



Happy summer! As we pack up our red pens and start thinking about next year’s lesson plans, here’s a quick walkthrough of one way to explain a construction that many students find particularly vexing.

Although most people think of the famous Polish astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, as the progenitor of Heliocentrism, the first astronomer to propose that the sun revolves around the Earth was actually Aristarchus of Samos, who had made the same hypothesis eighteen centuries earlier.

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus,
- C) astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus
- D) astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus

The first issue to address is always that many students simply address these problems by sounding them out and picking the answer that “sounds” best to their inner ears. If you’ve attended PD with A-List, you already know that students must be primed to think about his test intellectually, rather than instinctually, and that a top-scoring student is going to take the time to consider and analyze every single punctuation mark.

The way that I always train students to think about these types of problems is to read the paragraph, make sure that they understand the content, and then parse each sentence for structure. Students sometimes ask me why they have to actually try to understand the sentence¹. The point of grammar is to clarify meaning, so if you don’t think about an author’s intended meaning, how can you possibly determine the most effective grammatical strategy?

The content here has a bit of funky vocabulary, so some students might on their first reading only understand that most people think of Nick C-whatever as something, but Ari-whatever of Samos did the same thing earlier. Students *should* be able to pluck the definition of “Heliocentrism” from the context, but some classrooms may need that practice explicitly modeled, and if I were working on this particular problem I would certainly give them that opportunity. “Progenitor” might or might not be possible to fully get from the context depending on the student, but I always use words like these as opportunities to remind students to use roots to help them with vocab.

Next, we parse the sentence structurally. It starts with a subordinate clause²: the conjunction “although” followed by our first clause, “most people think”. We then have a prepositional phrase (“of the famous astronomer”), an appositive modifier (“Nicolaus Copernicus”), and another pair of prepositional phrases (“as the progenitor” “of Heliocentrism”). These all make up our first clause, and while one doesn’t strictly NEED to parse the rest of the sentence in order to solve the problem, the whole point of doing this work is to practice these processes. Until parsing structure becomes automatic for students (and even afterward!), deep dives cannot hurt anything and will very likely help. The next clause is independent with a handful of prepositional phrases and a restrictive dependent clause dropped in the middle (“the first astronomer *to* propose [that the sun revolves *around* the Earth] was

¹ Usually with a dramatic sigh.

² I generally do not spend time discussing the differences between coordinate and subordinate conjunctions, but some students may ask.

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actually Aristarchus *of Samos*”), and we end the sentence with a relative clause (“who had made the same hypothesis eighteen centuries earlier”).

Now that we have the structure of the sentence, the problem itself is a snap. We can see from looking at the answer choices that this question is about comma use, and we have already identified the underlined portion as an appositive, a noun or noun phrase which shares the same grammatical function as the structure it is next to³. Students should know *intellectually* that there are two types of apposition: restrictive and non-restrictive. In a nutshell, a restrictive phrase is necessary to understand the clause and a non-restrictive phrase is not. A non-restrictive phrase may be offset from the core sentence by a pair of commas, a pair of dashes, or a pair of parentheses. A restrictive phrase may not. The shortcut is to ask, “Does this sentence make sense without the appositive?” If it does, then the commas are appropriate. In this case, we have an error; “most people think of the famous Polish astronomer as the progenitor of Heliocentrism” wouldn’t make sense because the article “the” indicates that this clause is about one specific famous Polish astronomer, but without his name we can’t know which astronomer we are discussing. As a result, we can’t use a pair of commas there⁴.

At this point, a savvy student is done with the problem. Since it is grammatically correct to remove both of those commas, the correct answer is C. HOWEVER, many students are going to be tempted to read through the other options and think about each one and how it sounds. We went to all this trouble just to prevent doing exactly that! Don’t muck it up now! If a comma isn’t part of a pair surrounding a non-essential modifier/appositive or sentence adverb, a single comma can only be used to separate clauses, between coordinate adjectives, between items in a list of three or more, or to indicate a direct quotation. Since we don’t have any of those structures here, no commas would be acceptable.

Students do not need to put in this much thought on every single problem, but if they learn the nomenclature and practice parsing sentences in this way, this test becomes extremely easy because their instincts will become tuned to look for form. More importantly, their abilities to proofread written English and to skillfully use formal structures to communicate will improve dramatically.

³ The old shibboleth that one should never end a sentence with a preposition was first proscribed by the late 17th century poet and literary critic John Dryden because Latin sentences cannot end with prepositions, but it turns out that Latin and English are actually not the same language. Also, yes, I used an appositive phrase to define itself. Meta.

⁴ If the article were not “the” but were instead “a,” the clause would read “most people think of a famous Polish astronomer as the progenitor of Heliocentrism,” which would be perfectly acceptable. In fact, this construction would *require* commas around Copernicus’ name.

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