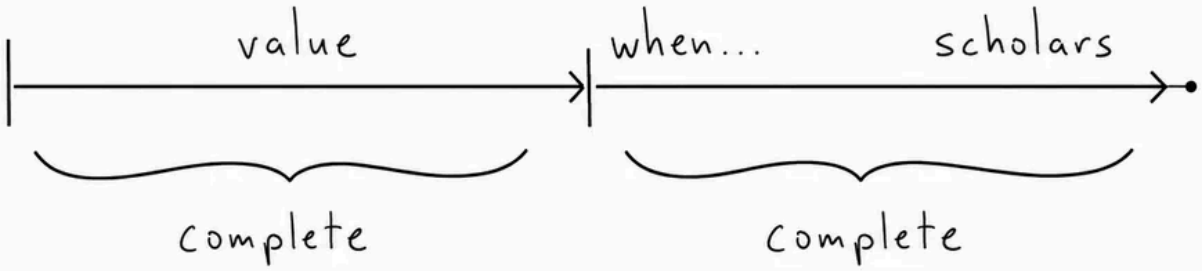
We see two completes, up to "value" and from "when".

Typically, underlines, scribbles, and notes left in the margins by a former owner lower a book's _____ when the former owner is a famous poet like Walt Whitman, such markings, known as marginalia, can be a gold mine to literary scholars.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) value, but
B) value
C) value,
D) value but

B) nothing
C) only a romma
D) only a FANBoys

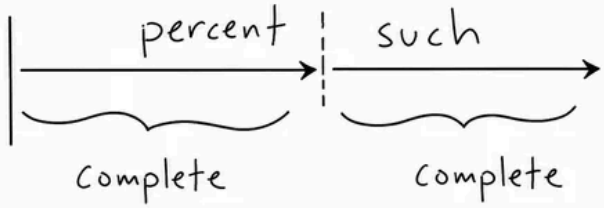


Again, two completes, up to "percent" and from "such".

After the United Kingdom began rolling out taxes equivalent to a few cents on single-use plastic grocery bags in 2011, plastic-bag consumption decreased by up to ninety _____ taxes are subject to what economists call the "rebound effect": as the change became normalized, plastic-bag use started to creep back up.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) percent, such
B) percent and such
C) percent. Such
D) percent such



A) only a romma
B) only a FANBoys
D) nothing

A DIFFERENT PATTERN

Colons

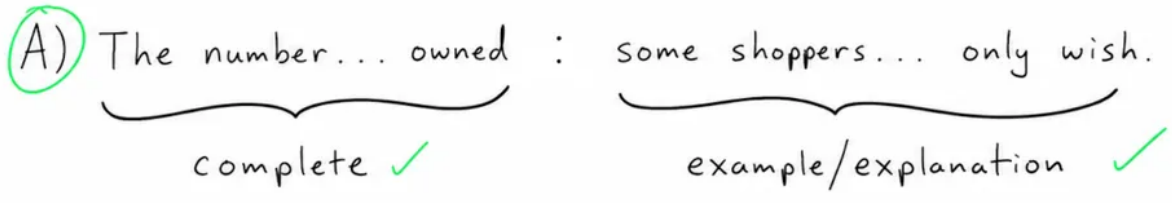
The rule for the SAT. Colons can be used in many different ways, but on the SAT, it goes like this: you MUST have a complete up to the colon, but what comes after just has to be an example or explanation of what came before it. It can be complete or incomplete. So notice it can have two completes but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

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

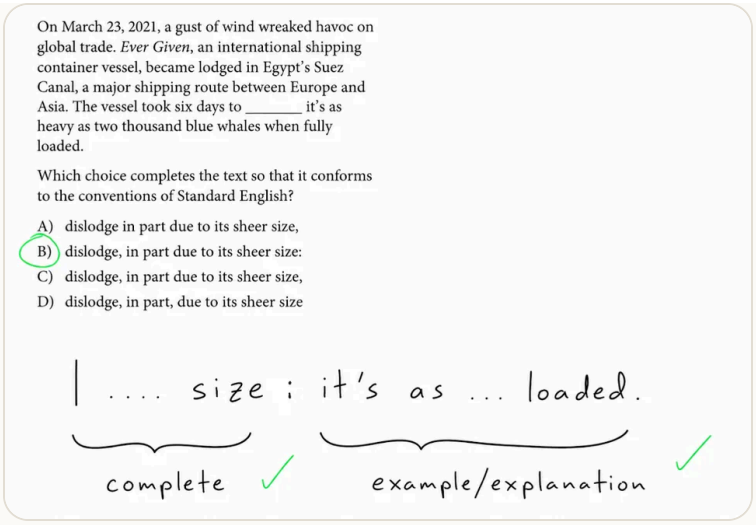
Over twenty years ago, in a landmark experiment in the psychology of choice, professor Sheena Iyengar set up a jam-tasting booth at a grocery store. The number of jams available for tasting _____ some shoppers had twenty-four different options, others only six. Interestingly, the shoppers with fewer jams to choose from purchased more jam.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) varied:
B) varied,
C) varied, while
D) varied while



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



THE TWO COMMA RULES

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.

