



Digital SAT[®] Writing Quick Guide

Use this packet as a quick reference for the most important Writing questions on the Digital SAT Reading and Writing section.

Format

The Digital SAT Reading and Writing section consists of two consecutive modules, each with 27 questions presented over 32 minutes.

Each question is paired with a unique text or pair of texts whose length will not exceed 150 words.

All questions are four-option multiple choice-format.

The section is scored from 200–800.

Punctuation

You'll be presented with a short text and asked to select the option that completes the text by introducing punctuation that ensures appropriate sentence structure and conveys the text's intended meaning. You'll need to understand the rules governing usage of commas, colons, semicolons, dashes, and apostrophes.

Using highly developed spatial memory skills, black-capped chickadees are able to recall the locations of up to hundreds of caches in order to supplement their energy intake during times of food _____ the birds to survive in a wide range of habitats with significant variations in resource availability.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- A) scarcity; enabling
- B) scarcity, enabling
- C) scarcity. Enabling
- D) scarcity—enabling

Key Knowledge

- Know your clause types, and, when necessary, analyze the clauses:
 - Independent clauses are full sentences that can stand alone.
 - Polar bears inhabit the Arctic Circle.
 - Dependent clauses are incomplete ideas that do not form full sentences.
 - After so much time had passed
 - Nonessential clauses (parenthetical phrases) are “side notes” enclosed by punctuation. They provide additional information but are removable.
 - Sister Rosetta Tharpe, **known as “the Godmother of rock and roll,”** popularized elements of gospel singing in mainstream music.
 - As a rule, a hibernating bear remains in its den during the cold winter months; if, **however,** temperatures become unusually high for a short period, the bear may emerge to forage for food.
 - Here, the transition word *however* is positioned in as an “interrupting” phrase, and thus resembles a nonessential clause

Punctuation, continued

- **Commas** are used to separate independent and dependent clauses; they also separate nonessential clauses from the rest of the sentence. They cannot be used to separate two independent clauses (an error known as a *comma splice*) or two dependent clauses.
 - When warm, most air masses migrate from over the ocean onto mountainous land, air rises and cools, this causes precipitation to occur on the sea-facing side of the mountain.
 - This is an example of a comma splice: both the red clause and the blue clause are independent, so the comma after *cools* is incorrect.
- Most of the time on the SAT, **semicolons** have one job: separating two independent clauses. If both clauses are not independent, a semicolon is probably incorrect.
 - When warm, most air masses migrate from over the ocean onto mountainous land, air rises and cools; this causes precipitation to occur on the sea-facing side of the mountain.
 - Both the red clause and the blue clause are independent, so a semicolon is correct.
 - This is essentially interchangeable with a period.
 - If two choices are identical other than swapping a semicolon for a period, neither is correct.
- **Colons** can be used to set off lists or points of emphasis, but must be preceded by an independent clause
 - The issues discussed at the annual conference usually include: artificial intelligence, the ethics of biotechnology, and economic inequality.
 - The blue clause is dependent, so even though a list follows, a colon is incorrect here!
 - The International Olympic committee decided that the 2020 Olympics would feature six new sports: baseball, softball, surfing, skateboarding, climbing, and karate.
 - This is a proper usage of a colon to set off a list; the first clause is independent.
 - Mid-twentieth-century America was transformed by the increased affordability and availability of a key transportation innovation: the automobile.
 - This is a proper usage of a colon to set off an emphasized clause; the first clause is independent.

