

Complete ACT Grammar and Punctuation Rules

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Punctuation

I. APOSTROPHES

Apostrophes make **nouns** possessive

For **singular nouns**, always add apostrophe + -s

The boy's ball = The ball belonging to the boy

The dress's buttons = The buttons on the dress

For **plural nouns**, always add -s + apostrophe (or -es + apostrophe if the singular version ends in -s)

The boys' ball = The ball belonging to the boys

The dresses' buttons = The buttons on the dresses

Pronouns: no apostrophe = possessive

It's vs. Its

It's = It is

Its = Possessive form of "it"

Its' = Does not exist

Incorrect: London is a city known for **it's (it is)** many tourist attractions.

Correct: London is a city known for **its** many tourist attractions.

Incorrect: London is a popular tourist attraction; in fact, **its** among the most visited cities in the world.

Correct: London is a popular tourist attraction; in fact, **it's** among the most visited cities in the world.

They're vs. Their vs. There

They're = they are

Their = possessive form of "they"

There = a place

They're

Correct: London and Paris are two of the most famous cities and Europe, and **they're (they are)** known for having many tourist attractions.

Their

Correct: London and Paris are known for **their** many tourist attractions.

There

Incorrect: In the nineteenth century, Paris was considered the capital of the art world because so many famous painters lived and worker **there**.

Who's vs. Whose

Who's = Who is

Correct: Barbara McClintock is a scientist **who's (who is)** best known for her discovery of "jumping" genes.

Whose = Possessive of who

Correct: Barbara McClintock is a scientist **whose** discovery of "jumping" genes helped earn her the 1983 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Note that "whose," unlike "who," can be used for both people and things/places.

Correct: London is a city **whose** many museums, palaces, and monuments make it a popular tourist destination.

II. SEMICOLONS & PERIODS

Semicolon = Period

Semicolons are used:

1. Between two complete sentences

London is an old city; it has many new buildings.

2. Before conjunctive adverbs such as *however, moreover, and therefore* when they are used to begin a clause

London is an old city; however, it has many new buildings.

London is an old city; therefore, it has buildings from many different eras.

Note: ACT grammar questions testing *however* will use a semicolon in the correct version whereas rhetoric questions will use a period.

III. COMMAS

Commas should be used:

1. Before a Coordinating Conjunction to join two full sentences (Independent Clauses)

Coordinating Conjunctions, aka FANBOYS:
For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

And and **But** are the two most popular conjunctions on the ACT; other coordinating conjunctions appear only rarely.

Correct: London is a very old city, but some parts of it are extremely modern.

2. Between a dependent clause and an independent clause when the dependent clause comes first.

Dependent clauses are clauses that cannot stand on their own as full sentences. They begin with **subordinating conjunctions** such as *before, after, because, when, until, unless, and since*.

Dependent Clauses:

Because I went home
After we returned from the movie
When we visited Chicago

In the following sentence, the dependent clause is in bold.

Correct: **Because London is a very old city**, it has buildings from many different eras.

Note: When “strong” subordinating conjunctions such as **(al)though** and **even though** are used to start a dependent clause, a comma should be used between the dependent clause and the independent clause, regardless of which one comes first.

Correct: London is a very old **city, although** some parts of it are extremely modern.

Correct: **Although** London is a very old **city, some** parts of it are extremely modern.

3. Around non-essential words and phrases

A non-essential clause is simply a clause that can be removed from a sentence without affecting its essential meaning. It's like a little interruption. When the information between the commas is crossed out, the sentence still makes sense -- even if the meaning is changed.

Non-essential clauses are always surrounded by commas.

Incorrect: London **which is a very old city**, has some extremely modern parts.

Correct: London, **which is a very old city**, has some extremely modern parts.
(London...has some extremely modern parts.)

The same goes for single words:

Incorrect: London is a very old city. It does **however**, have some very modern parts.

Incorrect: London is a very old city. It does **however**, have some very modern parts.

Correct: London is a very old city. It does, **however**, have some very modern parts.

Note: names and titles with commas around them should be treated like any other non-essential clause. Simply cross out the name or title, and see whether the sentence makes sense **in context** without the name or title.

4. To separate items in a list

Comma before *and* is optional

Correct: Hiking, skiing, and white-water rafting have always been some of my favorite activities.

Correct: Hiking, skiing and white-water rafting have always been some of my favorite activities.

5. To separate adjectives whose order could be reversed

Correct: The groaning, rumbling train finally pulled into the station

Correct: The rumbling, groaning train finally pulled into the station

Note: Commas should also be used after introductory words or phrases (e.g. however, in the beginning, as a result), but this usage is not normally tested on the ACT. Questions involving these words/phrases normally test meaning rather than grammar and will include the commas.