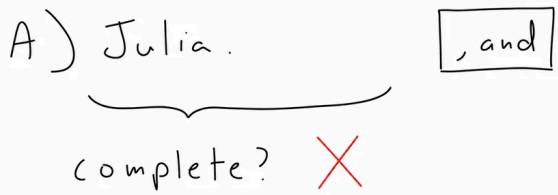
The other test of commas follows this rule: on the SAT we ALWAYS separate independent and dependent clauses.

Check out this question. You notice that A) has "`,and`" but does not have a complete before it. That's out. Then let's check the answer with a comma. I read the sentence without the phrase now located inside two commas "a fictionalized ... sisters," and see that the sentence flows: ***Julia Alvarez's 1994 novel In the Time of the Butterflies can serve as a starting point for...*** It flows. Choice C is correct.

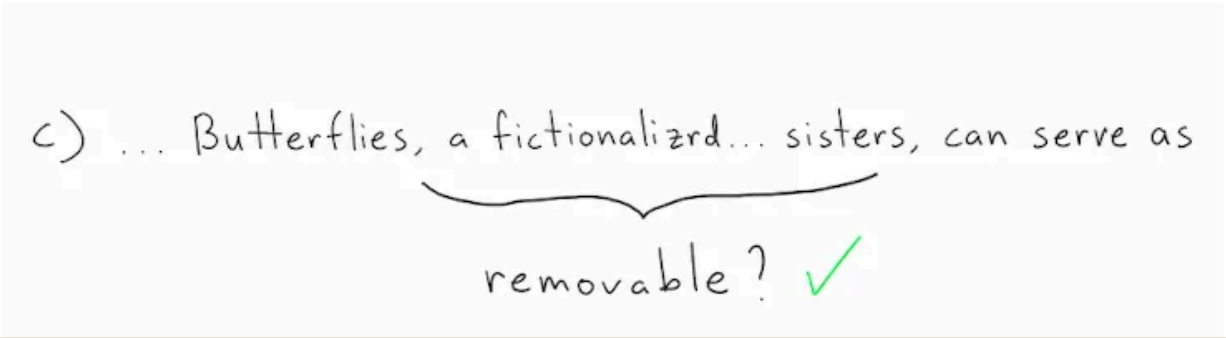
Julia Alvarez's 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies,* a fictionalized account of the lives of the Mirabal _____ can serve as a starting point for those wanting to explore how the rule of dictator Rafael Trujillo has been represented in Dominican American literature.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) sisters, and
B) sisters and
C) sisters,
D) sisters



