

Chapter 13

About the SAT Writing and Language Test

Writing will be central to your postsecondary education, whether your plans involve college or some form of workforce training. Along with speaking and creating media, writing is a critical communication tool — one that you’ll use continually in a variety of ways both informal and formal. You may use notes, journaling, or the like to record information, to aid memory, and to clarify thoughts and feelings for yourself; you may also create essays, poems, reports, and so on to share information and ideas with others in a more structured, fully developed way.

In the latter cases, you’ll probably take each piece of writing through a variety of steps, from planning to polishing. Your writing process may differ from that of others, and your own process may change depending on the nature of the writing task, purpose, and audience (not to mention how much time you have), but revising your writing to improve the content and editing your writing to ensure that you’ve followed the conventions of standard written English are likely to be key parts of most projects. The SAT Writing and Language Test is designed to emulate these two tasks, assessing how well you can revise and edit a range of texts to improve the expression of ideas and to correct errors in sentence structure, usage, and punctuation.

The passages on the Writing and Language Test vary in purpose, subject, and complexity. Some passages (and possibly questions) will also include one or more informational graphics, such as tables, graphs, and charts, and you’ll be expected to use the information in these graphics to inform decisions about revising and editing the associated passage.

Unlike passages on the Reading Test (discussed in Chapter 8), passages on the Writing and Language Test are written specifically for the test; that way, we can more easily introduce “errors” — our general term for the various rhetorical and mechanical problems we assess on the test.

REMEMBER

On the SAT Writing and Language Test, you’ll be placed in the role of someone revising and editing the work of another writer.

You'll encounter the passages and questions in side-by-side columns, with each passage (spread over multiple pages) in the left-hand column and associated questions in the right-hand column. Question numbers embedded in the passages, along with other forms of annotation (especially underlining), let you know what part of the passage is being tested at any given point; in some cases, questions may ask about a passage as a whole.

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Getting a strong score on the Writing and Language Test is not about rote recall of language rules or knowing all about grammar. You'll instead need to consider context — often at the paragraph or passage level — when choosing your answer.

You'll be asked questions that deal with the expression of ideas in a passage — specifically, questions about development, organization, and effective language use. You'll also be given questions that require you to apply your knowledge of the conventions of standard written English to the passage — specifically, to recognize and correct errors in sentence structure, usage, and punctuation. All of the questions are based in multiparagraph passages, so each question has an extended context and no question requires the rote recall of language “rules.” As a group, the questions call on the same sorts of revising and editing skills that you're using already in your high school classes and that are important to have in order to be ready for and to succeed in college and workforce training programs.

The rest of this chapter offers a general description of the Writing and Language Test. The following two chapters go into more detail about the question types that are included on the test.

Writing and Language Test Format

Before we delve into the passages and questions, let's review the test format. Understanding how things work will help you get a quick start on test day and allow you to focus your full attention on answering the questions.

A sample of the Writing and Language Test format appears on the next page. Each passage will be headed by a title in boldface type. The passage itself will be spread across multiple pages (so, unless you're on the last question set on the test, don't assume that you've reached the end of a given passage until you see the title of the next one). The passage is positioned in the left-hand column of each page, and the questions related to the portion of the passage on that page appear in order in the right-hand column.

Most questions are “anchored” to a particular location in the passage via a boxed question number in the passage. Sometimes this boxed number will stand alone; in these cases, the associated question will tell you what to do, such as consider adding a sentence at that point. At other times, this boxed number will be followed by underlined text; for these questions, you'll have to consider which of four answer options results either in the most rhetorically effective expression in the context of the passage or in an expression that is correct in terms of standard written English sentence structure, usage, or punctuation.



REMEMBER

In many cases, a boxed question number as well as underlining specify the part of the passage that a particular question refers to.



REMEMBER

Some questions with an underlined portion may not include directions. For these questions, assume that your task is to select the answer that's the most effective or correct.

Questions 1-11 are based on the following passage.

