

Part 2 ACT English Test

On the ACT English Test, you have 45 minutes to read five passages, or essays, and answer 75 multiple-choice questions about them—an average of 15 questions per essay. The essays on the English Test cover a variety of subjects; the sample passages that follow this discussion range from a personal essay about different ways of figuring one's age to an informative essay about the legal history of school dress codes.

Content of the ACT English Test

The ACT English Test is designed to measure your ability to accomplish the wide variety of decisions involved in revising and editing a given piece of writing. An important part of revision and editing decisions is a good understanding of the conventions of standard written English. You may not always use standard written English in casual writing (for instance, when you're e-mailing a friend) or in conversation. In casual writing or conversation, we often use slang expressions that have special meanings with friends our own age or in our part of the country. Because slang can become outdated (Does anybody say "groovy" anymore?) and regional terms might not be familiar to students everywhere (Do you and your friends say "soda" or "soft drink" or "pop"?), this test emphasizes the standard written English that is taught in schools around the country.

Questions on the English Test fall into two categories:

- Usage/Mechanics (punctuation, grammar and usage, sentence structure)
- Rhetorical Skills (writing strategy, organization, style)

You'll receive a score for all 75 questions, and two subscores—one based on 40 Usage/Mechanics questions and the other based on 35 Rhetorical Skills questions. If you choose to take the Writing Test, you will also receive a Combined English/Writing score.

You will not be tested on spelling, vocabulary, or on rote recall of the rules of grammar. Grammar and usage are tested only within the context of the essay, not by questions like "Must an appositive always be set off by commas?" Likewise, you won't be tested directly on your vocabulary, although the better your vocabulary is, the better equipped you'll be to answer questions that involve choosing the most appropriate word.

Like the other tests on the ACT, the English Test doesn't require you to memorize what you read. The questions and essays are side-by-side for easy reference. This is not a memorization test.

The questions discussed on the following pages are taken from the sample passages and questions that follow on pages 42–48. If you prefer, you can work through the sample passages and questions before you read the rest of this discussion. On the other hand, if you wish to better understand the English Test, you may want to first read the discussion, then work through the sample passages and questions.

Types of Questions on the ACT English Test

Usage/Mechanics questions always refer to an underlined portion of the essay. You must decide on the best choice of words and punctuation for that underlined portion. Usually, your options include NO CHANGE, which means that the essay is best as it's written. Sometimes, you'll also have the option of deleting the underlined portion. For example, the following question (from Sample Passage II on pages 44–46) offers you the option of removing the word *to* from the sentence.

| | |
|--|---|
| <u>Otherwise, this difference points</u> to significant underlying cultural values. | 22. F. NO CHANGE G. on H. at J. OMIT the underlined portion. |
|--|---|

In this example, the best answer is not to delete the underlined portion but to leave it as it is (F).

Rhetorical Skills questions may refer to an underlined portion, or they may ask about a section of the essay or an aspect of the essay as a whole. For example, in the following question (from Sample Passage I on pages 42–44), you're given a sentence to be added to the essay, and then you're asked to decide the most logical place in the essay to add that sentence.

| | |
|--|---|
| | 15. Upon reviewing this essay and finding that some information has been left out, the writer composes the following sentence incorporating that information: Those same German influences helped spawn a similar musical form in northern Mexico known as <i>norteño</i> . The sentence would most logically be placed after the last sentence in Paragraph: A. 1. B. 2. C. 3. D. 4. |
|--|---|

In this example, the best answer is C, because Paragraph 3 focuses on the European musical influences on the O'odham people of Arizona, and the last sentence of the paragraph specifically refers to the musical influences of German immigrants.

Let's look at some additional examples of the kinds of questions you're likely to find on the ACT English Test. If you want to know what an individual question looks like in the context of the passage it appears in, turn to the pages indicated. You can also use those sample passages and questions for practice, either before or after reading this discussion.

Usage/Mechanics

Usage/Mechanics questions focus on the conventions of punctuation, grammar and usage, and sentence structure and formation.

Punctuation questions involve identifying and correcting the following misplaced, missing, or unnecessary punctuation marks:

- commas
- apostrophes
- colons, semicolons, and dashes
- periods, question marks, and exclamation points

These questions address not only the “rules” of punctuation but also the use of punctuation to express ideas clearly. For example, you should be prepared to show how punctuation can be used to indicate possession or to set off a parenthetical element.