A) sisters, and
B) sisters and
C) sisters,
D) sisters

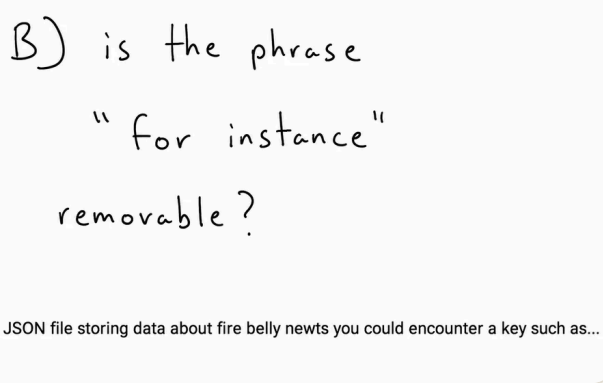


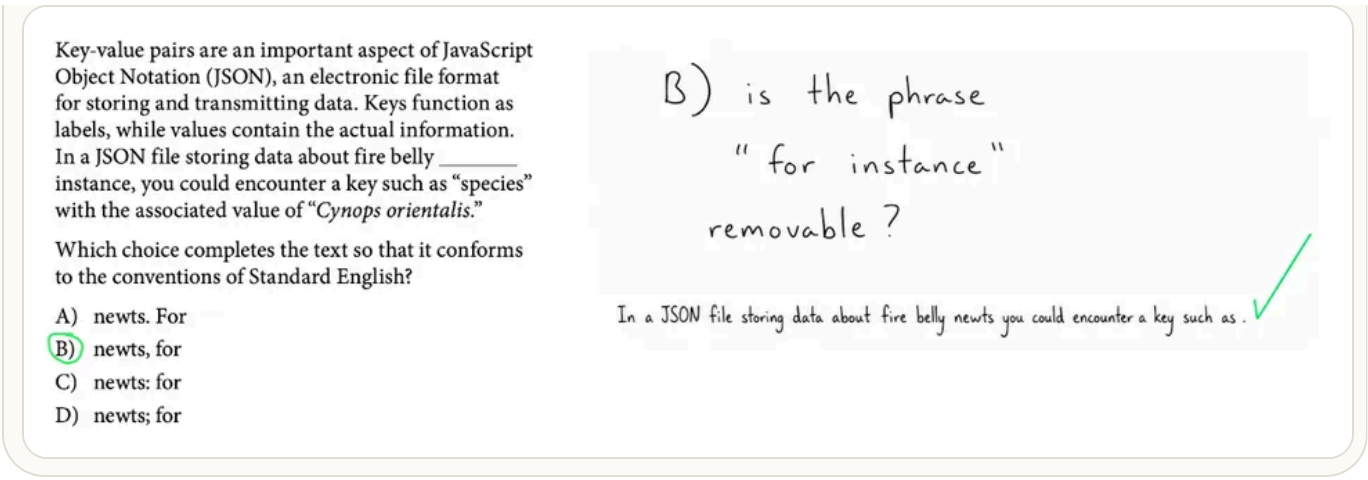
Another quick example. B) Since we can remove the phrase "for instance" choice B is correct. Notice none of the others have complete sentences up to the word "newts", which they all require, so we can eliminate them for that reason.

Key-value pairs are an important aspect of JavaScript Object Notation (JSON), an electronic file format for storing and transmitting data. Keys function as labels, while values contain the actual information. In a JSON file storing data about fire belly _____ instance, you could encounter a key such as "species" with the associated value of "*Cynops orientalis*."

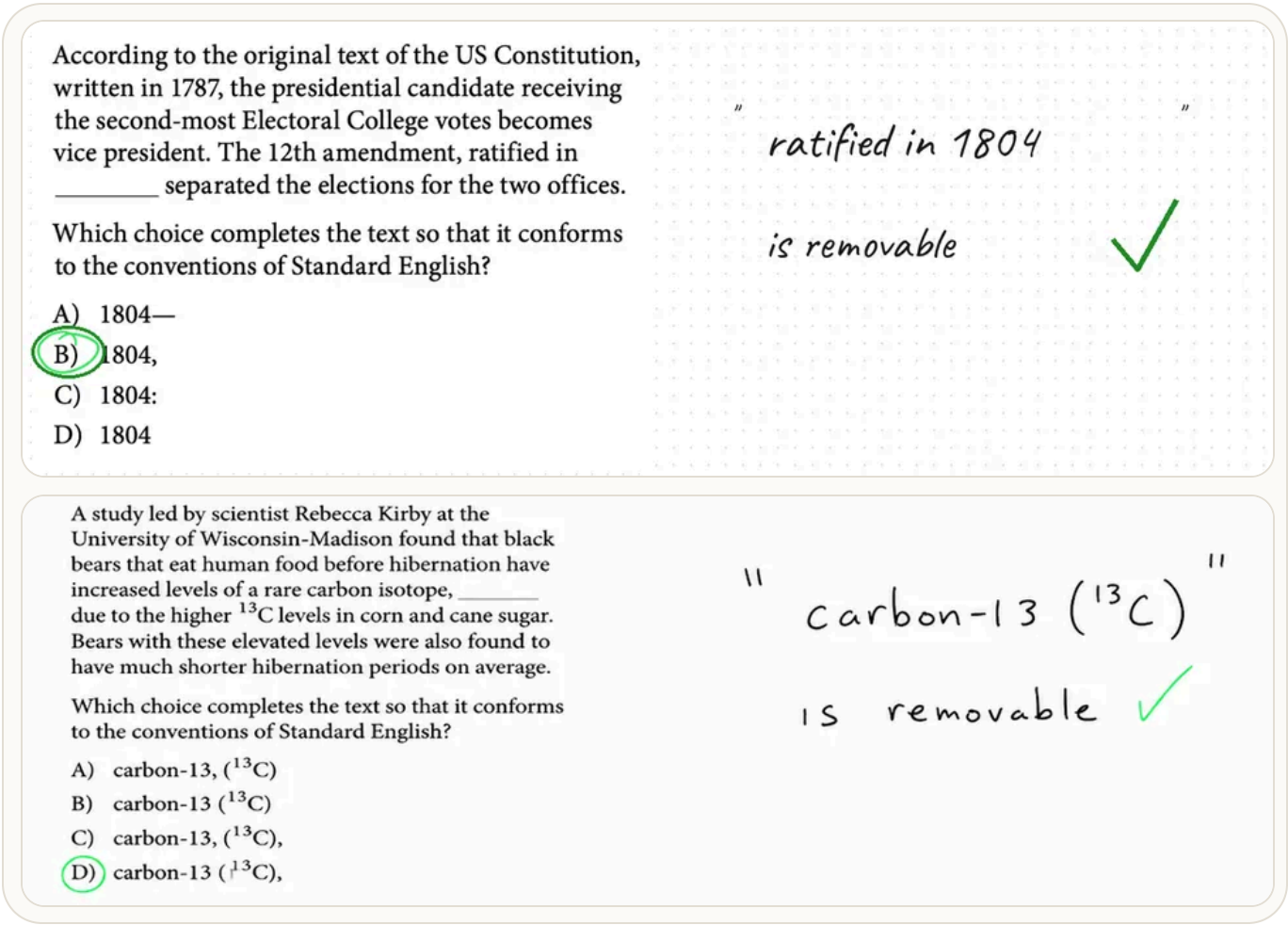
Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) newts. For
B) newts, for
C) newts: for
D) newts; for





