



# ACT English Test

## 8 Punctuation Tips & Tricks

### 1. Always put a comma before “which”.

**The Rule:** On the ACT English Test, “which” is usually used at the beginning of a nonrestrictive clause. These clauses are always set off by commas, so you should always have a comma before “which”.

**INCORRECT:** The homework assignment that I turned in on time which took me forever to complete raised my grade in the class.

**CORRECT:** The homework assignment that I turned in on time, which took me forever to complete, raised my grade in the class.

### 2. Never put a comma next to “that”.

**The Rule:** The word “that” is normally used at the beginning of a restrictive clause, and therefore needs to be connected to the subject of the sentence without punctuation in between them.

**INCORRECT:** The homework assignment, that I forgot to turn in, lowered my grade in the class.

**CORRECT:** The homework assignment that I forgot to turn in lowered my grade in the class.

### 3. Two commas = two dashes.

**The Rule:** Both can set off a non-restrictive clause or appositive in a sentence, and are therefore interchangeable. You will not be given both options as answer choices on the ACT.

**CORRECT:** The downtown movie theater, an old brick building built in 1908, sells the tastiest popcorn.

## Glossary

### Nonrestrictive Clause (or Nonessential Clause)

An adjective clause that adds extra, nonessential information to a sentence. The meaning of the sentence would not change if this clause was deleted. It is usually set off by commas

*Ex: The basketball player, who played four years in college, dunked ferociously over his defender.*

### Restrictive Clause (or Essential Clause)

An adjective clause that helps to further identify the word that it is modifying. It would change the meaning of the sentence if deleted, and is never bracketed by commas.

*Ex: The basketball player that had a blonde afro dunked ferociously over his defender.*

### Appositive

A noun or noun phrase that describes a noun right before or after it. If after the noun, it will almost always be set off by commas.

*Ex: Beyoncé, a Houston native, made the best album of 2016.*

*Ex: A Houston native, Beyoncé made the best album of 2016.*

**CORRECT:** The downtown movie theater – an old brick building built in 1908 – sells the tastiest popcorn.

**MAJOR  ALERT!**

*The ACT focuses more on commas than on dashes. Appositive phrases frequently show up on the ACT English section, so make sure there are two commas around them!*

**MAJOR  ALERT!**

If you see a dash in the same sentence as the underlined portion, and you have a dash as an answer choice, then it is most likely the right answer!

**TRY IT!** The downtown movie theater – an old brick building built in 1908 sells the tastiest popcorn.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. 1908 – sells
- C. 1908; sells
- D. 1908: sells

#### 4. One dash = a colon.

**The Rule:** You can use either one to introduce extra information following an independent clause. The ACT will not make you distinguish between using a dash or a colon in the same question.

**CORRECT:** The football team faced one major problem: the quarterback’s untimely injury.

**CORRECT:** The football team faced one major problem – the quarterback’s untimely injury.

#### 5. A period = a semi-colon = a comma + conjunction.

**The Rule:** You can use any of these between two independent clauses. A semi-colon is more of a stylistic choice, but the ACT will not make you distinguish between a period, a semi-colon, and a comma + FANBOYS conjunction in the same question.

#### Independent Clause

A complete thought; A group of words that can stand by itself as a sentence. It must have a subject and a predicate.

#### Dependent Clause

A group of words that has a subject and a verb but cannot stand alone as a sentence because it does not contain a complete thought.

When combined with an independent clause, a dependent clause will always require a comma.

#### Coordinating Conjunction

A conjunction that connects words, phrases and clauses.

**For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So**



**INCORRECT:** My uncle recently bought a boat, we might take it to the lake this summer.

**CORRECT:** My uncle recently bought a boat. We might take it to the lake this summer.

**CORRECT:** My uncle recently bought a boat; we might take it to the lake this summer.

**CORRECT:** My uncle recently bought a boat, and we might take it to the lake this summer.

## 6. Commas and Prepositions

**The Rule:** Never put a comma after a preposition, and rarely put a comma before a preposition.

**INCORRECT:** Leonardo DiCaprio finally won an Oscar for, his lead role in *The Revenant*.

**INCORRECT:** Leonardo DiCaprio finally won an Oscar, for his lead role in *The Revenant*.

**CORRECT:** Leonardo DiCaprio finally won an Oscar for his lead role in *The Revenant*.

**The Exception:** There is a *very rare* circumstance where you can place a comma before a preposition. This is only when a preposition introduces a nonrestrictive clause.

**CORRECT:** Suzie, for whom I was waiting, showed up to my house very late.

## 7. Commas and multiple adjectives

**The Rule:** Put a comma between two adjectives if you can reverse their order. If you can't reverse their order, then do not put a comma between them.

**INCORRECT:** The strenuous, 10-mile hike took us hours to complete, but the view was worth it.

**CORRECT:** The strenuous 10-mile hike took us hours to complete, but the view was worth it.



**CORRECT:** The long, strenuous hike took us hours to complete, but the view was worth it.

**CORRECT:** The strenuous, long hike took us hours to complete, but the view was worth it.

**MAJOR 🔑 ALERT!**

Can't decide if it sounds right to switch the adjectives? Try putting an "and" between them. If "and" makes sense, then use a comma.

## **8. WHEN IN DOUBT, LEAVE THE COMMA OUT.**

More ACT punctuation questions have to do with removing unnecessary commas rather than adding them in. This holds true for other punctuation marks as well, such as colons and semi-colons. Use your best judgment and always ask yourself, "If I wrote this sentence, would I need to pause here?"

One of the best ways to prepare for the ACT English section is to study the grammar and punctuation rules in the **ESM ACT English Curriculum**. If you need a refresher on how to properly use punctuation marks, refer to **pages 18-22**.