



ACT English lesson that will raise your score!

Sentences and punctuation for sentences in the English section of the ACT is a challenge for many students. Luckily, there are rules you can apply, and the answer will be clear if you follow these steps.

Many of the questions will involve evaluating the sentence structure and then determining which punctuation is needed. We will begin with general punctuation rules:

1. Figure out if the sentence is an independent clause (complete thought) – does it have a subject and verb?
2. How many of these independent clauses are in the sentence?
3. If you have more than one, it is a compound sentence and MUST have a comma (,) plus a conjunction (FANBOYS- for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) or a semicolon (;)
4. Do not be tricked by extra introductory phrases or examples set off with commas. The first step is to identify the independent clauses/complete thoughts in the sentence.
5. There may be a phrase used at the beginning with a subject and verb but is NOT an independent clause. In that case, you would need a comma directly **after** that phrase and before the beginning of the independent clause.

Ex. After the thumping music initiated the dancing in the nightclub the floor – only 15 ft. sq. – was packed and sweaty.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. nightclub, and
- C. nightclub;
- D. nightclub,

What is the answer? Follow the steps!

- Where are the independent clauses? There is one in this sentence. It is highlighted.

After the thumping music initiated the dancing in the nightclub the floor – only 15 ft. sq. – was packed and sweaty.

- Because the beginning phrase, *After the thumping music initiated the dancing in the nightclub*, is not an independent clause, apply rule 5!
- Yes! The answer is D.

Specific rules for Commas (,), semicolons (;), colons (:) and Dashes (-). The following lesson is not *all* there is to know about this punctuation, but the most tested.

The most tested use of **COMMAS** on the ACT are for these 3 reasons:

1. Use a comma plus a conjunction when joining independent clauses. You can NOT use just a comma – remember FANBOYS

Ex. The music in the club changed unexpectedly, the crowd stayed on the floor!

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. changed unexpectedly. The
- C. changed unexpectedly, but

D. changed, unexpectedly, but

What is the answer? Follow the steps!

- Where are the independent clauses? I have highlighted them here:

The music in the club changed unexpectedly, the crowd stayed on the floor!

- Look at rule #1 in this section.
- Yes! The answer is C

2. Use a comma when linking a dependent clause (not a complete thought) to an independent clause. This could be at the beginning or end of the sentence, as shown in our very first example.

Ex. At the end of the night I was just exhausted and begged my friends to leave.

- Follow the steps! I have highlighted the independent clause. The dependent clause at the beginning is introductory and should have a comma after *night*.

CORRECT ANSWER: At the end of the night, I was just exhausted and begged friends to leave.

Notice that "begged my friends to leave" is a dependent clause, so you would not add a comma before *and*

3. Use a pair of commas around unnecessary information. If you took out the phrase, the meaning of the sentence would not be affected.

Ex. Further studies have shown that most mammals, even the camel, have sweat glands.

- Follow the steps! I have highlighted the independent clause. The phrase in the middle interrupts with extra information and should have a comma before and after it.

Note that there are other uses for commas, as in dividing a list, but the above 3 rules are the most tested.

SEMICOLONS on the ACT are usually tested by applying these three rules:

1. Use a semicolon to join two or more closely related independent clauses that are **not** connected with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS - and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so). Basically, it can replace a period, but the clauses should relate to each other.

Ex. We talked all night long about our favorite music; we overslept in the morning.

2. Use a semicolon to join two closely related independent clauses that have a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so) if those clauses contain commas. The semicolon replaces where a comma would normally go to avoid confusion.

Ex. Lakisha wanted to play cards, board games, or charades; but Nancy wanted to play dodge ball, 4 square, or basketball.

3. Use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs, such as *therefore, thus, however, also, besides, finally, indeed, instead, meanwhile, moreover, namely, for example, for instance, nevertheless, next, still, then* when the word introduces a complete sentence. These words should connect two independent clauses in a compound sentence. Be sure to use a comma after the conjunctive adverb.

Ex. I decided not to do my homework last night; however, I was able to finish it on the bus this morning.

COLONS AND DASHES can sometimes be used interchangeably but the ACT will not usually have them both as an answer choice unless the answer is obviously something else. The most tested use of colons and dashes on the ACT are for these reasons:

1. There is a group of words that provides a list, explanation, example or additional reasons for the independent clause.
2. A colon would always be used to introduce a list, not a dash.

Ex. The fire department showed to at the club check on many issues: capacity, fire doors, and exits.

3. A set of dashes can be used in the middle of a sentence (or one at the end) to provide a detail or extra information that is not directly related to the main point of the sentence.

Ex. The club management – the same company who owns the bowling management – was cited for 2 fire code violations.

4. A colon can also be used to provide extra information, but the phrase would be directly related or provide extra clarification.

Ex. There were many values the two main characters shared, but one was most prominent throughout the story: loyalty.

Note, by continuing to identify the independent clause(s) first, you will understand the main idea of sentence, helping you see if the rest of the information provided is extra or is it needed.

Refer to this guide when you complete your ACT practice questions!

Also, remember to skip and move on if you are stuck. Answer all the questions you know immediately FIRST and go back for the rest. All questions have the same weight.

For tutoring, contact me at www.nextstepcollegeconsult.com

