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Review of Grammar Rules Frequently tested on the ACT

The English section of the ACT is extremely repetitive. The test makers ask you about the same grammar mistakes on every test. After doing examples from the book, make sure to look up the correct answers listed at the end of each test. Listen to the premium audio in order to receive additional explanations. Also, remember that you can use these rules not only to find correct answers, but also to get rid of incorrect answer choices through the process-of-elimination (which we use on the entire test).

Subject-Verb Agreement

The most common grammar mistake that students are tested on is subject-verb agreement. Here is an example:

The committee, made up of several women, are deciding on the school budget next week. No error.

A B C D E

The mistake is choice “C”. The subject of this sentence is “committee”, which is singular and therefore needs a singular verb. “Is” should replace “are” in this sentence. This sentence contains a clause. The clause is the fragment of the sentence between the two commas, and it separates the subject from the verb. Therefore, you are tricked to think that the verb (“are”) should agree with “women”. In this case, read the sentence and eliminate the clause, so that the subject and the verb come directly after each other. By doing this, you will be able to tell if the subject does not agree with the verb.

Here is a second example:

We enjoyed the brilliant sunshine of the beach so much that day that when we left there was only one couple and one lifeguard still there. No error.

A B C D E

The mistake is in choice C. “One couple and one lifeguard” is an example of a compound subject. A compound subject is when there is more than one person in the subject. A compound subject must always go with a plural verb. “Was” is a singular verb; “were” is a plural verb and should be used instead.

Special notes about Subject-Verb agreement:

1) The subject of the verb can never be in a prepositional phrase (a prepositional phrase begins with a preposition – at, in, on, by, with, of, within, about, around, through, etc.). (These phrases give additional information about a noun.)

Example: The schools in town is very nice.

This sentence is incorrect because “schools” is the subject of the sentence and is plural. Thus, “is” must be changed to “are.” We can immediately know that the “town” is not the subject because it follows the preposition “in” and is therefore part of a prepositional phrase. (In this sentence, the prepositional phrase answers the questions, “which schools?” The prepositional phrase tells us that we are talking about the schools in town). This technique can help with many subject-verb agreement questions.

2) The ACT very frequently puts the subject of the sentence in front of the word “of.”

Example: The benefits of exercise is numerous.

This sentence is incorrect because “is” should be “are.” The subject of the sentence is positioned just in front of the word “of.” Also, because “of” is a preposition, “exercise” cannot be the subject the sentence because it is in a prepositional phrase.

Examples to reference in the book “The Real ACT Prep Guide”: p.155 #22, p.156 #29, p.159 #47, p.162 #67, p.302 #62, p.438 #2, p.447 #68, p.723 #24, p.724 #31

Subject-Pronoun Agreement

Another grammar mistake they ask about constantly is subject-pronoun agreement. This is a lot easier to understand than it sounds. An example will help you understand exactly what to look out for:

A smart tennis player such as Samantha is someone who knows how to
move around the court, can hit winners at the net, and controls their emotions. No error.
A B C D E

The mistake is in choice D. “Their” is a plural pronoun. The antecedent, and subject in the sentence, “player”, is singular. Instead of using “their”, the sentence should have used “her” as the pronoun.

Examples to reference in the book “The Real ACT Prep Guide”: p.156 #33, p.301 #54, p.443 #37, p.445 #50, p.579 #25, p.585 #65, p.725 #33

Unclear Pronouns

An unclear pronoun refers to a pronoun found in a sentence where it is unclear as to what the pronoun is referring to.

Example 11: Sarah and Karen were enjoying the hike up the mountain until she felt ill and they
had to turn back for home. No error.
A B C
D E

The mistake in this sentence is choice “C” because it is unclear as to whether the pronoun “she” is referring to Sarah or Karen.

Examples to reference in the book “The Real ACT Prep Guide”: p.293 #9, p.294 #21, p.583 #49, p.727 #51

Proper Verb Tense

The ACT also tests students on proper verb tense. Here is a sentence that contains an improper verb tense:

The three coaches decided not to pick the team right after practice that day, but they do talk on
the phone and made the final decisions that night. No error.
A B C
D E

This entire sentence is written in the past tense. For example, “decided” is a verb used when something happened in the past. Choice C contains the mistake because “do” is in the present tense. “Do” should be changed to “did.”