A Life in Traffic

A subway system is expanded to provide service to a growing suburb. A bike-sharing program is adopted to encourage nonmotorized transportation. **1** To alleviate rush hour traffic jams in a congested downtown area, stoplight timing is coordinated. When any one of these changes **2** occur, it is likely the result of careful analysis conducted by transportation planners.

The work of transportation planners generally includes evaluating current transportation needs,

1

- Which choice best maintains the sentence pattern already established in the paragraph?
- A) NO CHANGE
 - B) Coordinating stoplight timing can help alleviate rush hour traffic jams in a congested downtown area.
 - C) Stoplight timing is coordinated to alleviate rush hour traffic jams in a congested downtown area.
 - D) In a congested downtown area, stoplight timing is coordinated to alleviate rush hour traffic jams.

2

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) occur, they are
- C) occurs, they are
- D) occurs, it is

While some questions with an underlined portion include a question-specific direction (as in question 1 above), others don't (as in question 2 above). When there are no additional directions, assume that you're to choose the option that's the most rhetorically effective in context or that results in a conventionally correct expression. If a question includes a "NO CHANGE" option — it'll always be the first answer choice — pick it if you think the original version presented in the passage is the best option; otherwise, pick one of the three alternatives.

You may come across some other forms of passage annotation as well. If the paragraphs in a passage or the sentences in a paragraph are numbered, one or more questions will refer to those numbers. You may be asked, for example, to consider where a particular sentence should be placed (e.g., "after sentence 3"). You may also, on occasion, be advised that a particular question asks about the passage as a whole. In that case, you'll have to apply your understanding of the entire passage when answering the question.



REMEMBER

Some questions include a "NO CHANGE" option; choose this answer if you think the original text presented in the passage is the best choice.

Writing and Language Test Passages

The passages on the Writing and Language Test are varied in order to better assess whether you can apply your revising and editing knowledge and skills in a wide range of contexts important for college and career. Passages differ in purpose: Some primarily serve to relate events or experiences narratively, while others serve mainly to convey information, explain a process or idea, or argue for a particular way of thinking or acting. Passages also represent numerous different subject areas. In addition, passages vary in complexity, with some being relatively straightforward and others being highly challenging.

Let's consider some of the key features of Writing and Language Test passages.

- ▶ **Purpose:** As previously mentioned, some Writing and Language Test passages are focused on narrating experiences in a storylike way. Though there is no fiction passage on the Writing and Language Test (as there is on the Reading Test), a nonfiction narrative, such as one recounting a historical event or relating the steps in a scientific investigation, is found on each test. Other passages on the test serve mainly to inform, to explain, or to argue in support of a claim.
- ▶ **Subject:** Writing and Language Test passages cover a variety of subject areas, including career-related topics, the humanities, history/social studies, and science. Passages on career-related topics aren't workplace documents, such as memos or reports; instead, they're general-interest pieces on trends, issues, and debates in common career pathways, such as health care and information technology. Humanities passages focus on the arts and letters and include texts on fine art, film, music, literature, and the like. History/social studies passages include texts on topics in history as well as in the social sciences, such as anthropology, archaeology, economics, and psychology. Science passages cover both foundational scientific concepts as well as recent advances in fields such as Earth science, biology, chemistry, astronomy, and physics.
- ▶ **Complexity:** The reading challenge posed by the passages on the test varies. Some passages are relatively straightforward. They may, for example, have a very clear purpose, present a fairly small amount of information, and use familiar language. Other passages, by contrast, are more complex. They may have a more subtle purpose, require the reader to follow a complicated series of events, and make use of long and involved sentences. (It's important to note that each Writing and Language Test has a similar range of passage complexity, so you shouldn't worry about taking a test that has nothing but highly challenging passages.)

One additional feature of passages is also important to note here.

