

ACT English Test: Grammar Review

The English Test will never explicitly ask you to name a grammatical error. However, to identify and correct errors, you must first understand what they are. While you'll often be able to rely on your ear to detect errors, many of the questions will ask you to fix phrases that are fine for spoken English but not for formal written English.

In the following sections, we'll cover these grammar issues, which appear on the English Test:

1. Subject-Verb Agreement
2. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement
3. Pronoun Cases
4. Verb Tenses
5. Adverbs and Adjectives
6. Idioms
7. Comparative and Superlative Modifiers

Subject-Verb Agreement

Singular verbs must accompany singular subjects, and plural verbs must accompany plural subjects.

SINGULAR:

- The man wears four ties.
- His favorite college is in Nebraska.
- Matt, along with his friends, goes to Coney Island.

PLURAL:

- The men wear four ties each.
- His favorite colleges are in Nebraska.
- Matt and his friends go to Coney Island.

In the first example with Matt, the subject is singular because the phrase “along with his friends” is isolated in commas. But in the second example with Matt, his friends join the action; the subject becomes “Matt and his friends,” calling for the change to a plural verb.

Subject-verb agreement is a simple idea, but ACT writers will make it tricky. Often, they'll put the subject at one end of the sentence and the verb a mile away. Try the following example:

Example:

17.

An audience of thousands of expectant

A. NO CHANGE

people who have come from afar to listen

B. seems

to live music in an outdoor setting seem (17)

C. have seemed

terrifying to a nervous performer.

D. to seem

To solve this problem, cross out the junk in the middle that separates the subject, “an audience,” from the verb “seem.” Remember that the subject of a sentence can never be part of a phrase that begins with “of.” You're left with:

An audience seem terrifying to a nervous performer.

Now you can see what the verb should be:

An audience seems terrifying to a nervous performer.

So the correct answer is B. Double-check by eliminating choices C and D because they are grammatically incorrect (and because they don't make much sense in the sentence).

As long as you can isolate the subject and verb, handling subject-verb agreement is relatively simple. But certain cases of subject-verb agreement can be tricky. The ACT writers like to test you on several of these difficult types of subject-verb agreement.

Collective Nouns

Collective nouns (such as *committee*, *family*, *group*, *number*, and *team*) can be either singular or plural. The verb depends on whether the collective noun is being treated as a single unit or as divided individuals.

SINGULAR: The number of people living in Florida varies from year to year.

PLURAL: A number of people living in Florida wish they had voted for Gore.

SINGULAR: The committee decides on the annual program.

PLURAL: The committee have disagreed on the annual program.

You can often determine whether a collective noun is singular or plural by examining the article (“the” or “a”) that precedes it. As in the first example, “The number” is generally singular, while “A number” is generally plural.

This difference is demonstrated in the first example above. “The number” of people in Florida is a single entity—even though it comprises multiple individuals—so it takes a singular verb, *varies*. “A number” of people, on the other hand, behave as multiple individuals—even though they wish for the same thing, they act independently of each other—so these people require a plural verb, *wish*.

Looking to the article preceding a noun is a useful trick when deciding whether the noun is singular or plural, but it doesn’t always work. In the second example, “The committee” can be both singular and plural. How the committee behaves (do they act together or apart?) decides whether the verb is singular or plural.

If the committee acts as a unified whole (“decides on the annual program”), then the verb is singular.

If the committee members act individually (“have disagreed on the annual program”), then the verb is plural.

Indefinite Pronouns

Indefinite pronouns refer to persons or things that have not been specified. Matching indefinite pronouns with the correct verb form can be tricky because some indefinite pronouns that seem to be plural are in fact singular. Questions dealing with singular indefinite pronouns are popular with ACT writers, so you’d be wise to memorize a few of these pronouns now.

