

SEM Education Winter Session

SAT Punctuation Questions: When in Doubt, Leave It Out

For the SAT, if you're unsure if a sentence requires punctuation, it's better to leave out punctuation. Only use commas, semicolons, colons, or dashes if you identify a situation that requires them. You're more likely to miss a punctuation question by adding unnecessary punctuation than by leaving out punctuation that's needed.

EXAMPLE

increased 40 percent **26** . [3] A recent study by two professors at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Chris Wilmers and James Estes, **27** suggests, that kelp forests protected by sea otters can absorb as much as twelve times the amount of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere as those where sea urchins are allowed to **28** devour the kelp. [4] Like **29** their terrestrial plant

27

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) suggests—that
- C) suggests, “that
- D) suggests that

The comma before “that” is unnecessary. A common error on SAT punctuation questions is to randomly place a comma or semicolon within a sentence, especially in sentences in which there are other commas. In this sentence, **answer choice D is the correct answer**. No punctuation is needed. Remember that if punctuation isn’t needed, you should leave it out.

Now I’ll go over specific rules to help you determine when to use punctuation.

The 6 SAT Comma Rules

#1: Surround Non-Restrictive Clauses and Appositives With Commas

The key rule to remember here is that a portion of a sentence that can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence must be surrounded by commas.

Relative Clauses: Restrictive vs. Non-Restrictive

Relative clauses are dependent clauses that describe a noun and start with a relative pronoun or adverb like “who,” “that,” “which,” or “where.” The basic rule is that restrictive clauses shouldn’t be surrounded by commas and non-restrictive clauses should be.

What’s a Restrictive Clause?

Restrictive clauses are essential to the meaning of the sentence. You can’t take a restrictive clause out of a sentence without significantly changing the meaning of the sentence. Here’s an example:

People who sleep well are more alert.

If you remove the clause “who sleep well,” the meaning of the sentence would be substantially changed. You’d be left with “People are more alert.” Because you can’t remove the clause without changing the meaning of the sentence, the clause shouldn’t be surrounded by commas.

What’s a Non-Restrictive Clause?

A non-restrictive clause isn’t essential to the meaning of the sentence. If you got rid of the clause, the sentence would still make sense, and its meaning wouldn’t change. Here’s an example sentence with the non-restrictive clause underlined.

Nate, who works as a software engineer, majored in computer science.

The clause “who works as a software engineer” adds more information about Nate, but if it were removed, the meaning of the sentence would be the same. There would be less information about Nate, but the sentence still states that he majored in computer science. This is what the sentence looks like after removing the non-restrictive clause:

Nate majored in computer science.

What Is an Appositive?

An appositive is a descriptive phrase that doesn't include a verb. Like a non-restrictive clause, an appositive can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. Here's an example sentence with the appositive underlined:

Torsha, a fan of celebrity gossip, loves watching *The Wendy Williams Show*.

If we get rid of the appositive, the sentence still has the same meaning:

Torsha loves watching *The Wendy Williams Show*.

If you're unsure if a phrase is an appositive, eliminate the phrase. If the meaning of the sentence is unchanged, the descriptive phrase is an appositive that should be surrounded by commas.

The rule that appositives must be surrounded by commas is one of the most often tested comma rules on the SAT.

SAT Example

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- A) NO CHANGE
- B) Box an associate professor of geology at Ohio State,
- C) Box, an associate professor of geology at Ohio State,
- D) Box, an associate professor of geology, at Ohio State

Because the only difference in the answer choices is the placement of commas, we know this question is testing our knowledge of comma rules. In this sentence, the phrase “an associate professor of geology at Ohio State” is an appositive. The phrase describes Jason Box, and it can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.

All we have to do is apply the rule that appositives must be surrounded by commas. The error in the original sentence is that there is no comma after “Ohio State.” **The correct answer is C.** There is no comma before the appositive in answer choice B, and answer choice D places a comma within the appositive unnecessarily, and there isn’t a comma at the end of it.

#2: Use Commas After Introductory Phrases or Clauses

Any time a sentence starts with a dependent clause or modifying phrase, it must be followed by a comma. Here are some examples:

Although I want to go to Hawaii for Joe’s wedding, I have to work.

