

General Tips

1. There is no penalty for guessing, so fill in an answer for every question. Use an “educated guess” (eliminate any answers you can) where possible. Otherwise, pick randomly.
2. Often the correct choice is the “simplest” (often “shortest”) selection – check it first. Often, longer passages have redundant words (“wordiness”).

Grammar Tips

1. Read the underlined words first and decide (if you can) where the problem lies. You may find the answer immediately. Then expand outward: the words adjoining the underlined words, then the entire sentence.
2. For each clause underline the subject and the verb.
 - Is the verb missing?
 - Do the subject and verb agree in number (singular/plural)?
 - If there is a pronoun subject, does it agree with the verb (e.g., I do, you do, he/she/it does)?
 - Does the tense (present/past/future) of the verb match the rest of the sentence?
 - Passive voice: whenever possible, avoid “non-active” uses of verbs; e.g., “I drove the car” (active) rather than “The car was driven by me” (passive).
3. Circle each pronoun and its antecedent (if one exists) and connect with a line.
 - Does the pronoun match its antecedent in number (singular/plural)?
 - Does the pronoun have the right case (subject/object)? (e.g., he vs. him, we vs. us, they vs. them, etc.)
 - For interrogative pronouns (who, what, etc.) make sure they match the type of antecedent noun
 - Who → person, what → thing, where → place, when → time, why → reason, etc.
 - Are pronouns used consistently – e.g., you ... you, one ... one?
4. Parallel constructions – with a list of two or more items
 - Keep the verb form (as noun, verb, etc.) the same – e.g., “writing a book, placing a bet, and joining a club”; “to read a book, place a bet, and join a club”; “wrote a book, placed a bet, and joined a club”
5. Misplaced (dangling) or incorrect modifiers
 - If there is a long, descriptive, introductory phrase, then the noun that is described should usually immediately follow the phrase.
 - Remember: adjectives describe nouns (which, what kind of, etc.); adverbs describe verbs (how, why, when, where, how often, how much) and other adjectives/adverbs – most adverbs end in -ly.
 - Special cases: good (adjective) vs. well (adverb), less (amount) vs. few (number)
 - For comparative adjectives, two/both → better, worse, more <...>; for more than two → best, worst, most <...>.
6. Run-on sentence – when there are two primary sentences without a break between them
 - Connect with a semi-colon (“;”) if they are two related thoughts.
 - Connect with “and” or “but” if they are two independent thoughts.
 - Connect with a colon (“:”) if the second thought expands upon the first.

7. Tricky words

- Lie – lay – lain (to recline) vs. lay – laid – laid (to place or set)
- “Between A and B” vs. “among A, B, and C”; and “...traveled from Washington to Chicago...” (not “traveled between...”).
- Like (preposition) vs. as (used as a conjunction with a following clause containing a subject and verb); e.g., “He looks like a prince.” and “He looks as a prince would wish to look.”
- They’re (“They are”) vs. there (“over there”) vs. their (“it was their book”)
- It’s (“It is”) vs. its (“that is its last chance”)
- If (used when there is a condition to answer: e.g., “Let me know if the train ever arrives”) vs. whether (used when there is doubt: e.g., “I don’t know whether to hug him or hit him”)
- Different from (e.g., “the style of Monet is different from the style of Picasso”) vs. different to or different than (both wrong)
- Plurals of compound nouns (e.g., chairman of the board → chairmen of the board; attorney-general → attorneys-general; maid-of-honor → maids-of-honor; passer-by → passers-by)
- Principal (“she was the principal speaker” or “she was the high school principal”) vs. principle (“that sutra describes a principle of Buddhism”)

8. Punctuation

- **Look for commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, or apostrophes** in the underlined portion of the sentence.
- Commas are used usually to: separate an independent clause and a dependent clause; separate two independent clauses connected by a conjunction (and, but, etc.); separate a modifier from the rest of the sentence; or separate items in a list.
 - Although Mary wanted to leave town, her friends encouraged her to stay.
 - John hoped to study medicine in college, and he’ll next pursue a research degree.
 - My brother, who is a great athlete, swims daily.
 - Beth is a fine artist, an excellent equestrian, and an expert shot.
- Semicolons: to coordinate **two related independent clauses with equal ideas** without a conjunction but often with another connector (however, moreover, therefore, thus, then, etc.).
 - John hoped to study medicine in college; however, his best subject is literature.
- Colon: to separate a **concrete** (specific) list, explanation, or example **from** the more **general** independent clause.
 - The use is hardest for these punctuation marks: commas, colons, and semicolons.
 - The great books of literature are essential to a proper education: they give intellectual depth to the student.
- Dashes: to separate a list containing commas from the rest of the sentence or to show a change in direction or intent.
 - These writers – Melville, James, and Twain – are vital to an understanding of 19th Century American literature.
 - For every complex problem there is a solution that is simple, neat – and wrong.
- Apostrophes: used in contractions or a possessive noun.
 - These aren’t my shoes. These are Carol’s shoes.

Essay Tips

1. Standard essay format
 - Intro paragraph with thesis sentence and overview of examples to be presented; preferably, the thesis sentence should be the first or last sentence in the paragraph
 - 2 – 3 body paragraphs, each with topic sentence and 3 – 5 discussion sentences
 - Concluding paragraph to summarize and elaborate upon the thesis (tie together themes discussed in the preceding paragraphs)
2. Basic essay approach
 - First 3 – 5 minutes:
 - Read the Writing Test Prompt.
 - Brainstorm and make a decision (yes or no; agree or disagree)
 - Identify several examples that might be pertinent to your thesis; prioritize
 - Identify details for the 3 highest priority; either write a) a brief outline; b) a brief list of notes; or c) a content web (visual) for each high-priority example
 - Sketch the thesis sentence and draw a block around it – you’ll refer back repeatedly.
 - Next 23 – 25 minutes:
 - Write the intro paragraph on the answer sheet, including a final revised version of the thesis sentence (preferably as the first or last sentence in the paragraph). The intro paragraph should introduce (in some fashion) the upcoming high-priority examples you’ve picked.
 - Write two body paragraphs using your brainstorming/outline/web/notes.
 - If 10 minutes remain, write a short 3rd paragraph; update the intro paragraph as necessary. Writing the 3rd paragraph must not interfere with writing the concluding paragraph.
 - When 5 minutes remain, write a concluding paragraph that restates and elaborates upon the thesis sentence.
 - Final 2 - 3 minutes (if time permits).
 - Edit/correct – line out errors neatly.
 - General tips:
 - Be specific: don’t talk about general, abstract examples, events, people, etc. Instead, pick detailed items involving real people, real events, etc.
 - Be forceful: don’t “...believe that something is true...” or “...think that something is true...” Instead, state the information as if you were arguing for someone’s life in court.
 - Be consistent with your thesis: constantly review the thesis sentence as you a) find examples and b) write the paper. Always ask yourself “is the example/sentence I’m writing helping to defend my thesis?” If not, remove the example/sentence. Note: it is perfectly acceptable to bring up ideas that contradict your thesis – as long as you forcefully show how those contradictions are not sound.