The following indefinite pronouns are always singular, and they tend to appear on the English Test:

Another	Everybody	Nobody
Anybody	Everyone	No one
Anyone	Everything	Somebody
Anything	Each	Someone

All the indefinite pronouns in the list above should be followed by singular verbs.

Examples:

- Anyone over the age of 21 is eligible to vote in the United States.
- Each has its own patch of grass.

If you’re used to thinking these pronouns take plural verbs, these sentences probably sound weird to you. Your best bet is to memorize the list above (it’s not very long!) and to remember that those pronouns take singular verbs.

You should also be aware that not all indefinite pronouns are singular. Some (for example, *all*, *any*, *none*, and *some*) can be either singular or plural depending on the context of the sentence.

Other indefinite pronouns (for example, *both*, *few*, *many*, and *several*) are always plural.

The differences among these indefinite pronouns can be very confusing; determining what’s right often requires an astute sense of proper English (or good memorization).

If you’re struggling to remember the different indefinite pronouns, take comfort in these two things:

1. The most commonly tested indefinite pronouns are the singular ones in the list above.
2. You probably won’t come across more than a couple of indefinite pronouns on the English Test you take.

Compound Subjects

Most compound subjects (subjects joined by *and*) should be plural:

- Kerry and Vanessa live in Nantucket.
- The blue bike and the red wagon need repairs.

The reasoning behind this rule is fairly simple: you have multiple subjects, so you need a plural verb. Thus “Kerry and Vanessa live” and “the bike and wagon need.”

“There Is” or “There Are”?

Whether to use “there is” or “there are” depends on the singularity or plurality of the noun that the phrase is pointing out.

If you have five grapes, you should say:

“There are five grapes.”

If you have a cat, you should say:

“There is a cat.”

The *is* and the *are* in these sentences are the main verbs, so they must agree with the noun.

“Or” and “Nor”

If you have singular subjects joined by an *or* or *nor*, the sentence always takes a singular verb.

Example:

Either Susannah or Caitlin is going to be in trouble.

If one of the subjects is plural and the other is singular, the verb agrees with the subject closer to it.

Examples:

- Neither the van nor the buses were operating today.
- Either the dogs or the cat is responsible for the mess.

Both of these examples contain a singular and a plural subject. The main verb of the sentence is determined by the subject nearest it:

In the first example, “buses” is closer to the verb, so the verb is plural; in the second example, “cat” is closer to the verb, so the verb is singular.

Mathematics, News, Dollars, Physics

These and other words look plural but are singular in usage:

Today’s news was full of tragic stories.

Trust your gut instinct with these words. You’ll probably know they’re singular from everyday usage.

“Dollars” is an exceptional case—it’s singular when you’re talking about an amount of money (“Ninety dollars is a big chunk of change”) but plural when you’re discussing a particular group of bills (“The dollars in my pocket are green”).

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun. The antecedent is the noun that the pronoun refers to. A pronoun must agree in number and gender with its antecedent.

Example:

When a person shops, *he or she* should use coupons.

Here, “a person” is singular, so the pronoun must also be singular — *he or she*, not *they*.

If the antecedent were plural, we would use *they*:

When people shop, *they* should use coupons.

Common Pronoun-Antecedent Mistakes

- 1. Pronoun without a clear antecedent
 - ✗ *In the paper it says they will lower taxes.*
(Who are “they”?)
 - ✓ *The article says the government will lower taxes.*
- 2. Singular antecedent with plural pronoun
 - ✗ *Each student must hand in their test on time.*
 - ✓ *Each student must hand in his or her test on time.*
- 3. Collective nouns
 - ✗ *The team must submit their roster.*
 - ✓ *The team must submit its roster.*

(Unless the team members are acting individually:

The team disagree among themselves about the strategy.)

Pronoun Case

Pronouns change form depending on how they are used in a sentence — as a subject, object, or possessive.