Commas should NOT be used:

1. Between two full sentences (Independent Clauses)

When two stand-alone sentences are joined by a comma, the result is known as a **comma splice**. Comma splices are always incorrect.

Incorrect: London is a very old **city**, **some** parts of it are extremely modern.

Correct: London is a very old **city**. **Some** parts of it are extremely modern.

Correct: London is a very old **city**; **some** parts of it are extremely modern.

2. Between an independent clause and a dependent clause when the independent clause comes first.

Incorrect: London has buildings from many different **eras, because it is a very old city.**
Correct: London has buildings from many different **eras because it is a very old city.**

3. Between two clauses with the same subject when the subject is not repeated

Repeated Subject: London is a very old **city, but it has** many modern buildings.

Subject Not Repeated - Correct: London is a very old **city but has** many modern buildings.

Subject Not Repeated - Incorrect: London is a very old **city, but has** many modern buildings.

4. Between Subjects and Verbs

This holds true even when the subject is very long.

Incorrect: European cities such London and Paris, **are** famous for their museums and monuments.

Correct: European cities such as London and Paris **are** famous for their museums and monuments.

5. In Compound Subjects and Compound Objects

Incorrect: Many tourists visit London and Paris to visit **museums, and monuments.**

Incorrect: Many tourists visit London and Paris to visit **museums, and monuments.**

Correct: Many tourists visit London and Paris to visit **museums, and monuments.**

If you have difficulty thinking in terms of subjects and object, think of the rule this way: comma + and = period, so fill in a period and see whether there are two sentences. E.g. "Many tourists visit London and Paris to visit museums. Monuments" is clearly not two sentences, so no comma is needed.

6. Before or after a preposition

Incorrect: Frida Kahlo is among the most famous **artists, of** Latin American origin.

Incorrect: Frida Kahlo is among the most famous **artists of,** Latin American origin.

Correct: Frida Kahlo is among the most famous **artists, of** Latin American origin.

7. Before or after the word "that"

Incorrect: I finally saw the movie, that my friends had recommended.

Incorrect: I finally saw the movie that, my friends had recommended.

Correct: I finally saw the movie that my friends had recommended.

AND in clauses in which *that* is optional and does not appear

Incorrect: He said, he would come to the movie tonight.

Correct: He said (that) he would come to the movie tonight.

8. Between two adjectives whose order cannot be reversed

Incorrect: The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most **stunning, coral reefs**.

(You wouldn't say, "The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most **coral, stunning reefs**.)

Correct: The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most **stunning coral reefs**.

9. Between adjectives and nouns

Incorrect: The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most **stunning, reefs**.

Correct: The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most **stunning reefs**.

10. Before an open parenthesis

Incorrect: The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most stunning coral **reefs, (which** are home to thousands of species of marine life), but many of them are in danger because of overfishing and pollution.

Correct: The Caribbean Sea contains some of the world's most stunning coral **reefs (which** are home to thousands of species of marine life), but many of them are in danger because of overfishing and pollution.

IV. COLONS

Colons must always follow a full sentence that can stand on its own as a complete thought. Unlike semicolons, however, they can be followed by either a full sentence or a fragment.

1. Before a list

Incorrect: On our trip to London, we visited: museums, palaces, and monuments.

Correct: On our trip to London, we visited these tourist attractions: museums, palaces, and monuments.

2. Before an explanation

Correct: When the Manchus took control in China 1644, the Great Wall ceased to have military **significance: the empire** now extended well north of the wall, and China's new enemies came from a different direction - across the sea.

In the example above, the second clause explains why the Great Wall ceased to have military significance. Note that in this case, the colon is grammatically identical to a period or semicolon.

V. DASHES

1. To indicate non-essential statements within a sentence

Grammatically, dashes are identical to commas when used this way.

Correct: London - **which is a very old city** - has many new buildings.

2. Before a list, an explanation, or to create a deliberate pause in a sentence

Grammatically, dashes are identical to colons when used this way

Correct: London has many tourist attractions - museums, palaces, and monuments.

Additional Grammar Rules

I. Wordiness/Redundancy

Shorter is better. This is the absolute #1 rule of the ACT English section. When multiple answers are grammatically correct and express the same essential information, the shortest one will virtually always be correct. Note that most of these questions can be answered visually.

The construction of the Great Wall of China was an enormous undertaking that occurred on a very large scale and required over 3,000 workers.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. an enormously huge undertaking on a large scale
- C. an enormous undertaking, which occurred on a very large scale
- D. an enormous undertaking

The correct answer (D) can be determined with near certainty simply by length.

II. Parallel Structure

1. Keep all lists in the same format: noun, noun noun; -ING, -ING, -ING; verb, verb, verb.

Incorrect: Deception expert Pamela Meyer has collaborated with a team of researchers to survey and analyze existing research on lying from academics, law enforcement officers, and **working as psychologists**.