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

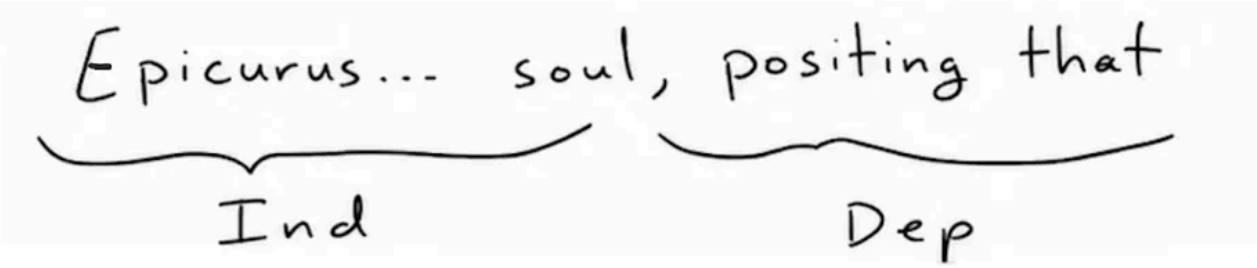


Let's check out an example of the second way the SAT tests comma usage: separating Independent and Dependent clauses. Notice that with C) and D) we do not have a required complete starting from "positing", and in B) we do not have an example or explanation (though it is close). Notice that phrase starts with an "ing" word, "positing"? A common type of dependent clause. And "Epicurus...soul" works as an Independent. Choice A it is.

In ancient Greece, an Epicurean was a follower of Epicurus, a philosopher whose beliefs revolved around the pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus defined pleasure as "the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the _____ that all life's virtues derived from this absence.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) soul," positing
B) soul": positing
C) soul"; positing
D) soul." Positing



A) soul," positing
B) soul": positing
C) soul"; positing
D) soul." Positing

RARER, BUT PREDICTABLE

Dashes

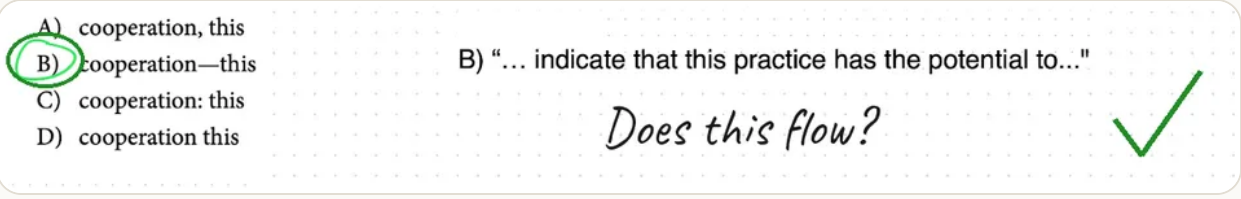
Dashes are tested the exact same ways as the two comma rules we just went over, though they are far less common on the SAT. A sentence can have only 0, 1, or 2 in a sentence. If you have one, it MUST be to separate Independent and Dependent clauses. If you have two, they MUST be to bookend interjections. 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 "assuming solar panel installers' cooperation" and we see it flows. Choice B it is.