In many punctuation questions, the words in every choice will be identical but the commas or other punctuation will vary. It’s important to read the choices carefully in order to notice the presence or absence of commas, semicolons, colons, periods, and other punctuation. The following example of a punctuation question comes from Sample Passage I on pages 42–44.

Around this time the polka music and button
accordion played by German immigrant rail-
road workers; left their mark on wails.

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14. F. NO CHANGE
G. workers
H. workers;
J. workers,

It may help you to read through this sentence without paying attention to the punctuation so you can identify the grammatical construction of it. The subject of this sentence is “the polka music and button accordion.” What follows that might seem like the predicate verb of the sentence, but it’s not. The phrase “played by German immigrant railroad workers” is a dependent or subordinate clause (a clause that cannot stand on its own). More specifically, this type of dependent clause is known as an adjective clause because it modifies the noun it follows. This is a little tricky to figure out because the relative pronoun that normally introduces this clause (*that*) and the helping verb for *played* (*were*) are missing; they’re understood but not expressed. If we stick them into the sentence, we’ll notice that its meaning doesn’t change:

Around this time the polka music and button accordion that were played by German immigrant railroad workers; left their mark on waila.

After the adjective clause is the predicate verb of the main clause, “left.” Then, there’s a phrase that explains what was left (the direct object “their mark”) and a prepositional phrase that explains where it was left (“on waila”).

Now we can deal with the question about what kind of punctuation should follow that adjective clause. Sometimes, these clauses are set off from the main clause with commas to indicate that the adjective clause is parenthetical or provides information not essential to the meaning of the sentence. That’s not the case here for two reasons. First, there’s no comma at the beginning of the adjective clause. Second, the adjective clause is essential to the sentence; the sentence is not referring to just any polka music and button accordion but to the music and accordion played by those German immigrant railroad workers (presumably, not while they were working on the railroad).

Ignoring the adjective clause for a minute, we need to ask ourselves what kind of punctuation we would normally place between the subject “the polka music and button accordion” and the predicate “left.” Our answer should be no punctuation at all, making G the best answer. Of course, you could answer this question without this rather tedious analysis of the parts of the sentence. You might simply decide that if there’s no other punctuation in the sentence, you would never insert a single punctuation mark between the subject and the predicate of the main clause. Or you might just plug in each of the four punctuation choices—semicolon, no punctuation, colon, comma—and choose the one that looks or sounds best to you.

Grammar and usage questions involve choosing the best word or words in a sentence based on considerations of the conventions of grammar and usage. Some examples of poor and better phrases are given below.

- Grammatical agreement

(Subject and verb)

“The owner of the bicycles *are* going to sell them.”
should be:

“The owner of the bicycles *is* going to sell them.”

(Pronoun and antecedent)

“Susan and Mary left *her* briefcases in the office.”
should be:

“Susan and Mary left *their* briefcases in the office.”

(Adjectives and adverbs with corresponding nouns and verbs)

“Danielle spread frosting *liberal* on the cat.”
should be:

“Danielle spread frosting *liberally* on the cat.”

- Verb forms

“Fritz had just *began* to toast Lydia’s marshmallows when the rabbits stampeded.”
should be:

“Fritz had just *begun* to toast Lydia’s marshmallows when the rabbits stampeded.”

- Pronoun forms and cases

“Seymour and Svetlana annoyed *there* parents all the time.”
should be:

“Seymour and Svetlana annoyed *their* parents all the time.”

“After the incident with the peanut butter, the zebra and *me* were never invited back.”
should be:

“After the incident with the peanut butter, the zebra and *I* were never invited back.”

- Comparative and superlative modifiers

“My goldfish is *more smarter* than your brother.”
should be:

“My goldfish is *smarter* than your brother.”

“Your brother, however, has the *cuter* aardvark that I’ve ever seen.”
should be:

“Your brother, however, has the *cutest* aardvark that I’ve ever seen.”

- Idioms

“An idiom is an established phrase that has a unique or special meaning that can be looked *down* in the dictionary.”
should be:

“An idiom is an established phrase that has a unique or special meaning that can be looked *up* in the dictionary.”

Questions dealing with pronouns often have to do with using the proper form and case of the pronoun. Sometimes they address a pronoun’s agreement with its antecedent, or referent. In such cases, it’s important to consider the entire sentence, and sometimes the preceding sentence, in order to make sure you know what the antecedent is. Consider the following question (from Sample Passage I on pages 42–44).