Correct: Deception expert Pamela Meyer has collaborated with a team of researchers to survey and analyze existing research on lying from academics, law enforcement officers, and **psychologists**.

2. The same is true when there are only two items joined by "and" or but. Note that when parallel structure involves infinitives ("to + verb"), it is not necessary to repeat the "to" after the first verb.

Incorrect: Deception expert Pamela Meyer has collaborated with a team of researchers **to survey and analyzing** existing research on lying from academics, law enforcement officers, and psychologists.

Correct: Deception expert Pamela Meyer has collaborated with a team of researchers **to survey and analyze** existing research on lying from academics, law enforcement officers, and psychologists.

III. Subject-Verb Agreement

Singular verbs end in -s (she walk**s**)

Plural verbs do not end in -s (they walk)

Most common irregular verb = to be. You **must** know the singular/plural forms of this verb in both the present (is/are) and the past (was/were).

Tip: If you're not sure where the subject is, look at the beginning of the sentence.

The most common way that the ACT distracts from subject-verb disagreements is to place a prepositional phrase between the subject and the verb.

Incorrect: Illegal logging in Mexican forests **have** resulted in the destruction of the monarch butterfly's habitat.

Correct: Illegal logging in Mexican forests **has** resulted in the destruction of the monarch butterfly's habitat.

Also be on the lookout for compound subjects -- two singular subjects connected by "and."

Incorrect: The Monarch and the Red Admiral **is** among the most common butterfly species in North America.

Correct: The Monarch and the Red Admiral **are** among the most common butterfly species in North America.

IV. Pronoun Agreement

Singular = it, its

Plural = they, their

Singular nouns must take singular pronouns; plural nouns must take plural pronouns. The noun to which a pronoun refers (its **antecedent** or **referent**) will not always appear in the same sentence; you may need to look at the sentence before.

Incorrect: Painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was best known for her portraits. **It was** strongly influenced by indigenous Mexican culture, as revealed by her use of bright colors and dramatic symbolism.

Correct: Painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was best known for her portraits. **They were** strongly influenced by indigenous Mexican culture, as revealed by her use of bright colors and dramatic symbolism.

V. Verb Tense

1. Always keep verb tense consistent with that of other verbs in the paragraph. Paragraphs in the present should stay in the present; paragraphs in the past should stay in the past. Always start by checking the tense of the verbs in the sentence in question, as well as the surrounding sentences (before/after). The underlined verb must match the other verbs.

Incorrect: Painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) **was** best known for her portraits. She **is** strongly influenced by indigenous Mexican culture, as revealed by her use of bright colors and dramatic symbolism. In her paintings, she **combined** elements of the classic Mexican tradition with surrealist techniques.

Correct: Painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) **was** best known for her portraits. She **was** strongly influenced by indigenous Mexican culture, as revealed by her use of bright colors and dramatic symbolism. In her paintings, she **combined** elements of the classic Mexican tradition with surrealist techniques.

Important: Correct answers to most verb questions are in either the simple past (was, did, ran) or the present. Answers that include more complicated tenses (would have done, will have gone) are virtually always wrong.

2. Present perfect and Past perfect.

You should also have some basic familiarity with two additional tenses.

Present perfect - has/have + verb. Describes an action that began in the past and that continues into the present. Signaled by "for" and "since."

Incorrect: Italy and France **are/were** tourist attractions for hundreds of years/since the eighteenth century.

Correct: Italy and France **have been** tourist attractions for hundreds of years/since the eighteenth century.

Past perfect - had + verb. When a sentence describes two completed actions in the past, the past perfect can be used to describe the action that came **first**.

Most of the time, either the simple past or the past perfect can be used, e.g. "Before Mae Jemison became an astronaut, she **studied/had studied** science for many years." When this is the case, you will not be asked to choose between the simple past and past perfect. When the phrase "by the time" appears, however, the past perfect must be used.

Incorrect: By the time Mae Jemison became an astronaut, she **studied** science for many years.

Correct: By the time Mae Jemison became an astronaut, she **had studied** science for many years.

VI. Adjectives & Adverbs

Adjectives modify nouns: the good book, the boring class, the exciting trip

Adverbs modify verbs and usually end in -ly: the girl ran quickly, the top came off suddenly, the wind blew strongly

1. Adjective vs. Adverb

On the ACT, adjectives and adjectives are switched.

Incorrect: The monkey, a traditional Mexican symbol, appears **frequent** in Frida Kahlo's paintings.

Correct: The monkey, a traditional Mexican symbol, appears **frequently** in Frida Kahlo's paintings.