In rural Minnesota, ecologist Leroy Walston conducted a study to determine whether seeding solar panel fields with wildflowers could bolster pollinator populations in nearby food crops. Walston's findings indicate that—assuming solar panel installers' _____ practice has the potential to increase the number of native bees in crops near solar fields throughout the Midwest by up to 20 percent.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) cooperation, this
B) cooperation—this
C) cooperation: this
D) cooperation this

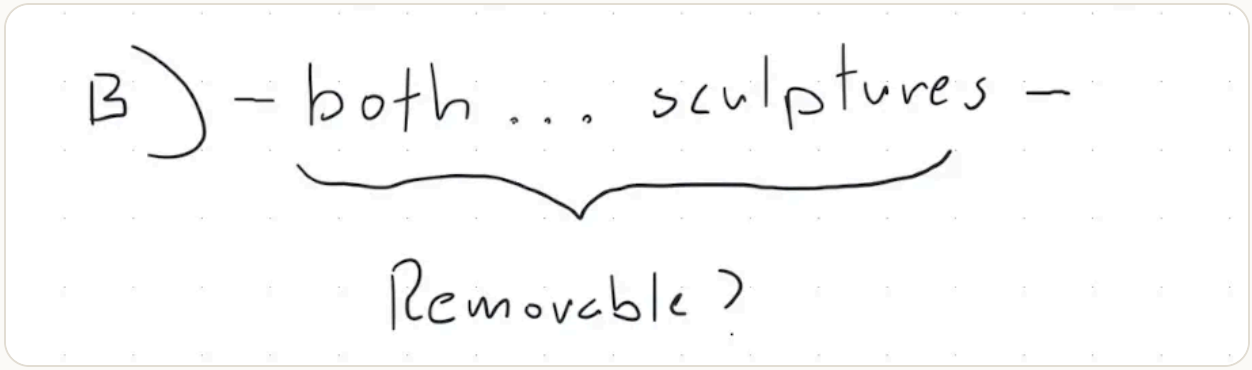


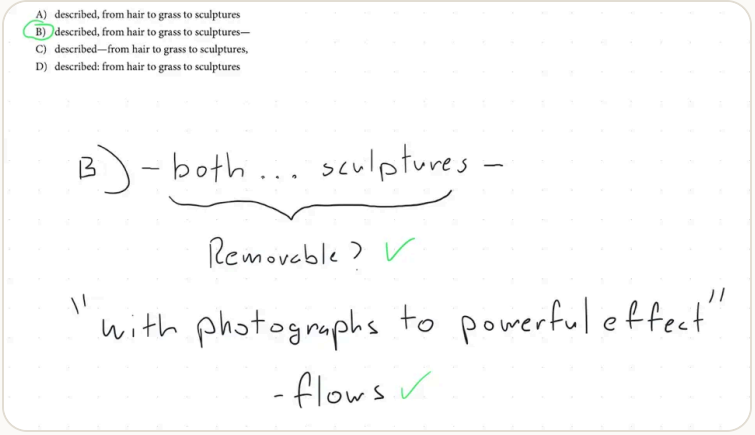
Another example that works the same way.

In 1986, conceptual artist Sophie Calle asked twenty-three people, all of whom had been born without sight, to describe "their image of beauty" in rich detail. Calle paired excerpts of these conversations with photographs—both of interviewees and the items they _____ to powerful effect in her exhibition *The Blind*.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) described, from hair to grass to sculptures
B) described, from hair to grass to sculptures—
C) described—from hair to grass to sculptures,
D) described: from hair to grass to sculptures