- ▶ **Informational graphics:** Passages (and occasionally questions) on the Writing and Language Test may include one or more tables, graphs, or charts that relate to the topic of the passage. A graphic may, for example, provide additional statistical support for a point made in the passage. Questions may ask you, for example, to use information from the graphic(s) to correct a factual error in the passage or to replace the passage's vague description with a more precise one using specific quantities.

All of the passages on the Writing and Language Test are high-quality, well-edited pieces of writing developed specifically for the test. They convey interesting information, explore intriguing ideas, and offer new insights. Although the primary purpose of the passages is to help assess your revising and editing skills, it's our hope that you find the passages engaging and worth reading.

REMEMBER

Passage purpose, subject matter, and complexity will vary in order to provide a broad assessment of your revising and editing skills.

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When you answer questions on the Writing and Language Test that relate to informational graphics, you'll be using skills similar to those you'll use on Data Analysis questions on the SAT Math Test and Synthesis questions on the SAT Reading Test.

Writing and Language Test Questions

Now that we've talked about the passages, it's time to turn to the questions on the Writing and Language Test. All of the questions are multiple-choice, which means that you'll pick the best of four answer options for each question. The questions are also all centered in multiparagraph passages, so you won't be tested on isolated rhetorical or grammar, usage, and mechanics knowledge and/or skills. Because all questions are passage based, you'll want to consider the passage context carefully before answering each question. Sometimes focusing only on the sentence that a particular question refers to is enough to get that question right, but in other cases you'll have to think about the entire paragraph or the passage as a whole to get a good feel for the best response. Questions are sequenced in order of appearance, meaning that questions addressing the first paragraph come before those addressing the second paragraph, and so on. Any questions about the passage as a whole come last in a set. You'll encounter questions about informational graphics in the most logical spots in the order.

The questions on the test are designed to reflect as closely as possible the kinds of revising and editing decisions that writers and editors make. Think about a piece of writing that you've written and then gone back to improve. When you reread what you'd written, what came to mind? Maybe you realized that a particular point you were making didn't have enough support, so you added some. Maybe you recognized that you'd forgotten to put in a transition between two ideas, so you clarified the connection. Or maybe you saw that a subject and verb didn't agree, so you corrected the problem. Although you're not working with your own writing on the Writing and Language Test, the thinking process you'll use as you revise and edit the pieces on the test is similar.

The questions also often reflect the demands of the specific sort of passage you're working with. In some passages (particularly those with graphics), data are important, so you're likely to be working to improve the accuracy, clarity, and precision of the writer's descriptions of those data. In other passages (particularly in narratives), sequence will be central, so a question about the logical order and flow of information and ideas is likely to show up. Although these passages are grounded in particular subject areas, the questions don't test your background knowledge of the specific topics covered. The passages and any supplementary material, such as tables or graphs, will provide all of the information about a given topic that you'll need to make revision and editing decisions.

Writing and Language questions can be sorted into two general categories: (1) Expression of Ideas and (2) Standard English Conventions. The questions won't have those labels on them, but usually it'll be pretty easy to tell the difference. A brief discussion of each category should help you get a sense of what's on the test, what knowledge and skills you're likely to make use of, and how to focus your preparation for the test.

1. **Expression of Ideas:** These questions focus on the rhetorical elements of passages. To put it another way, Expression of Ideas questions deal

REMEMBER

All questions on the Writing and Language Test are multiple-choice with four answer options.

REMEMBER

All questions are passage based, so consider each question in the context of the passage before selecting your answer.

REMEMBER

You won't need any background knowledge of the topic covered in a passage; all the information you need to answer the questions will be in the passage and in any supplementary material, such as a table or graph.