2. Comparatives and Superlatives

Comparative - "adjective + -er" or "more + adjective" (better, stronger, more interesting)

Superlative - "adjective + -est" or "most + adjective" (best, strongest, most interesting)

When -er is used, "more" should not be used as well.

When -est is used, "most" should not be used as well.

Incorrect: Mexican folk art exerted a **more stronger** influence on Frida Kahlo's paintings than Surrealism did.

Correct: Mexican folk art exerted a **stronger** influence on Frida Kahlo's paintings than Surrealism did.

VII. Word Pairs

(N)either...or
Not only...but (also)
As...as

When one of these pairs of words appears in a sentence, the other must appear as well.

Incorrect: Not only did Mae Jemison study science as a girl growing up in Chicago, **and** she (also) studied ballet.

Correct: Not only did Mae Jemison study science as a girl growing up in Chicago, **but** she (**also**) studied ballet.

VIII. Who, Which, and Whom

1. Who, whom = people, which = things

Correct: Frida Kahlo was an artist **who** gained renown for her portraits
Incorrect: Frida Kahlo was an artist **which** gained renown for her portraits

2. "Whom" before a verb = wrong

Incorrect: Frida Kahlo was an artist **whom** earned renown for her portraits.
Correct: Frida Kahlo was an artist **who** earned renown for her portraits.

3. "Whom" after a preposition = right

Correct: Frida Kahlo is an painter **to whom** many artists owe their inspiration.
Correct: Frida Kahlo is an painter **to who** many artists owe their inspiration.

IX. Modification: Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

Always place modifiers as close as possible to the nouns they modify.

1. When a modifier begins a sentence, the subject must immediately follow. If it does not, a **dangling modifier** is created.

Incorrect: Born in Mexico City in 1907, self-portraits were what Frida Kahlo was best known for.

Correct: Born in Mexico City in 1907, Frida Kahlo was best known for her self-portraits.

2. **Misplaced modifiers** can occur anywhere in a sentence

Incorrect: The Great Wall of China was constructed was by thousands of workers originally consisting of separated military fortifications. (The sentence makes it sound as if the *workers* originally consisted of separated military fortifications.)

Correct: The Great Wall of China was constructed, originally consisting of separated military fortifications, was by thousands of workers. (This version makes it clear that the Wall originally consisted of separated military fortifications.)

X. Pronoun Case (I vs. me)

When pronoun case is tested, it will always be plural: usually proper name + pronoun (Rob and me) or two pronouns (him and me).

If name + pronoun, cross out the proper name and answer by ear.

If two pronouns, cross out each pronoun in turn and answer by ear.

Incorrect: Last year, my **mother and me** attended the Gathering of Nations, the largest annual meeting of Native Americans in the United States.

Crossed out: Last year, ...**me** attended the Gathering of Nations, the largest annual meeting of Native Americans in the United States.

Correct: Last year, my **mother and I** attended the Gathering of Nations, the largest annual meeting of Native Americans in the United States.

XI. Idioms and Diction

Incorrect: Could/should/would **of**

Correct: Could/should/would **have**

Than - comparison

Then - sequence of events.

More/less...**than**, NOT more/less...**then**

Other diction questions may test prepositions or verbs, but these can only be answered by ear. There is no way to determine the answer by using a rule.

Incorrect: The Great Wall of China might have been more effective **with** keeping people in than keeping invaders out.

Correct: The Great Wall of China might have been more effective **at** keeping people in than keeping invaders out.

Incorrect: Some people claim that The Great Wall of China was really built to **capture** the Emperor's love of grandiose projects.

Correct: Some people claim that The Great Wall of China was really built to **satisfy** the Emperor's love of grandiose projects.

XII. Transitions

Questions testing transitions are more about **meaning** than grammar. Answers may be grammatically correct but still wrong. Whenever you encounter a transition question, cross out the transition and state the relationship between the sentences/clauses (similar ideas/contrasting ideas) **before** you look at the answer choices.

Incorrect: The obvious reason for the construction of the Great Wall of China was protection, **since** China had no powerful enemies at the time construction first began.

The two halves of the sentence express opposing ideas, so a contradictor is needed.

Correct: The obvious reason for the construction of the Great Wall of China was protection, **but** China had no powerful enemies at the time construction first began.

Important: If there is an OMIT/DELETE option, or an option without a transition, check it FIRST because it will usually be right.

When two transitions have the same meaning (e.g. but/yet) and are both grammatically acceptable in context, both can automatically be eliminated since no question can have more than one right answer.

For more in-depth explanations, examples, and exercises, see [The Complete Guide to ACT English](http://www.amazon.com/The-Complete-Guide-ACT-English/dp/1484831454) (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Complete-Guide-ACT-English/dp/1484831454>).