In high school, Suzy was the class clown.

Unable to focus because of the loud construction work outside, Harry went to the library to study.

SAT Example

On the SAT, a sentence may include an introductory dependent clause or phrase, and you have to select the proper punctuation that follows the introduction. Only a comma can come after an introductory phrase or clause that isn’t a complete sentence.

steady and lucrative position for women. Living
independently and demonstrating an intense work
21 ethic; the Harvey Girls became known as a
transformative force in the American **22** West.

21

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) ethic:
- C) ethic, and
- D) ethic,

The introductory phrase, from “Living” to “ethic,” modifies the Harvey Girls. Because the phrase isn’t a complete sentence, meaning it can’t stand alone as a sentence, we must put a comma at the end of the phrase. **The correct answer is D.** Answer choice C is wrong because the addition of “and” makes the sentence incorrect. When an introductory phrase describes a noun, the noun being modified must come directly after the comma. In this sentence, the phrase is modifying the Harvey Girls.

#3: Use Commas to Separate Items in a List

You’re probably familiar with this comma rule: **in lists of three or more items, you must place a comma after every item except the last.** Check out this example:

During spring break, my days will consist of eating, watching Netflix, and sleeping.

The three items on the list are “eating,” “watching Netflix,” and sleeping. Because there are three items, there are commas after the first two. The last comma in the list before “and,” known as the oxford comma, is technically optional, and you won’t be tested on whether or not to use it. However, every list question I’ve seen uses the oxford comma.

Here’s another example:

Participation in sports teaches many important values, including perseverance, teamwork, and dedication.

The three items on this list are “perseverance,” “teamwork,” and “dedication.” On the SAT, there may be incorrectly placed commas placed before the first item or after the “and” prior to the last item. In the sentence above, you can’t place a comma after “including” or before “dedication.”

Incorrect: Participation in sports teaches many values, including, perseverance, teamwork, and dedication.

Incorrect: Participation in sports teaches many values, including perseverance, teamwork, and, dedication.

Correct: Participation in sports teaches many values, including perseverance, teamwork, and dedication.

decomposes. [6] Yogurt manufacturers, food
4 scientists; and government officials are also
working together to develop additional solutions for
reusing whey. 5

- 4
- A) NO CHANGE
 - B) scientists: and
 - C) scientists, and
 - D) scientists, and,

As we know, items in a list must be separated by commas. The three items in this list are "yogurt manufacturers," "food scientists," and "government officials." The semicolon in the original sentence is being used incorrectly. In answer choice D, there is an unnecessary comma placed after "and." **The correct answer is C.**

#4: Don't Use Commas to Separate Complete Sentences

Using a comma to separate two complete sentences creates a grammar error known as a **comma splice**. Here's an example of a comma splice:

Dorothy failed her test, it was extremely difficult.

The clauses before and after the comma are complete sentences that could stand alone as sentences. There are a few ways to correct a comma splice. You can put a conjunction after the comma:

Dorothy failed her test, but it was extremely difficult.

Also, you can put a relative pronoun after the comma:

Dorothy failed her test, which was extremely difficult.

Finally, you can use a semicolon or colon to correctly separate two complete sentences:

Dorothy failed her test; it was extremely difficult.

Dorothy failed her test: it was extremely difficult.

Next, take a look at a comma splice example from the real SAT.

SAT Example

treatment. [6] Take Bartlett **29** pears, for instance, unless they are treated with exactly the right amount of 1-MCP at exactly the right time, they will remain hard and green until they rot, and consumers who experience this will be unlikely to purchase them again. **30**

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- A) NO CHANGE
- B) pears, for instance:
- C) pears for instance,
- D) pears. For instance,

The comma after “instance” is incorrect because the clauses before and after the comma are complete sentences. Answer choice C is still a comma splice. Answer choice D is wrong because the resulting sentences don’t make sense in context. **The correct answer is B.** A colon comes after a complete sentence, and it sets up a list or explanation. In this sentence, an explanation follows the colon. Even if you were unsure of colon rules (which I’ll explain later), you could have selected the right answer by eliminating wrong answer choices.