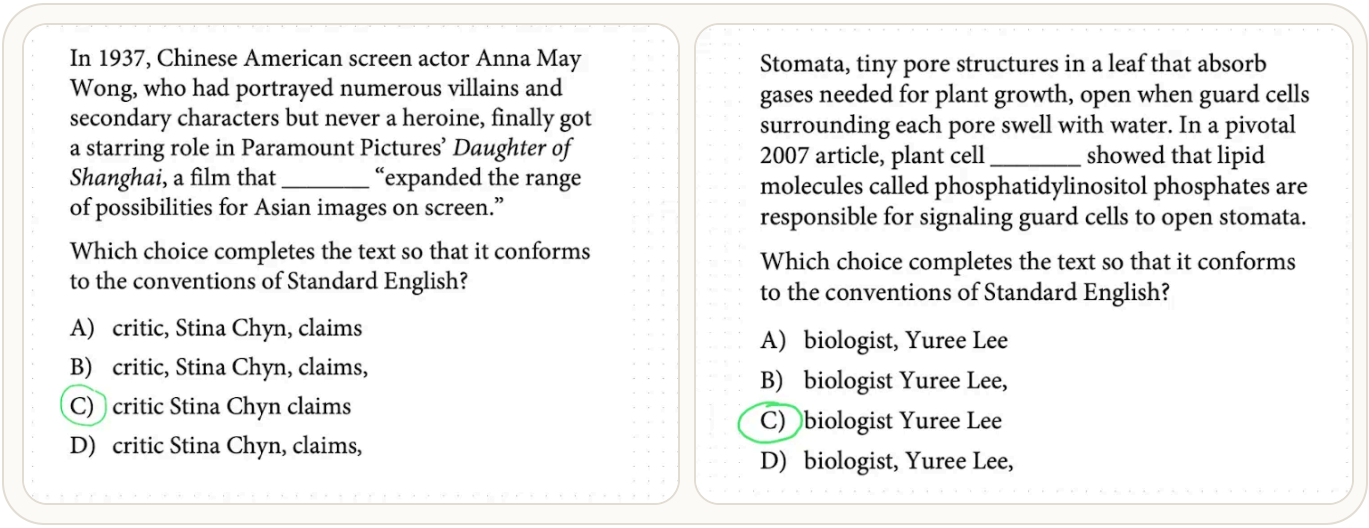
LOOKS LIKE A COMMA QUESTION — ISN'T

Title/Occupation + Name

These 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. "SAT tutor Majid Hasan", "theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer", "cartoon character Krusty the Clown", etc.

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

Check out two examples.



In 1937, Chinese American screen actor Anna May Wong, who had portrayed numerous villains and secondary characters but never a heroine, finally got a starring role in Paramount Pictures' *Daughter of Shanghai*, a film that _____ "expanded the range of possibilities for Asian images on screen."

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) critic, Stina Chyn, claims
B) critic, Stina Chyn, claims,
C) critic Stina Chyn claims
D) critic Stina Chyn, claims,

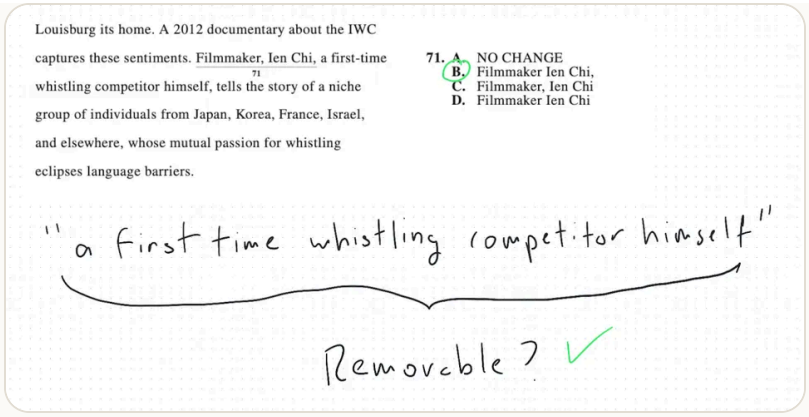
Stomata, tiny pore structures in a leaf that absorb gases needed for plant growth, open when guard cells surrounding each pore swell with water. In a pivotal 2007 article, plant cell _____ showed that lipid molecules called phosphatidylinositol phosphates are responsible for signaling guard cells to open stomata.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) biologist, Yuree Lee
B) biologist Yuree Lee,
C) biologist Yuree Lee
D) biologist, Yuree Lee,

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 dependent 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 (it's from the ACT, but it's exactly what you might see on the SAT). See the interjection that starts right after "Ien Chi"? So no comma before the name, but we need one right after.



RARE, BUT WORTH KNOWING

Niche (infrequent) Question Types

Multiple semicolons. If you see the option to have 2 semicolons in a sentence, meaning there's one in the sentence already and the answers would let you add another, it has to be a semicolon answer choice. Sometimes that's enough to answer the question, but if you have to choose, you need to follow the pattern in the sentence. See, the semicolons are being used like commas in a list.

In this first example, it has to be B) since that's the only option that would have two semicolons in the sentence.