Punctuation, continued

- **Dashes** can be used in two ways
 - Single dashes serve approximately the same role as colons, setting off both lists and emphasized clauses.
 - As the protest continued, the crowd swelled into the tens of thousands—a staggering figure considering the lack of support for the movement early on.
 - Double dashes set off nonessential clauses, just as commas do. If a nonessential clause opens with a dash, it must close with one; if it closes with a dash, it must open with one.
 - Dolphins—aquatic mammals—are highly intelligent beings.
- When **apostrophes** appear on nouns (people, places, things, ideas), assume they are indicating possession, NOT contraction. When they appear on a pronoun such as *it* or *who*, they ALWAYS form contractions, NOT possessives.
 - Hundreds of cars stop on the side of the road to admire the **hillside's** dazzling array of tulips.
 - The *dazzling array of tulips* belongs to the hillside, so we attach 's to the noun *hillside*.
 - NEVER use an apostrophe simply to pluralize.
 - Incandescent bulbs will no longer be sold, so **consumer's** will have to purchase other kinds of lighting to illuminate their homes.
 - This is incorrect: *consumers* are not possessing anything in this sentence; the author simply intends to indicate that there are multiple consumers.
 - When a plural noun ending in s needs to possess something, simply place an apostrophe after the s.
 - All of the **students'** test scores were excellent.
 - The test scores belong to multiple students.
 - Possessive pronouns such as *its*, *whose*, *their*, and *your* NEVER have apostrophes.
 - While some trees lose their leaves gradually, **it's** not unusual for a Ginko tree to lose all of **its** leaves all at once.
 - **It's** is ALWAYS a contraction of *it is* or *it has*; it is NEVER possessive.
 - **Its** is the singular non-gendered possessive; it indicates that something possesses something else.

Subject-Verb Agreement

You'll be presented with a short text and asked to select the option that completes the text by introducing a verb (action word) in a form that agrees with the subject and tense of the sentence.

Certain linguists argue that elements of the New York metropolitan-area accent _____ west, altering traditionally midwestern pronunciations to be more like those found in New York City and northeastern New Jersey.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- A) has migrated
- B) migrating
- C) is migrating
- D) have migrated

Key Techniques

- You know this is being tested when the answers feature different forms of the same verb.
- Start by identifying the **subject**. This is the thing or person doing the verb (the action). Then, read straight from the subject to the verb, ignoring words in between. Evaluate whether the two go together.
- For help identifying the subject, look out for **prepositions** (location and relation words): the subject will appear immediately before them.
 - The seven most common prepositions are *in, of, for, to, by, from, and on*.
 - Cross out everything between the subject and the verb to evaluate the agreement.
 - The ~~ferry to the islands~~ **was** running behind schedule.
- If the subject and verb are separated by a nonessential clause, eliminate the nonessential clause to make the agreement easier to discern.
 - ~~The Tata Steel Chess Tournament, held annually in the village of Wijk aan Zee in the Netherlands,~~ **hosts** elite competitors in a round-robin competition known as “the Wimbledon of Chess.”

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

You'll be presented with a short text and asked to select the option that completes the text by introducing a pronoun that agrees with the subject of the sentence. You'll usually need to distinguish between the pronouns *its* and *their* and the similar-looking homophones *it's* and *they're*.

The ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) has evolved to thrive in low-light environments: over hundreds of millions of years, various traits have accumulated to enable _____ survival under the canopies of large trees, which filter much of the incoming sunlight.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- A) it's
- B) their
- C) its
- D) they're

Key Techniques

- Remember that *it's* and *they're* are always and only contractions of the expanded phrases *it is* and *they are*, respectively—they are never possessive and should not be used to indicate ownership/association. Replace each of the words with its expanded phrase to check for correct usage.
- Singular collective nouns that refer to organizations or classes (e.g., *the government*, *the team*, *the black-capped chickadee*) must be handled as singulars, even though they are made up of many individuals; this means you should use the pronoun *it* to refer to them, not *they*
- Determine what the missing pronoun needs to refer to by examining the phrase around it: what is the phrase describing?

Misplaced Modifiers

You'll be presented with a short text and asked to select the option that completes the text by introducing a clause that correctly distinguishes the subject of the clause preceding it.

By examining the data from a language survey created by University of Cambridge linguist Bert Vaux, _____ have learned much about the variation and geographic extent of various dialects throughout the United States.

