

# A LIST

On the SAT and ACT, the Writing and Language/English tests are sections where a motivated student can very easily improve. However, they offer a common pitfall: many students don't think that they need to prepare for it! After all, since they speak English perfectly well, they should be able to do good on the test. I mean, "do well."

The vast majority of students approach these problems by reading each answer choice and picking the one that "sounds best" to their inner ear. This is not a terribly effective strategy because the writers of the tests deeply understand both the rules of grammar and the styles of common linguistic patterns. The point of the test is to determine whether or not a student understands the technical rules of English, not whether or not they have a good ear. For this reason, test-makers are masters of writing answer choices that are grammatically correct but "sound" wrong and vice versa.

The way to overcome this issue is to develop a confident and uncompromising understanding of the structural errors that plague the test. By studying the errors that frequently pop up, a student can learn to identify quickly and accurately the grammatically correct option(s) every single time. Take a look at this example:

According to Michaelson, a leading expert in Williamson-Grubb Theory, artificial appendixes have been shown to reverse the effects of diphenhydramine toxicity in experimental subjects, some **14** of them have gone on to make complete recoveries and live long, healthy lives.

14

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) subjects
- C) of whom
- D) DELETE the underlined portion

Our task is, first of all, to determine whether or not there is something wrong with the underlined portion. If there *is* something wrong, the next decision to be made is whether that underlined portion should be replaced with options B or C or deleted (answer choice D). The classic mistake that students make is to rely on their instincts to choose an answer that *feels* best. Working this way, some students may think that since they understand the passage as is, it doesn't need to be changed, others might consider replacing the pronoun phrase with the word "subjects" because the term is more specific, and yet others might think that deleting the underlined portion would be best in order to make the passage more concise. In most cases, students who try to answer this question using their instincts alone will be at best insecure and at worst conflicted.

The correct way to approach this question is to consider the fact that any correct answer fixes a specific error. The error that is actually made here is one of the most common structural errors on these tests: the comma splice, which is when two independent clauses (full ideas that could stand alone as their own sentences) are joined together with just a comma. The most common way to fix this error is to replace the offending comma with a semicolon or to split the two clauses into two separate sentences. However, since the comma itself is not underlined, we cannot fix this error that way and must change our second clause into something that is not so independent.

A student who has studied comma splices will immediately recognize that answer choices B and D are both also incorrect; if we replace "of them" with "subjects" or delete it entirely the clause will still make sense standing alone as its own complete sentence, so neither of those options fixes the error. This means that our correct answer must be C, which would likely be the last choice for many students who

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are not confident about when to correctly use “whom.” In fact, many students will immediately discount answer choice C because “whom” is infrequently correct! However, since it is a relative pronoun, “whom” instantly turns this phrase into a relative clause, which is perfectly acceptable to connect to an independent clause with a comma.

The takeaway is that students looking to improve their scores should simply study the rules! There are only a few rules that students must learn, and putting in the time can pay big dividends when it comes to improving one’s score.

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