



SAT/ACT Punctuation Cheat Sheet



Important Tips

1 Attack the semicolon!

Always start with the punctuation mark that you know is being used correctly or incorrectly, and eliminate answer choices accordingly. Semicolons are the easiest to eliminate because they are used only in one way – to separate independent clauses.

2 Stuck? Identify the independent clause!

Identifying the independent clause can help to clarify the other parts of the sentence, such as nonessential clauses/phrases and dependent clauses.

3 Use The Pause Test!

If you are stuck on a comma question, read the answer choices you have not eliminated to yourself (try to hear it in your head!) and put extended pauses where the commas are. If the answer choice with no punctuation sounds correct, it probably is!



Clauses & Punctuation

Connecting Two Independent Clauses

Period

The boy did not go to school. He was tired.

Semicolon - this is the ONLY use of a semicolon on the ACT or SAT.

The boy did not go to school; he was tired.

On the SAT and ACT, the following items are functionally equivalent, which means that if there are no other differences in the answer choices, BOTH can be eliminated:

- A period and a semicolon
- Two dashes, two commas, or two parentheses
- One colon and one dash

Comma + FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So)

The boy did not go to school, and he was tired.

Colon or One Dash - either can be used to separate independent clauses, but they can also separate an independent clause from an explanation of that clause (the explanation can be independent, dependent, or just a phrase).

The boy did not go to school: he was tired.

The boy did not go to school — he was tired.



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Clauses & Punctuation

Nonessential Clauses and Phrases

To evaluate if a phrase is nonessential, take the phrase out of the sentence. If the meaning of the sentence does not change without it and is grammatically sound, then the phrase is nonessential and requires commas, dashes, or parentheses surrounding it.

Phrases beginning with prepositions and ‘that’ are always essential and do not require commas, unless (prepositional phrases only) they come at the beginning of a clause.

*The boy **on the hill** throws the ball.*

***On the hill**, the boy throws the ball.*

*That boy **that is tired** throws the ball.*

Phrases beginning with ‘w-words’ (which, who, where) are usually nonessential and require commas.

*The boy, **who is tired**, throws the ball.*

Transition words are always nonessential and require commas.

*The boy wanted to go to school; he, **however**, is tired.*

*The boy wanted to go to school; **however**, he is tired.*

*The boy wanted to go to school; he is tired, **however**.*



Other Comma Uses

To separate items in a list (apples, oranges, bananas, and peaches)

To separate adjectives **some of the time**.

Use the “And Test”! Insert the word “and” between the adjectives; if the “and” makes sense, a comma is required.

Switch the order of the adjectives. If it still makes sense, the comma is necessary.

The adorable, tiny puppy

The adorable spotted puppy



Colons

A colon always follows an independent clause and provides an explanation of the clause.

What follows a colon can be one word, a list of items, or even an independent clause.

The boy has one favorite class: Algebra 2.

My basketball team struggles to defend: we are giving up 125 points per game this season.



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Dashes

Two dashes = two commas

One dash = one colon.

Used like commas to separate out a nonessential clause/phrase.

The boy — who is tired — throws the ball.

Used like colons to explain an independent clause that came before it.

The boy has one favorite class — Algebra 2.



Apostrophes

Primarily used to indicate possession

Singular nouns and plural nouns not ending in s: add apostrophe + s at the end.

the child's dog, the children's lunches, Jess's book

Plural nouns ending in s: add apostrophe at the end

families' houses, players' lockers

Can also be used to indicate contractions

It's = it is, that's = that is, etc.

When used with pronouns, apostrophes are ALWAYS contractions.