To serve local families during the Great Depression, innovative New York City librarian Pura Belpré offered storytelling in both English and Spanish, an uncommon _____ celebrated *el Día de los Tres Reyes Magos*, an important community holiday; and put on puppet shows dramatizing Puerto Rican folktales.

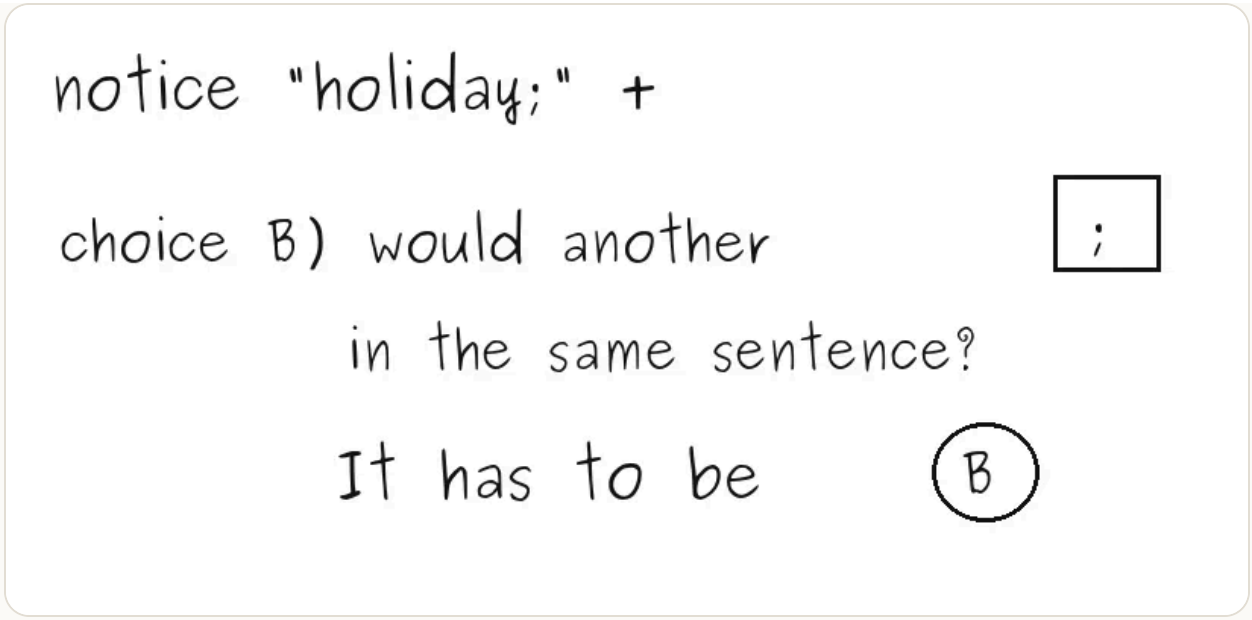
Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