Examples to reference in the book “The Real ACT Prep Guide”: p.153 #13, p.154 #14, p.154 #17, p.158 #44, p.159 #48, p.292 #3, p.297 #33, p.301 #59, p.446 #58 and #61 and #62, p.447 #70, p.577 #7, p.579 #23, p.581 #39, p.721 #8, p.726 #42, p.727 #46 and #47 (“would of” is always incorrect), p.729 #64

Redundancy

The ACT loves to test us on redundancy. There will be 3-5 questions on every ACT English section that test on this topic.

Example: The bank robbers, who stole money from the bank, were quickly apprehended by the police.

This sentence is incorrect because we have already labeled the robbers as “bank robbers”; thus, pointing out that they stole money from a bank is unnecessary and redundant.

Examples to reference in the book “The Real ACT Prep Guide”: p.153 #9, p.154 #20, p.156 #35, p.157 #37, p.160 #55, (p.162 #66 - correct as is), p.297 #34, p.299 #43, p.302 #68, p.439 #9, p.440 #16, p.444 #41, p.445 #49, p.446 #59, p.447 #67, p.578 #12, p.586 #66 and #68, p.720 #3, p.725 #39, p.730 #71

Separating Independent Clauses

An independent clause is a group of words that can form its own sentence. When two groups of words that can form their own sentences meet, then we either need to separate them with a period, a semi-colon, or a common *and* a conjunction.

Example: Many people want to know how to succeed, it is achieved by hard work.

This sentence is incorrect because both phrases that are separated by a comma could form their own complete sentence. In the first half, the subject “people” and the verb “want” are enough to make this a complete thought. In the second half, the subject “it” and the verb “is” also make this clause a complete thought on its own. Here are our options:

1. Form two different sentences by inserting a period. (“Many people want to know how to succeed. Success is achieved by working hard.”)
2. Inserting a semi-colon. (“Many people want to know how to succeed; it is achieved by working hard.”)
3. Inserting a common *and* a conjunction. (“Many people want to know how to succeed, and they can succeed by working hard.”)
4. Or, we can significantly alter the sentence; often this includes turning an independent clause into a dependent clause (which cannot stand on its own and is not a complete thought). (“Many people want success, which is achieved by working hard.”)

Examples to reference in the book “The Real ACT Prep Guide”: p.301 #55, p.439 #5 p.443 #40, p.578 #16, p.578 #22, p.581 #36 and #37, p.722#16, p.726 #41, p.729 #59

Active vs. Passive Voice

This is a grammatical concept with which most students are unfamiliar. But, it is helpful to know for the ACT and for writing for the rest of your life. 90% of your sentences should be written in active voice. (This grammatical construction will make your writing clearer and stronger. Sometimes you will have to write some sentences in passive voice, but this will be a minority of cases.) In most cases, answers in passive voice on the ACT will be wrong, and the correct answer will be in active voice. (This does not mean that all answers in active voice are correct, but simply that you can typically eliminate answers that are in the passive voice.)

Active Voice:

When the subject does the action, we say that the sentence is in active voice.

Example: Bobby hit the ball.

Bobby is the subject, and he physically did the action of hitting.

Passive voice:

When the subject does not do the action or when the action is done to the subject of the sentence, then the sentence is in passive voice.

Example: The ball was hit by Bobby.

In this construction, the ball is the subject, but it is not doing the action of hitting. In fact, the action was done to it.

Examples to reference in the book "The Real ACT Prep Guide": p.153 #12, p.156 #34, p.302 #66, p.303 #73, p.443 #35

Opening Clause without a Subject

If a sentence begins with a clause set apart from the sentence and does not have a clear subject, then the subject of this clause must come after the comma. Here's an example:

Example: Driving down the street, the tree looked beautiful to me.

This sentence is incorrect because the opening clause (which is set apart from the sentence by a comma and does not have a clear subject) is not followed by the subject of the clause. After reading "driving down the street," the first question we could ask is, "who was driving down the street?" The tree could not have driven down the street; thus, we need to rearrange the sentence to make it correct. It should read: "Driving down the street, I saw a beautiful tree." "I" is the subject of the opening clause. Spotting these clauses and realizing that the subject of these clauses must follow can help you narrow down answer choices very quickly.

Note: Sometimes the makers of the ACT will try to trick you by including one of these questions with a possessive.

Example: After shopping at the mall, Theresa's shopping bags were full and her purse was empty.