Here’s a quick reference chart:

Subject Pronouns	Object Pronouns	Possessive Pronouns
I	me	my, mine
you	you	your, yours
he	him	his
she	her	her, hers
it	it	its
we	us	our, ours
they	them	their, theirs
who	whom	whose

1. Subject Pronouns

Use subject pronouns (I, he, she, we, they, who) when the pronoun does the action.

Examples:

- He runs every morning.
 - They are going to the concert.
 - Who is at the door?
-

2. Object Pronouns

Use object pronouns (me, him, her, us, them, whom) when the pronoun receives the action.

Examples:

- The teacher called me.
 - The gift was for her.
 - The kids waved to them.
-

3. Possessive Pronouns

Use possessive pronouns (my, mine, his, hers, its, our, ours, their, theirs, whose) to show ownership.

Examples:

- That book is mine.
 - The cat licked its paw.
 - Is this your phone?
-

Who vs. Whom

A favorite of ACT question writers!

- Who is used as a subject.
- Whom is used as an object.

Trick: Try replacing the pronoun with *he* or *him*:

- If *he* fits → use who.
- If *him* fits → use whom.

Examples:

- (He) is calling → Who is calling?
 - You called (him) → Whom did you call?
-

Verb Tenses

Verb tense tells us when an action happens — past, present, or future. Keeping verb tenses consistent in a sentence or passage is essential for clarity.

1. Present Tense

- Used for actions happening now or general truths.
- Examples:
 - She walks to school. / Water boils at 100°C.

2. Past Tense

- Used for actions completed in the past.
- Examples:
 - He watched the movie last night. / They went to the park yesterday.

3. Future Tense

- Used for actions that will happen later.
- Formed with *will* or *shall* + base verb.
- Examples:
 - I will call you tomorrow. / They shall arrive soon.

Verb Tense Consistency

A sentence or passage should maintain the same time frame unless there's a clear reason to shift tense.

Incorrect:

She was walking to school and plays basketball every day.

Correct:

She was walking to school and was playing basketball every day.

or

She walks to school and plays basketball every day.

Perfect Tenses

Perfect tenses describe actions that relate to a specific point in time or another action.

Tense	Form	Example
Present Perfect	has/have + past participle	She has finished her homework.
Past Perfect	had + past participle	They had left before the party started.
Future Perfect	will have + past participle	By tomorrow, I will have completed the project.

Examples Explained

- Present Perfect connects past action to present:
I have seen that movie (and I still remember it now).
- Past Perfect shows an action was completed before another past action:
She had eaten before he arrived.
- Future Perfect shows an action that will be completed before a specific future time:
By next year, they will have graduated.

Common Verb Tense Errors on the ACT

1. Incorrect shift in tense
 -  *He goes to the store and bought some milk.*
 -  *He went to the store and bought some milk.*
2. Wrong tense for hypothetical or conditional statements
 -  *If I was you, I would study more.*
 -  *If I were you, I would study more.*
3. Using simple past instead of past perfect to show sequence
 -  *After she left, he called.* (Ambiguous timing)
 -  *After she had left, he called.*

Subjunctive Mood

Used for wishes, hypotheticals, or recommendations.

- Use *were* instead of *was* for all subjects in hypotheticals:
If I *were* rich, I would travel the world.
 - Use the base verb after verbs like *suggest*, *recommend*, or *insist*:
I *suggest* that he *study* harder.
-

Modifiers

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that provide description or detail in a sentence. They help clarify meaning but can cause confusion if placed incorrectly.

1. Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is placed too far from the word it describes, which can confuse the reader.

Example:

Incorrect: She served sandwiches to the children on paper plates.
(Implies children were on paper plates!)

Correct:

She served sandwiches on paper plates to the children.

2. Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier lacks a clear subject to modify and thus "hangs" without a proper connection.

Example:

Incorrect: Running quickly, the finish line was crossed first by Sarah.
("Running quickly" describes Sarah, but Sarah isn't the subject of the phrase)

Correct:

Running quickly, Sarah crossed the finish line first.