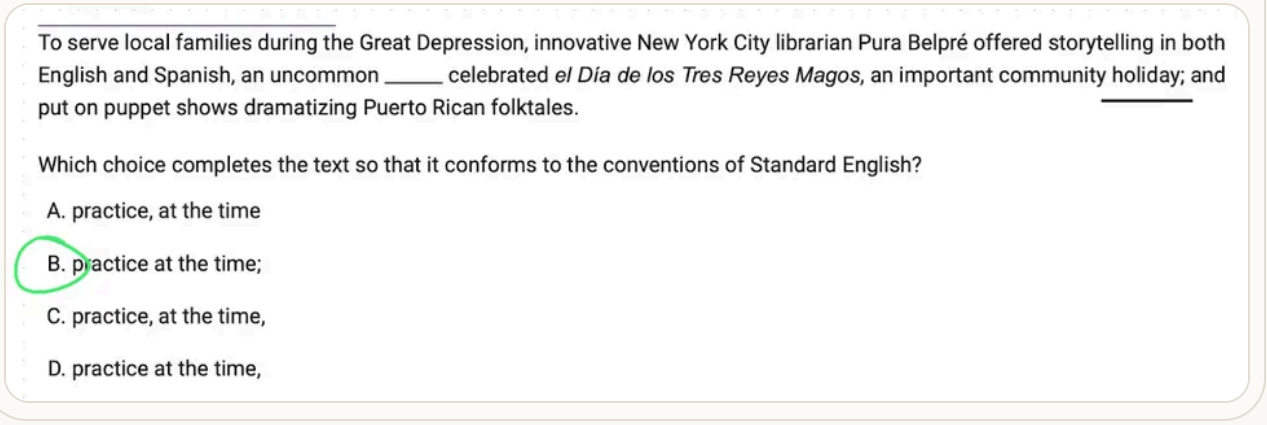
A. practice, at the time

B. practice at the time;

C. practice, at the time,

D. practice at the time,



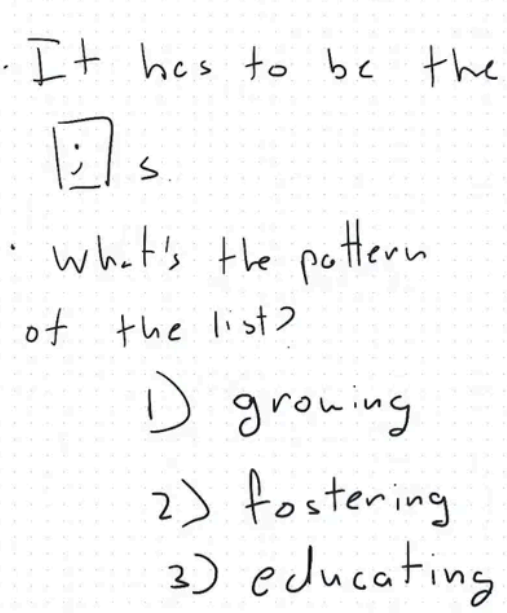


In this second example, we have two options that would result in two semicolons. Therefore, we need to follow the pattern: "...growing...; fostering...; and educating..."

The Arctic-Alpine Botanic Garden in Norway and the Jardim Botânico of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil are two of many botanical gardens around the world dedicated to growing diverse plant _____ fostering scientific research; and educating the public about plant conservation.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) species, both native and nonnative,
B) species, both native and nonnative;
C) species; both native and nonnative,
D) species both native and nonnative,



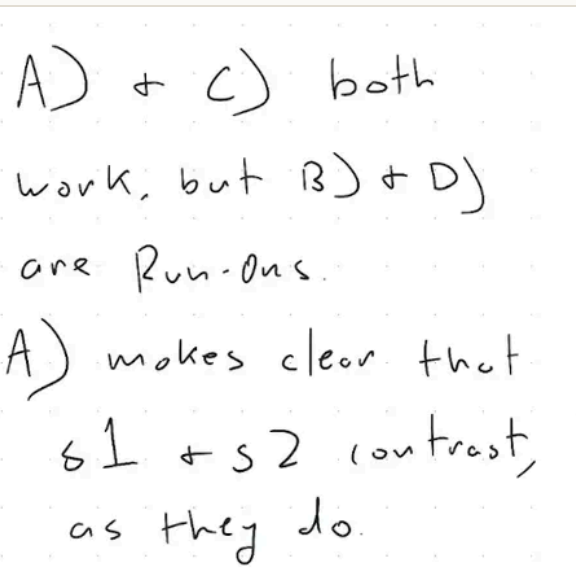
Two correct comp/comp answers (transitions). These questions will have two answer choices that are grammatically correct. They'll correctly link two completes. The question is really about which answer choice presents the transition word correctly. Think of them as having three statements. S1, S2, and S3. The question is whether S1 and S2 contrast, or whether S2 and S3 contrast. So far, it's always been S1 and S2.

Notice that answer choice C) would imply that the idea that her subsequent career was more than just solving equations contrasts with the idea that she helped usher in the digital age. Rather, it should be that the idea that she solved equations in the war contrasts with the idea that the rest of her career was about more than just equations. Choice A makes this clear.

In 1943, in the midst of World War II, mathematics professor Grace Hopper was recruited by the US military to help the war effort by solving complex equations. Hopper's subsequent career would involve more than just _____ as a pioneering computer programmer, Hopper would help usher in the digital age.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) equations, though:
B) equations, though,
C) equations. Though,
D) equations though



This example is the same: Choice A) indicates Okinaka sits on the review board, but that he doesn't make decisions on his own. Choice B) would imply that him not making decisions alone contrasts with the notion that all decisions are made collectively by a group of experts, which doesn't make sense.

Sociologist Alton Okinaka sits on the review board tasked with adding new sites to the Hawai'i Register of Historic Places, which includes Pi'ilanihale Heiau and the 'Ōpaeka'a Road Bridge. Okinaka doesn't make such decisions _____ all historical designations must be approved by a group of nine other experts from the fields of architecture, archaeology, history, and Hawaiian culture.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) single-handedly, however;
B) single-handedly; however,
C) single-handedly, however,
D) single-handedly however

A) + B) both work, but C) + D) are Run-Ons.
A) makes clear that s1 + s2 contrast, as they do.