This sentence is incorrect because it makes it sound as if the "shopping bags" were the ones shopping at the mall. Instead, Theresa needs to be the subject. (One helpful way to recognize this is that "Theresa's shopping bags" can be re-worded as "the shopping bags of Theresa." This re-wording helps us see that then the sentence would read: After shopping at the mall, the shopping bags of Theresa were full and her purse was empty. The latter sentence is, of course, incorrect. The sentence should read: After shopping at the mall, Theresa had filled her shopping bags and emptied her purse. This way the subject of the opening clause, "Theresa," immediately follows the opening clause without a clear subject. (It is very unlikely that the possessive will be the correct answer for these types of questions.)

Examples to reference in the book "The Real ACT Prep Guide": p.155 #28, p.294 #12, p.579 #19, p.724 #27

Parallel Sentence Structure

A third grammar concept that is commonly tested on the SAT writing section is called parallel sentence structure. Here is an example of a sentence with a mistake in parallel sentence structure.

In a survey of the school's fifth graders, playing in gym class, painting in art
A
class, participating in science labs and lunch time were all mentioned repeatedly as
B C

favorite activities in school. No error.
D E

In this sentence, "lunch time" should be changed to "eating lunch." Each of the items that the fifth graders mentioned start with an "-ing" word. This is called parallel sentence structure. Each item in a series should be written in the same grammatical form.

Examples to reference in the book "The Real ACT Prep Guide": p.295 #23, p.301 #57, p.303 #71, p.441 #24, p.442 #28, p.444 #44, p.445 #52, p.581 #40, p.721 #9 and #12, p.728 #56

Who/whom

Students are often tested on when to use "who" and when to use "whom." Here is an example:

I wish to know exactly who she will be seeing tomorrow.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. whom
- C. to whom
- D. the person is who

The correct answer is B. A good strategy is to change the sentence around: Would a person say "She will be seeing him" or would a person say "She will be seeing he"? Obviously, in this case, a person would say "She will be seeing him." Wherever you can substitute "him",

Examples to reference in the book "The Real ACT Prep Guide": p.152 #3, p.156 #31, p.300 #47

It's/its

Students are often tested on when to use "it's" and when to use "its". Here is an example:

The rabbit began licking it's paw.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. its
- C. its'
- D. it's right

The correct answer is B. The word "its" is a possessive adjective. When you want to say "its paw" or "its claw" or "its tail", you use "its." The word "it's" means "it is". For example, if you wanted to say "it's going to rain" or "The book is on the end of the shelf. It's about to fall."" Choice C is never correct because there is no such word as "its'."

Examples to reference in the book "The Real ACT Prep Guide": p.294 #17, p.581 #31, p.723 #19

Transitional Phrases

Students are often asked to identify effective transitions between sentences or paragraphs. We use different types of transitional words, or phrases, to appropriately link ideas. Let's take a look at the different kinds of transitional words and how they should be used.

-Signaling addition

I have a degree in economics; and also, I have six years experience working for a bank.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. furthermore
- C. on the other hand
- D. thus

The correct answer is B. Using a transition word here adds clarity and flow to the sentence. Choice C implies that the word "experience" is in contrast to the degree. This changes the meaning of the sentence entirely. The work experience is in addition to the degree. Choice D suggests that the degree is completely responsible for the work experience, which again changes the meaning of the sentence.

-Signaling comparison

Last week I was given the opportunity to preview a movie well before it hit theatres; likewise, a friend of mine often previews new music before release to the general public.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. while
- C. also important
- D. to this end

The correct answer is A. Likewise is the perfect transitional word in this circumstance. Previewing a new movie is very similar to previewing new music and the word "likewise" accurately portrays this relationship. The other answer choices change the meaning of the sentence in one way or another.

-Signaling contrast

Since I studied very hard for the exam, I did not manage to pass.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. Because
- C. When
- D. Although

The correct answer is D. We need a word that clearly indicates that studying hard did not result in a positive result. Choice B implies that failing to pass the exam was the desired result- no one studies hard to fail an exam, right? Choice C suggests that these events occurred in the past but fails to create the appropriate contrast between studying and the exam result.

Examples to reference in the book "The Real ACT Prep Guide": p.161 #62, p.293 #6, p.293 #8, p.298 #39, p.301 #58, p.303 #70, p.444 #48, p.446 #57, p.577 #9, p.584 #54, p.728 #57 and #58, p.729 #61 ("From... to..."), p.731 #73 and #74