#5: Don’t Use a Comma Between an Adjective and a Noun

You can’t place a comma between an adjective and noun. Check out this example sentence:

Incorrect: Trista bought a blue, truck.

Correct: Trista bought a blue truck.

On the SAT, this comma rule tends to come up when a title is being used as an adjective before a noun. Here are a couple of examples:

Incorrect: I enjoy reading the books of acclaimed writer, Malcolm Gladwell.

Correct: I enjoy reading the books of acclaimed writer Malcolm Gladwell.

Many people incorrectly assume there should be a comma; however, in this sentence, “writer” is describing Malcolm Gladwell, and you can’t place a comma between an adjective and a noun.

Similarly, if the title comes before a possessive noun, there shouldn’t be a comma after the title or the possessive. Check out this example:

Incorrect: You are extremely excited to read PrepScholar writer, Justin Berkman’s next article.

Incorrect: You are extremely excited to read PrepScholar writer Justin Berkman’s, next article.

Correct: You are extremely excited to read PrepScholar writer Justin Berkman’s next article.

SAT Example

12 On one hand, I couldn’t wait to view **13** painter,
Georges Seurat’s, 10-foot-wide *A Sunday Afternoon on*
the Island of La Grande Jatte in its full size. It took me by

13

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) painter, Georges Seurat’s
- C) painter Georges Seurat’s,
- D) painter Georges Seurat’s

Remember that there shouldn't be a comma after a title used as an adjective or a possessive noun. In this sentence, there are commas placed after both "painter" and "Georges Seurat's." We need to remove the commas to correct the sentence. Only **answer choice D** removes both unnecessary commas.

Semicolons on the SAT

The only thing you have to know about semicolons is that **they are used to separate two complete sentences**. You should be able to replace the semicolon with a period and have two complete sentences. Here's an example:

Incorrect: Because Jesse is my friend; I invited him to my party.

Correct: Jesse is my friend; I invited him to my party.

The second sentence is correct because the semicolon is separating two independent clauses. On the SAT, semicolons are often used incorrectly.

SAT Example

higher levels of carbon dioxide in the air. But they suggest that the presence of otters provides a good model of how carbon can be sequestered, **33** or removed; from the atmosphere through the management of animal populations. If ecologists can better understand what

33

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) or removed from,
- C) or, removed from,
- D) or removed, from

Immediately, we know that the semicolon is incorrect because the phrase after the semicolon can't stand alone as a sentence. Now we have to determine the correct comma placement. Answer choices B and C are wrong because you can't place a comma after a preposition. **Answer choice D is correct**; the comma separates the independent clause from the explanatory phrase. Keep in mind that commas often separate independent clauses from dependent clauses or descriptive phrases.

Colons on the SAT

Colons can connect two independent clauses, but they're usually used to introduce lists and explanations. **Colons must come after a complete sentence.** You should be able to put a period in place of the colon and have a sentence that makes sense.

Incorrect: Jasmine brought everything she needed for the exam, including: pencils, a backpack, and a calculator.

Correct: Jasmine brought everything she needed for the exam: pencils, a backpack, and a calculator.

The first sentence is incorrect because the part that comes before the colon isn't a complete sentence.

Also, a colon should be used instead of a comma to separate a noun from items on a list:

Incorrect: Lewis was excited to meet his relatives, his aunt, uncle, and cousins from the Bahamas.

Correct: Lewis was excited to meet his relatives: his aunt, uncle, and cousins from the Bahamas.

The first sentence makes it seem like "his relatives" is part of the list. However, all of the people he is meeting are his relatives, and the portion after the colon lists the relatives whom he will be meeting.

Additionally, **colons can be used to provide explanation.** Here's an example:

Sandy repeatedly complained about her least favorite restaurants: places where you can often hear loud conversations and crying babies.

In the above sentence, the colon is placed after a complete sentence, and the portion of the sentence after the colon describes the type of restaurants that Sandy dislikes.