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

- A) insight into the richness of American English has been gained by language researchers who
- B) language researchers' insight into the richness of American English has been gained; the researchers
- C) language researchers have gained insight into the richness of American English and
- D) there are language researchers who have gained insight into the richness of American English and

Key Techniques

- You know this is being tested when the answer choices all feature clauses with the same or similar words shuffled in different orders.
- Ask yourself *who* or *what* could be doing the action described in the first clause: whoever or whatever is doing the action must be mentioned at the beginning of the second clause.
- Be careful in selecting possessives. Consider the examples below: in the first, the second clause begins with *Emma's intention*, making it sound like the *intention* set the alarm clock; in the second, the second clause begins with *Emma*, making it clear that it was *Emma* who set the alarm clock.
 - In going to bed at the same time each evening, **Emma's intention was to normalize her sleep schedule.**
 - In going to bed at the same time each evening, **Emma intended to normalize her sleep schedule.**

Transitions

You'll be presented with a short text and asked to select the option that completes the text with the most logical transition word or phrase.

In most stellar-planetary systems, the planets rotate around their axes in the same direction in which they orbit their stars, a phenomenon known as prograde rotation. _____ the planet Venus, the second planet from the Sun in our Solar System, exhibits retrograde rotation, spinning clockwise on its axis while revolving in a counterclockwise orbit around the Sun.

Which choice completes the text with the most logical transition?

- A) For example,
- B) Accordingly,
- C) Furthermore,
- D) In contrast,

Key Techniques

- At first, ignore the choices: determine the relationship between the sentence(s) preceding the missing transition and the sentence(s) including the transition, making sure to read everything. Do the sentences express a single, developing idea, or do they present contrasting statements?
- Once you've determined the relationship between the sentences, narrow the possibilities for the missing word to the correct category.
 - Common "continuing idea" words/phrases
 - Cause & effect: *therefore, thus, consequently, as a result, accordingly*
 - Addition: *additionally, in addition, furthermore, moreover*
 - Sameness: *similarly, likewise*
 - Narrow example: *for example, for instance, specifically*
 - Common "contrasting" words/phrases
 - Contradiction: *however, but, nevertheless, even so, yet*
 - Contrasting example: *on the other hand, in contrast*
- Once you've selected the proper category, determine which choice aligns best.

Rhetorical Synthesis

You'll be presented with a series of notes taken by a student while researching a topic; you'll then be asked to use a subset of these notes to achieve a specific goal.

While researching a topic, a student has taken the following notes:

- Most commercially available coffees are derived from the plant species *Coffea arabica*, which produces caffeine as a natural insect repellent.
- At low altitudes, relatively moderate temperatures support diverse insect life.
- As a result, coffees derived from plants grown at low altitudes contain higher concentrations of caffeine.
- At high altitudes, temperatures are cooler, preventing most insects from thriving.
- As a result, coffees derived from plants grown at high altitudes contain lower concentrations of caffeine.

The student wants to emphasize the difference between coffees grown at different altitudes. Which choice most effectively uses relevant information from the notes to accomplish this goal?

- A) While they may be grown at different altitudes, most commercially available coffees contain caffeine, an insect repellent produced naturally by the plants from which the coffees are derived.
- B) Though low-altitude temperatures support more insect life than do high-altitude temperatures, coffee plants are grown in both environments.
- C) Though most commercially available coffees are derived from the same plant species, low-altitude coffees contain higher caffeine concentrations than do high-altitude coffees.
- D) Both low-altitude coffees and high-altitude coffees are derived from *Coffea arabica*, a plant that can grow in either environment by repelling the insects they encounter.

Key Techniques

- Before reading the notes, look at the question and determine the goal the student is trying to achieve. Then, look at the notes and determine which ones are relevant.
- Make sure the choice you select achieves all aspects of the goal (there may be more than one)

Answer Key

Topic	Answer
Punctuation	B
Subject-Verb Agreement	D
Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	C
Misplaced Modifiers	C
Transitions	D
Rhetorical Synthesis	C