

ACT & SAT English & Reading: Strategy Guide

Both of these sections are designed so that the wrong answers sound reasonable. The strategies below share one core idea: **decide what you're looking for before you look at the choices.**

PART 1 English & Grammar

THE #1 RULE

Fix It First — then look at the answers.

Cover the answer choices with your hand. Read the sentence. Decide what's wrong and how *you* would fix it. **Only then** uncover the choices and find the one that matches your fix. The answer choices are written to make incorrect grammar sound natural — reading them first contaminates your ear before you've formed an opinion.

READ THE WHOLE SENTENCE — NOT JUST THE UNDERLINED PART

The underline tells you *where* to make a change, not *what* is wrong. The error is very often an agreement problem with a word that sits **outside** the underline — a subject five words back, a verb tense set in the previous clause, a pronoun whose noun is in the sentence before.

SEE IT IN ACTION

The collection of rare manuscripts donated by the historian were displayed in the east wing.

Looking only at the underline, "were" seems fine. Looking at the whole sentence, the subject is **collection** (singular) — everything between is a prepositional phrase.

Correct: was

"NO CHANGE" IS A REAL ANSWER

It's correct roughly a quarter of the time — exactly what you'd expect from one of four choices. Students talk themselves out of it because picking it feels like doing nothing. If the sentence is already correct and concise, **NO CHANGE** is the answer.

SHORTER USUALLY WINS

When two choices are both grammatically correct, the test prefers the concise one. Cut redundancy and filler: due to the fact that → because, in order to → to, at this point in time → now.

THE PROCESS, EVERY TIME

- 1 Read the **entire sentence**, underline included.
- 2 Cover the choices. Ask: is something actually wrong here?
- 3 Form your own fix — or decide it's already fine.
- 4 Uncover the choices and find your fix. If nothing matches, re-check what the underline is agreeing with.
- 5 All else equal, take the shortest correct option.

Don't "sound it out." Reading the four choices to see which one "sounds right" is the single most common way students lose points here. Casual speech breaks most of these rules routinely — your ear was trained on conversation, and the test knows it.

MOST COMMON ERRORS TESTED — ACT ENGLISH / SAT WRITING

ERROR	HOW TO CATCH IT
Comma splice / run-on	Two complete sentences joined by only a comma. Fix with a period, semicolon, or comma + FANBOYS.
Sentence fragment	No subject, no verb, or starts with a subordinator and never finishes the thought.
Subject-verb agreement	Cross out prepositional phrases between subject and verb, then re-read.
Pronoun agreement / ambiguity	Every pronoun needs one clear noun. If <i>it</i> or <i>they</i> could mean two things, that's the error.
Its / it's · their / there / they're	<i>it's</i> = it is. <i>its</i> = belonging to it. No apostrophe on possessive pronouns, ever.
Misplaced & dangling modifiers	An opening descriptive phrase must describe the noun immediately after the comma.
Parallel structure	Items in a list or comparison must share a form: <i>running, jumping, and swimming</i> .
Verb tense consistency	Don't switch tenses without a reason. Check against verbs in nearby sentences.
Nonessential clauses	If the phrase can be removed without changing meaning, it needs commas on <i>both</i> sides.
Semicolon vs. colon	Semicolon joins two complete sentences. Colon introduces a list or explanation after a complete sentence.
Apostrophes	<i>student's</i> = one · <i>students'</i> = many · <i>students</i> = just plural.
Transition words	Does the logic continue (<i>moreover</i>), contrast (<i>however</i>), or conclude (<i>therefore</i>)? Read both sentences.
Wordiness / redundancy	Delete repeated ideas: <i>past history, each and every, free gift</i> .
Comparison words	Two things → <i>more / better / fewer</i> . Three or more → <i>most / best</i> . Countable → <i>fewer</i> ; uncountable → <i>less</i> .

PART 2 Reading**GO TO THE QUESTIONS FIRST**

There are no bonus points for reading the passage. The questions tell you exactly which parts matter — so let them guide you through the passage instead of reading it cold and hoping you remember the right details. Most students scoring 30+ on Reading do not read the passage first.

LOCAL QUESTIONS BEFORE GLOBAL QUESTIONS

Local questions point to something findable — a line number, a name, a specific scene. **Global** questions ask about the whole passage — main idea, tone, author's purpose. Do all the local ones first. They act as guideposts to the parts the test writers cared about, and by the time you finish them you've read the passage's important sections. The global answers then become obvious.

The first question is often a Main Idea question. **Skip it** and come back.

THE FOUR STEPS FOR EVERY LOCAL QUESTION

- 1 Read the question. **Ignore the answer choices completely.**
- 2 Go to the reference in the passage.
- 3 Read around it until you can answer in your own words — your **personal answer**.
- 4 Now look at the choices and grade them against your answer. Eliminate what doesn't match.

option it read most recently.

THREE TRAPS TO RECOGNIZE

- **Extreme language** — *always, never, all, only, completely*. Passages rarely support absolutes.
- **Half-right** — the first half matches the passage, the second half adds something false. Read the whole choice.
- **Right words, wrong relationship** — real terms from the passage combined in a way it never claimed.