Today's researchers have found that the veritable army of trained volunteers traveling the country conducting face-to-face interviews can sometimes be **29** replaced by another army the vast array of individuals volunteering details about their lives—and, inadvertently, their language—through social media. Brice Russ of Ohio State

29

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) replaced—by another army,
- C) replaced by another army;
- D) replaced by another army:

The portion of the sentence after “army” describes the other type of army. We need punctuation to separate the complete sentence up until “army” from the phrase elaborating on this group of people. Answer choice C is incorrect because the phrase following “army” isn’t a complete sentence, and answer choice B is wrong because the dash before “by” is unnecessary (I’ll explain dashes next). **The correct answer is D.**

Dashes on the SAT

Dashes aren’t very common on the SAT, but they do come up. They can be used to mark off a non-essential clause or phrase (like a comma) or introduce a list or explanation (like a colon).

If dashes are used with non-essential clauses or phrases, you can’t mix them with commas. **You have to go with either two dashes or two commas.** Here’s an example:

Incorrect: Ryan, an energetic teenager—can’t sit still during class.

Correct: Ryan—an energetic teenager—can’t sit still during class.

Correct: Ryan, an energetic teenager, can’t sit still during class.

This is an example using a dash like a colon to set up an explanation:

Correct: Ryan can’t sit still during class—he’s an energetic teenager.

Lastly, a dash can be used for stylistic reasons to interrupt a statement or create a dramatic pause. Check out this example:

Byron spent hours painting a beautiful picture—and then his little brother destroyed it.

You don’t have to worry too much about using dashes for this type of sentence. If a dash is the correct answer in a similar sentence, then you’ll be able to eliminate the other answer choices because they’ll be obviously incorrect.

of their own species to those of other species. Indeed,
when we think about animals depicted in well-known
works of art, the image of dogs playing
poker—popularized in a series of paintings by American
artist C. M. **35** Coolidge, may be the first and only one
that comes to mind. Yet some of the earliest known

35

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) Coolidge—
- C) Coolidge;
- D) Coolidge

The phrase from “popularized” to “Coolidge” is a non-essential phrase. You can get rid of the phrase without altering the meaning of the sentence. The error is that the phrase is first marked off with a dash and then a comma. Remember that you can’t mix dashes and commas when marking off non-essential phrases and clauses. Therefore, **to maintain consistency, the correct answer is B.**

The Most Important Rules and Strategies for SAT Punctuation

Because we’ve gone over a number of punctuation rules and ways to correct punctuation errors, **I’m going to sum up the most important points to help you correctly answer SAT Writing punctuation questions.**

Important Rules

- Surround appositives and non-essential phrases with commas.
- Use commas to separate items in a list.
- Don’t use commas in between two independent clauses.
- Semicolons connect two independent clauses.
- Colons come after a complete sentence and set up a list or explanation.
- Dashes can be used to mark off non-essential clauses or introduce lists and explanations.

Strategies

- Leave out punctuation unless you identify a situation that requires it.
- You’ll never be asked to choose between interchangeable punctuation marks: if two answer choices serve the same function, then both will be wrong.
- Use process of elimination to determine the right answer on punctuation questions. Many of the wrong answers will have errors that you’ll be quickly able to detect. Eliminating the wrong answers can sometimes be easier than choosing the right one.

Practice Questions

Try these practice questions using the knowledge you've acquired.

1. Studies show that children; who are physically active may perform better in the classroom.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. children,
- C. children
- D. children:

2. Last week, Theodore—who is an extremely conscientious student, won a \$10,000 scholarship; his parents are incredibly proud.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. student—won
- C. student won
- D. student: won

3. Julie was thoroughly confused: she couldn't figure out where she put her car keys.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. confused, she
- C. confused she,
- D. confused she

4. Paul was overcome with joy when he saw actor, Keanu Reeves, in the parking lot of a McDonald's restaurant.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. actor, Keanu Reeves
- C. actor: Keanu Reeves
- D. actor Keanu Reeves

5. I hurried home from school to find Max, my dog that I've had for five years chewing on my favorite pair of shoes.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. had, for five years chewing
- C. had for five years, chewing
- D. had, for five, years chewing

Answers: 1. C, 2. B, 3. A, 4. D, 5. C