THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SAT PUNCTUATION

Independent vs. Dependent Clauses

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE

An independent clause contains a subject, a verb, and a complete thought that can stand alone as a sentence.

Example

The students finished the exam.

Subject: students

Verb: finished

Complete thought: Yes

DEPENDENT CLAUSE

A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb but not a complete thought. It cannot stand alone.

Example

Because the students finished the exam

Subject: students

Verb: finished

Complete thought: No

PUT THEM TOGETHER

Because the students finished the exam, they left early.

Dependent: Because the students finished the exam

Independent: they left early

QUICK TEST

Does it have a subject, a verb, and a complete thought?

All three → Independent clause

Subject + verb, but incomplete thought → Dependent clause

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Colons, Dashes & Parentheses

01 COLONS

Colons have one primary function—and one frequently overlooked rule.

Use a colon after an independent clause to introduce a quotation, explanation, example, or list.

KEY RULE

The words before the colon must form an independent clause.

✗ The researchers needed: a microscope.

✓ The researchers needed one final item: a microscope.

02 DASHES

Dashes have two primary functions on the SAT.

SINGLE DASH

A single dash functions like a colon: it introduces an explanation or example.

Example

The researchers needed one final item—a microscope.

PAIRED DASHES

A pair of dashes inserts extra, nonessential information—just like parentheses.

Example

The microscope—an unusually powerful model—revealed the organism.

REMOVAL TEST

Remove the information between the dashes. The sentence must still make sense.

The microscope revealed the organism.

03 PARENTHESES

Parentheses insert extra, nonessential information.

Example

The microscope (an unusually powerful model) revealed the organism.

THE SHARED RULE

Parentheses and paired dashes perform the same grammatical job. In both cases, the sentence must remain complete and logical after the enclosed information is removed.

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Three Ways to Link Independent Clauses

Recall

An independent clause is a complete sentence with a subject, a verb, and a complete thought that can stand alone.

01 PERIOD

A period is by far the most common way to link two independent clauses. It signals a full stop.

Example

The experiment failed. The researchers tried again.

02 SEMICOLON

A semicolon works like a period: it separates two independent clauses while suggesting a closer relationship between them.

SAT Shortcut

The SAT will not make you choose between otherwise identical answers that differ only by a period or semicolon. If both appear, eliminate both—unless other wording changes make one answer incorrect.

Example

The experiment failed; the researchers tried again.

Another Use

A semicolon can also separate items in a complex list that *already* contains commas.

I have lived in Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; New York, New York; and Phoenix, Arizona.

03 COMMA + FANBOYS

The SAT frequently uses a coordinating conjunction to link two independent clauses. When FANBOYS joins two independent clauses, place a comma directly before it.

FANBOYS

For · And · Nor · But · Or · Yet · So

Example

The experiment failed, **but** the researchers tried again.

WATCH OUT: THE COMMA SPLICE

A comma alone cannot join two complete sentences.

✕ The experiment failed, the researchers tried again.

Use a period, semicolon, or comma + FANBOYS instead.

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The Six Core Comma Rules

THE BIG PICTURE

These six rules cover the vast majority of comma usage tested on the SAT. A comma often separates a dependent clause from an independent clause—but a comma alone can never join two independent clauses.

01 COMMA + FANBOYS

Plase a comma before FANBOYS when it joins two independent clauses.

The study was small, **but** the results were significant.

02 ITEMS IN A LIST

Use commas to separate three or more items in a series.

The team collected soil, water, **and** air samples.

03 NONESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Use a pair of commas to set off removable information.

The scientist, a Nobel Prize winner, published the study.

Removal test: The scientist published the study.

04 INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS

Use a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or dependent clause.

Well, the team lost the game anyway.

After reviewing the data, the researchers revised their conclusion.

After the researchers reviewed the data, they revised their conclusion.

05 COORDINATE ADJECTIVES

Use a comma between adjectives that independently describe the same noun.

It was a long, difficult experiment.

06 DIRECT ADDRESS & INTERRUPTERS

Set off direct address and certain interrupters or transitions.

However, the results were inconclusive.

The results, therefore, were inconclusive.

WATCH OUT: SUBJECT + VERB

Never place a comma between a subject and its verb.

✗ The results of the experiment, surprised the researchers.

✓ The results of the experiment surprised the researchers.

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The Fastest SAT Punctuation Check

Identify the sentence structure first. Then choose the punctuation.

01 FIND THE BOUNDARY
Locate exactly where the punctuation belongs.

02 TEST BOTH SIDES
Does each side contain a subject, a verb, and a complete thought?

03 MATCH THE PATTERN
Choose the punctuation that fits the sentence structure.

TWO COMPLETE SENTENCES

Use: Period · Semicolon · Comma + FANBOYS

The experiment failed**.** The researchers tried again.

The experiment failed**;** the researchers tried again.

The experiment failed**,** but the researchers tried again.

INTRODUCTORY DEPENDENT CLAUSE + COMPLETE SENTENCE

Use: Comma

Because the experiment failed**,** the researchers tried again.

Remember: the introductory clause cannot stand alone.

COMPLETE SENTENCE + EXPLANATION

Use: Colon · Single dash

The researchers needed one final item**:** a microscope.

The researchers needed one final item**—**a microscope.

Remember: the words before the punctuation must form a complete sentence.

REMOVABLE INFORMATION

Use: Two commas · Two dashes · Parentheses

The microscope**,** an unusually powerful model**,** revealed the organism.

The microscope**—**an unusually powerful model**—** revealed the organism.

The microscope **(**an unusually powerful model**)** revealed the organism.

Removal test: The microscope revealed the organism.

ELIMINATE THESE IMMEDIATELY

- ✗ Comma alone between two complete sentences
- ✗ Colon after an incomplete thought
- ✗ One-sided punctuation around removable information
- ✗ Comma between a subject and its verb

THE GOLDEN RULE

Do not choose punctuation by sound. Prove what appears on both sides.

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Apostrophes

Use an apostrophe to show possession or form a contraction.

SINGULAR POSSESSION

For a singular noun,
add apostrophe + s.

scientist → scientist's conclusion

the conclusion of the scientist →
the scientist's conclusion

PLURAL POSSESSION

For a plural noun ending in s,
place the apostrophe after the s.

scientists → scientists' conclusions

the conclusions of the scientists →
the scientists' conclusions

CONTRACTIONS

Use an apostrophe to show where letters have been omitted.

do not → don't | cannot → can't | will not → won't

IT'S vs. ITS

IT'S

Always means it is.

It's time to record
the organism's growth.

ITS

Shows possession.
Never use an apostrophe.

The organism changed
its shape.

WATCH OUT: FALSE PLURALS

Never use an apostrophe simply to make a word plural.

✗ Several scientist's participated. | ✓ Several scientists participated.

FAST CHECK

If you can replace it's with it is, use the apostrophe.
If not, use its.