Writing Skills & the PSAT
3 Types of Questions

1. Identifying Sentence Errors (14/39) – “easy”

2. Improving Sentences (20/39) – “medium”

3. Improving Paragraphs (5/39) – “hard”
Identifying Sentence Errors Tips

• Remember that the error, *if there is one*, must be in an underlined part of the sentence. Don’t worry about the rest of the sentence.

• Use your ear. Does it sound right? You don’t have to explain why it is wrong, just know that something *is*.

• Be systematic, check each underlined section. *Most of the sentences will have errors*, but 10 - 20% will *not* have errors.
Air pollution caused by industrial fumes has been studied for years, but only recently has the harmful effects of noise pollution become known. No error.

- **Correct Answer:** C
- **Explanation:**
The error in this sentence is (C): the verb "has" (which is singular) does not agree in number with the noun "effects" (which is plural). The noun phrase "harmful effects" is the subject of the verb phrase "has become known." The correct sentence reads: **Air pollution caused by industrial fumes has been studied for years, but only recently have the harmful effects of noise pollution become known.**
Improving Sentences Tips

• If you spot an error in the underlined section, eliminate choice A (always no change) and any other answer that contains the same error.

• One of the most common types of mistakes that inexperienced physicians make is misreading symptoms, another that occurs about as frequently is recommending inappropriate treatment.

(A) symptoms, another that occurs
(B) symptoms; another one that occurs
(C) symptoms, the other, and it occurs
(D) symptoms; another one which is occurring
(E) symptoms and also occurring
Improving Sentences Tips

• If you *don’t* spot an error in the underlined section, look at the answer choices to see what is changed to help you out.

• **Pay attention to shorter answer choices.** (This can apply to improving paragraphs too.) Good prose uses words efficiently.
Improving Paragraphs Tips

• Skim or read the passage first, \textit{then} read the questions. Do \textit{not} read the questions first.

• Which questions should I tackle first?
  – 1\textsuperscript{st}: Improving individual sentence questions in the passage

  \textbf{Example:} In context, which is the best version of "He tells them" in sentence 7?

  – 2\textsuperscript{nd}: Improving the passage as a whole

  \textbf{Example:} Which of the following is the best way to combine sentences 2, 3, and 4 in order to convey clearly the relationship of the ideas?
Improving Paragraphs Tips

• Consider whether the addition of signal words/phrases would strengthen the passage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Type</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Cause-and-Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signal Words/Phrases</td>
<td>Although Despite However In contrast Nevertheless On the contrary On the other hand</td>
<td>Additionally Furthermore In addition Likewise Moreover</td>
<td>Accordingly As a result of Because Consequently Hence Therefore Thus</td>
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</table>
Don’t freak out about the grammar questions, because the PSAT really tests only five basic grammatical concepts:

1. Verbs
2. Nouns
3. Pronouns
4. Prepositions
5. Other Little Things
Verbs

- A verb is an action word.
- It tells what the subject of the sentence is doing.
- There are three types of errors you can see with verbs:
  1. Agreement
  2. Parallelism
  3. Tense
Agreement

• Verbs must always *agree* in number with the subjects with which they are paired.

• So if you have a singular subject (Jake, the car, she, Europe), it must be paired with a singular verb (is, was, plays, rocks).

• Singular verbs generally have an “s” on the end, like plural nouns.

• The trick is to determine what is *really* the subject and what is *really* the verb.
  – Don’t let prepositional phrases get in your way!
  – In fact, you can cross them out!
Let's look at an agreement question

The statistics released by the state department makes the economic situation look bleaker than it really is.

A. makes the economic situation look bleaker than it really is
B. makes the economic situations look bleaker than they really are
C. make the economic situations look bleaker than it really is
D. make the economic situation look bleaker than it really is
E. make the economic situation look more bleak than it really is
Collective Nouns

- Collective nouns can be tricky, because they are usually GROUPS; remember, though, collective nouns are always SINGULAR!
- The family is
- The jury is
- The group is
- The audience is
- The company is
- The government is
- The United States (or any other country) is
Compound Subjects

- Subjects joined by AND are PLURAL.
- Subjects joined by OR can be either SINGULAR or PLURAL.
- It depends on the last noun.
  - If it is singular, conjugate for the singular.
  - If it is plural, conjugate for the plural.
- These pronouns are ALWAYS SINGULAR:
  - Either
  - Neither
  - None
  - Each
  - Anyone
  - Everyone
  - No one
Let’s Look at a Question

• Pam Cruise and Jim Braswell, (A) **neither** of (B) **whom** takes the bus to work, (C) **is** secretly plotting (D) **to take over** the world. (E) **No error.**

Pam Cruise and Jim Braswell is plural. “Is” should be “are”.
The next thing you need to check when you see a verb is whether it is parallel to the other verbs in the sentence.