How to Fix Dangling Modifiers

- Add the missing subject that the modifier describes.
 - Reword the sentence to clarify who or what the modifier refers to.
-

Common Modifiers

- Participial phrases:
 - *Walking down the street*, she saw a dog.
 - Prepositional phrases:
 - The book *on the table* is mine.
 - Infinitive phrases:
 - He wants *to win the race*.
-

Tips for Modifiers on the ACT

- Make sure the modifier is next to the word it modifies.
 - Check if the modifier has a clear subject.
 - Watch out for modifiers at the beginning or end of sentences — these often cause problems.
-

Examples from ACT-style questions

Q: Incorrect: After eating the dog food, the dog bowl was empty.

A: Correct: After the dog ate the dog food, the bowl was empty.

Pronouns

Pronouns replace nouns to avoid repetition but can cause confusion if they don't agree or are unclear.

1. Pronoun Agreement

Pronouns must agree with the nouns they replace in:

- Number (singular/plural)
- Gender (he/she/they)

Example:

Incorrect: Each student must bring their book.

(Since *each student* is singular, "their" should be "his or her")

Correct:

Each student must bring his or her book.

Or rewrite to avoid awkwardness:

All students must bring their books.

2. Pronoun Case

Pronouns change form depending on whether they're the subject, object, or possessive in a sentence.

Case	Example
Subject	I, he, she, they
Object	me, him, her, them
Possessive	my, his, her, their

Common mistakes:

- Using object pronouns as subjects or vice versa.
 - Example:
Incorrect: Him and I went to the store.
Correct: He and I went to the store.
-

3. Pronoun Clarity

Pronouns must clearly refer to a specific noun. Avoid vague or ambiguous references.

Example:

Incorrect: When John talked to Mike, he was angry.

(Who was angry: John or Mike?)

Better:

John was angry when he talked to Mike.

Tips for Pronouns on the ACT

- Identify the noun the pronoun replaces.
 - Check if the pronoun agrees in number and gender.
 - Use the correct case depending on function in the sentence.
 - Avoid unclear or ambiguous pronouns.
-

Examples from ACT-style questions

Q: Incorrect: Neither of the boys brought their lunch.

A: Correct: Neither of the boys brought his lunch.

Q: Incorrect: Between you and I, this is a secret.

A: Correct: Between you and me, this is a secret.

Verb Tense & Mood

Verbs show when an action happens (tense) and the attitude or reality of the action (mood).

1. Verb Tense

Keep verb tense consistent and logical within sentences and paragraphs.

- Past: action happened before now.
 - *She walked to school yesterday.*
 - Present: action happening now or generally true.
 - *She walks to school every day.*
 - Future: action that will happen.
 - *She will walk to school tomorrow.*
-

Consistency

Avoid shifting tenses unnecessarily. If a sentence starts in past tense, stay in past unless there's a clear reason to change.

Incorrect:

He went to the store and buys some milk.

Correct:

He went to the store and bought some milk.

2. Verb Mood

Mood shows the speaker's attitude:

- Indicative: states facts or opinions.
 - *She is happy.*
 - Imperative: gives commands or requests.
 - *Please sit down.*
 - Subjunctive: expresses wishes, hypotheticals, or demands.
-

Subjunctive mood examples:

- *I wish I were taller.* (not "was")
 - *If he were here, he'd help.*
 - *It's essential that she be present.*
-

Tips for Verb Tense & Mood on the ACT

- Identify the time frame and keep tense consistent.
 - Use the subjunctive mood for hypothetical or wished-for situations.
 - Watch for tricky verbs like "were" in subjunctive statements.
-

Examples from ACT-style questions

Q: Incorrect: If I was you, I'd study more.

A: Correct: If I were you, I'd study more.

Q: Incorrect: She have to finish the report.

A: Correct: She has to finish the report.