 **REMEMBER**

Expression of Ideas questions ask you to assess and improve the substance and quality of passage text, while Standard English Conventions questions require you to recognize and correct errors in grammar, usage, and punctuation.

with improving the substance and quality of the writer’s message. You’ll be asked to revise passages to improve the development of the topic, the organization of information and ideas, and the effectiveness of the language use. Development questions, which include questions about main ideas (such as topic sentences and thesis statements), supporting details, focus, and quantitative information in tables, graphs, charts, and so on, were discussed briefly in Chapter 6’s overview of the Command of Evidence subscore. Organization questions focus on logical sequence and placement of information and ideas as well as effective introductions, conclusions, and transitions. Effective Language Use questions ask you to improve precision and concision (e.g., eliminating wordiness), consider style and tone (e.g., making sure that the tone is consistent throughout the passage), and combine sentences to improve flow and to achieve particular rhetorical effects (such as emphasis on one point over another). These sorts of questions were briefly discussed in Chapter 7’s overview of the Words in Context subscore.

2. **Standard English Conventions:** These questions focus on correcting grammar, usage, and mechanics problems in passages. More specifically, these questions ask you to recognize and correct errors in sentence structure (such as run-on or incomplete sentences), usage (such as lack of subject-verb or pronoun-antecedent agreement), and punctuation (such as missing or unnecessary commas).

These categories are discussed in more detail in Chapters 14 and 15.

The Writing and Language Test in Overview

Some of the basic elements of the Writing and Language Test are listed below. Familiarizing yourself with this overview may help you prepare for the test and pace yourself on test day.

- ▶ Total Questions: 44
- ▶ Total Time: 35 minutes (on average, slightly under a minute per question, inclusive of passage reading time)
- ▶ Number of Passages: Four
- ▶ Passage Length: 400 to 450 words; total of 1,700 words
- ▶ Passage Subjects: One passage on a career-related topic and one passage each in the humanities, history/social studies, and science
- ▶ Passage Writing Modes: One nonfiction narrative, one to two informative/explanatory texts, and one to two arguments
- ▶ Passage Complexities: A defined range from grades 9–10 to early postsecondary

- ▶ Questions per Passage: 11
- ▶ In addition to an overall test score, the questions on the Writing and Language Test contribute to various scores in the following ways:
 - Expression of Ideas: 24 questions, six per passage
 - Standard English Conventions: 20 questions, five per passage
 - Command of Evidence (Chapter 6): Eight questions, two per passage
 - Words in Context (Chapter 7): Eight questions, two per passage
 - Analysis in History/Social Studies: Six questions (all of the Expression of Ideas questions on the history/social studies passage)
 - Analysis in Science: Six questions (all of the Expression of Ideas questions on the science passage)

Note: Some Writing and Language questions contribute to multiple scores.

Chapter 16 provides sample passages and questions to help you become more familiar with the Writing and Language Test. Chapter 16 also contains explanations for the answers.

CHAPTER 13 RECAP

The SAT Writing and Language Test measures your knowledge and skills in revising and editing texts widely varied in purpose, subject, and complexity. The questions on the test are multiple-choice and passage based; represent the kinds of choices writers and editors routinely have to make; reflect differences in the content and nature of the passages; and cover two basic areas: Expression of Ideas and Standard English Conventions. Questions don't test topic-specific background knowledge; all of the information about each topic needed to answer the questions is included in the passages themselves. Some passages and/or questions on the test include one or more informational graphics.

The Writing and Language Test offers a significant but fair challenge to college- and career-ready students. Since the questions are fairly “natural” in the sense that they mimic common revision and editing issues and are based in extended pieces of high-quality writing, you won't have to worry about applying obscure conventions or dealing with highly artificial or brief passages that provide little context for an answer. On the other hand, you *will* have to pay attention to the context as you answer the questions. Sometimes you'll have to “read around” a given place in the passage — looking both before it and after it — or you'll have to think about the whole passage to see how the larger text influences the answer to a particular question. Sometimes, too, what would seem like the best answer in many

situations — such as adopting a formal tone — is a weaker choice in a given case, such as in a highly informal essay. The questions themselves will also often state the goal to be accomplished, such as adding support or shifting emphasis. Paying careful attention to the contextual clues provided in the questions themselves and by the passages will go a long way toward ensuring that you do your best on the Writing and Language Test.