As a competitor in the Iron Man competition, Paula was required to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and running the last 26 miles.

A. running the last 26 miles
B. to run the last 26 miles
C. run the last 26 miles
D. ran the last 26 miles
E. she had to run the last 26 miles
Finally, verbs need to be in the proper *tense*, such as past, present, or future. Verb tenses should generally be consistent in a sentence unless the meaning requires different tenses.

• (A) Throughout the Middle Ages, women *work* (B) beside men, knowing that the effort of men and women alike was (D) *essential* to survival. (E) No error.
Pronouns

- Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns.
- As with verbs, there are three types of errors that a pronoun can have:
  1. Agreement
  2. Ambiguity
  3. Case
Agreement

- Pronouns must agree in number with the nouns they replace.
- Singular pronouns replace singular nouns.
- Plural pronouns replace plural noun.
- The noun that the pronoun replaces is known as the *antecedent*.
- The key to these types of questions is figuring out the antecedent *and* the pronoun, and then deciding if they should both be plural or if they should both be singular.
Tricky stuff

• These pronouns are ALL SINGULAR.
• EVERY TIME.
• NO MATTER WHAT.
  – Either
  – Neither
  – Each
  – Anybody
  – No one
  – Everyone
  – Everything

• Please remember.
Let’s try one!

• Everyone (A)on the softball team (B)who came up to bat squinted (C)at the pitcher in order to keep the sun’s glaring rays out of (D)their eyes. (E)No error.
Ambiguity

• When you see a pronoun in a sentence on the PSAT, you should make sure it’s perfectly clear what the pronoun replaces.

• The director (A)told the star of the production that (B)he was making far too much money (C)to tolerate such nasty (D)treatment from the producer. (E)No error.
Case

Subjective Case
- I
- We
- You
- He
- She
- It
- They
- Who

Objective Case
- Me
- Us
- You
- Him
- Her
- It
- Them
- Whom
The I/Me Thing

• The book belongs to Jerry and I.
• The book belongs to Jerry and me.
• Take a look at each separately to determine which is correct.

• Clare is more creative than I.
• Clare is more creative than me.
• Add the verb “to be” at the end of the sentence (i.e. “I am”) to determine the correct case.
Idioms! Let’s practice

* I am indebted ________ you.
* I am resentful ________ you.
* I am delighted ________ you.
* I am jealous ________ you.
* I am worried ________ you.
* I am astounded ________ you.
* The women had a dispute ________ politics.
* You have a responsibility ________ take care of your pet.
* My friends are not so different ________ your friends.
Let’s try this one!

• (A) Despite the (B) poor weather, my sister (C) and I were planning (D) on attending the festival. (E) No error.
Other Little Things

The final area of grammar we’re going to cover is Other Little Things – some areas that are tested on the PSAT but don’t fall into our other categories.

1. Faulty comparisons
2. Misplaced modifiers
3. Adjectives/adverbs
4. Diction
5. Active/passive
Faulty Comparisons

• Apples to Apples
  – Larry goes shopping at Foodtown because the prices are better than Shop Rite.

• Do you count?
  – If you eat fewer French fries, you can use less ketchup.

• Two’s Company, Three or More Is...?
  – More (2 things) vs. Most (3 or more)
  – Less (2 things) vs. Least (3 or more)
  – Better (2 things) vs. Best (3 or more)
  – Between (2 things) vs. Among (3 or more)
Misplaced Modifiers

• Every time he goes to the bathroom outside, John praises his new puppy for being so good.

• Perhaps the most beautiful natural vegetation in the world, the west of Ireland explodes each spring with a tremendous variety of wildflowers.

— (Hint: use “home to”)
Movie cameras are no longer particularly costly, but film, development, and editing equipment cause the monetary expense of making a film to add up tremendous.

A. cause the monetary expense of making a film to add up tremendous

B. add tremendously to the expense of making a film

C. much increase the film-making expenses

D. add the tremendous expense of making a film

E. tremendously add up to the expense of making a film
Active/Passive Voice

- The **test makers prefer sentences written in the active voice** to sentences written in the passive voice.
- In the active voice, the subject of the sentence is doing something.
- In the passive voice, the main actor becomes the object, and is being acted upon.
- The word “by” often (but not always) highlights the passive voice.
  - Active: She took the PSAT.
  - Passive: The PSAT was taken by her.