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ACT English Study Guide

Subject-Verb Agreement

Students are frequently tested on subject-verb agreement. This concept is easier than it sounds. Here is an example:

The doctors in the urban veterinarian clinic is kept busy with many different animals throughout the day.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. is keeping
- C. has to be keeping
- D. are kept

The correct answer here is D. Since the subject, doctors, is plural (there is more than one doctor), the verb must be plural. "Are" is a plural verb. A person doesn't say the doctors is; we say the doctors are.

Don't be afraid of NO CHANGE!

The first answer choice is frequently "NO CHANGE." Many students tend to be skeptical of choosing this answer. Don't be! This answer is correct about 25% of the time. So don't think of "NO CHANGE" as a trick answer; it is often the correct choice.

Organization of Sentences

Students are frequently tested on the organization of sentences. Here is an example:

His room contains binders and folders that we must label, organize, fill and ship to the various member s of his team.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. folders- must
- C. folders that must
- D. folders, these we must

The correct answer here is A, leave the sentence how it is. In general, the best strategy is to read the sentence as it is. If it sounds OK, then leave answer choice A as a maybe and read the other choices in the underlined portion of the sentence. Choices B and C are no good because these choices leave out the subject, we. Choice D is no good because the comma separates the sentence in an awkward way.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Students are frequently tested on what's called pronoun antecedent agreement. This concept is easier than it sounds and it may be helpful to think of it as subject pronoun agreement. Here is an example:

Carla wants to ace all of the sections of the ACT, so to do really well on it she has been doing many practice tests.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. math
- C. their challenges
- D. them

The correct answer here is D, "them." The subject, "all of the sections" is plural so the pronoun must be plural as well. "Them" is a plural pronoun. "It" is a singular pronoun so Choice A can't be correct. By the way, another word for the subject of a pronoun is "antecedent." A good strategy is to draw an arrow from the pronoun to the proper antecedent (noun that comes before a pronoun) right on your test.

It's vs. 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'."

Eliminate any redundancy or repetition!

Students are frequently tested on sentences that are redundant or repetitive. Eliminate anything redundant! Less wordy is always better. Here is an example:

The intrepid duo faced great peril and danger.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. peril
- C. obstacles
- D. OMIT the underlined portion.

The correct answer is B. "Peril" and "danger" mean the same thing. Thus, "danger" is redundant so choice A is not correct. Choice C is not correct because "obstacles" is not the same as danger. Choice D is not correct because omitting the underlined portion leaves the sentence incomplete. By the way, look for the choice "OMIT the underlined portion." Because less wordy is better, this choice is often correct because it makes the sentence more concise.

Who vs. 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", the answer will be "whom." Wherever you can substitute "he", the answer will be "who." Also, "whom" goes with prepositions. For example, "to whom" or "from whom."

Parallel Verb Tense

Students are tested over and over on verb tense. Here is an example:

It is taking a long time to decide if I need to take that test. Countless hours of circumspection and meditation, discussions with my guidance counselor, and gut feelings led me nowhere.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. will lead
- C. will have led
- D. are leading

The correct answer is D. The first three words in the sentence "It is taking" indicate the present tense. Therefore, the verb that follows in the next sentence must also be in the present tense. This way, the verbs are parallel to each other. Choice A is not correct because "led" is the past tense.

Creating Concise Sentences

Students are often asked to make sentences more concise. The goal is to eliminate any unnecessary words while still maintaining the original meaning of the sentence. These types of questions are often referred to as "too wordy". Let's look at the example below.

My friend Eric was employed and now works for the company Wal-Mart.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. was employed
- C. now works
- D. employed to work

The correct answer is C. It is unnecessary to include the portion "was employed and" since stating that Eric "now works for" implies that he was hired. Choice B is incorrect because "was employed for the company" is not correct; the correct way would be "was employed by". Choice D makes very little sense: If Eric is employed, then we know that he is working.

Another example:

Last night I saw one of the most beautiful and attractive cars I had ever seen!

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. beautifully
- C. beautiful, attractive
- D. beautiful

The correct answer is D. The words beautiful and attractive mean the same thing. Using both words together is very repetitive. Only answer choice D maintains the meaning of the sentence while eliminating unnecessary words.

One final example:

In the event that there is an earthquake, you should hide underneath your desk until the shaking stops.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. If there
- C. The event
- D. What

The correct answer is B. We don't need to say "In the event that" in order to understand the sentence. Choice C implies that earthquake is used as an adjective rather than a noun—describing the event and not the actual event. Choice D changes the opening clause into a question; however, as you can see, we do not have the appropriate punctuation or logic to make that selection.

Read each sentence carefully and find any words that seem repetitive or clearly unnecessary. With some practice you should have no problem finding the right answer.

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.

These are only a few examples of how transitional words and phrases are used. Study the following lists to help better identify transitions and their intended meanings.

Transitions signaling addition

equally important	likewise	also
Besides	by the same token	and
Too	similarly	again
what is more	as well as	at the same time
in addition	further	moreover

Transitions signaling time

after; after a while	Earlier	thereafter	next
afterward	Before	until	then
as long as	in the past	in the future	meanwhile
as soon as	Lately	ultimately	at length

at last; finally	presently	first; first of all	later
formerly	Shortly	second; secondly	now
Since	so far	while	in turn
subsequently	simultaneously	in the meantime	

Transitions signaling comparison

similarly	likewise	also
at the same time	in the same way	in comparison
by the same token	in turn	in a like manner

Transitions signaling contrast

but at the same time	regardless	in contrast
Despite	though	conversely
even so	nonetheless	notwithstanding
even though	nevertheless	for all that
on the other hand	however	but
in spite of	yet	whereas
on the contrary	still	

Transitions signaling example

such as	for instance
in particular	an illustration of
to demonstrate	to illustrate