

15 Tips to Improve Your Conventions and Sentence Fluency Scores

Tip #1 – Capitalize Correctly

Capitalized letters both signal the start of a sentence and help the reader understand how a word is being used. For example, march refers to an action while March refers to a month. Also, knowing when to capitalize and when not to will help you improve your conventions grade and help your writing make a better impression on your readers.

Here are some basic guidelines as to when you should capitalize:

- ❖ First Word of a Sentence
 - Always capitalize the first word of a sentence or quoted sentence.
- ❖ Proper Noun
 - Always capitalize nouns that refer to a particular person, place or thing.
 - EX: Mary, Riverton, Wind River
- ❖ Titles of People
 - Capitalize the titles of people when they are placed before the name, after the name on a signature or address line, and when the title is being used instead of the name as a direct address.
 - Ex: Mrs. Murray
 - Ex: Joanne Flanagan, Principal
 - Ex: Why do you think I'm sick, Doctor?
- ❖ Titles of Publications
 - Always capitalize the first word and last word regardless of part of speech and all other words with the exception of articles, coordinating conjunctions and prepositions.
 - Ex: *The Bean Trees*
 - Ex: *A Tale of Two Cities*
- ❖ Titles of Courses
 - English III
 - American History
- ❖ Salutations and Complimentary Closes
 - To whom it may concern,
 - Dear Mr. Smith
 - With thanks, Jen
 - Sincerely, Mrs. Murray

Tip #2 – Punctuate Properly

Punctuation marks are the road signs that keep written texts orderly. They tell the reader when to pause, when to stop and what words go together to create a unit of meaning. Just to review, here are some of the rules for using common punctuation marks in your writing:

❖ Comma

- Use a comma to connect two adjectives.
 - The sly, mischievous cat pounced on the small, oblivious Chihuahua.
- Use commas surrounding extra information that disrupts the flow of a sentence.
- Use a comma to separate a city and a state.
 - Ex: Riverton, WY
- Use a comma to separate a statement from a question.
 - You remembered to write down the homework, right?
- Use commas to introduce or interrupt a direct quotation.
 - “Writing,” according to Strunk and White, “should be clear and concise.”
- Use a comma with a coordinating conjunction to connect two independent clauses.
 - It rained on Sunday, so I didn’t get to take my dog to the park.
- Use a comma to connect a dependent clause to an independent clause when the dependent clause begins the sentence.
 - When the weather is pleasant, I like to take my dog to the park on Sundays.

❖ Semicolon

- Use a semicolon to connect two sentences.
 - It rained on Sunday; I didn’t get to take my dog to the park.
- Use a semicolon to separate items in a list when the items include commas.
 - Ex: The following cities have football teams: Denver, Colorado; Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; Buffalo, NY; Dallas, Texas.

❖ Colon

- Use a colon at the end of a sentence to introduce a list.
 - Ex: I want you to take out the following items: the poem, your notebook, a pen.

❖ Apostrophe

- Use an apostrophe in place of missing letters to create a contraction.
 - Ex: can’t
- Use an apostrophe to show possession.
 - Mary’s dog; Billy’s bat

❖ Period

- Use a period at the end of a declarative sentence.
 - Ex: I went to the park on Sunday.

❖ Question Mark

- Use a question mark at the end of an interrogative sentence.
 - Ex: What did you do this weekend?
- ❖ Exclamation Point
 - Use an exclamation point at the end of a sentence to show emphasis or surprise. (Use these sparingly, especially on formal writing assignments.)

Tip #3 – Combine Clauses Competently

Clauses are the building blocks of sentences, so if you want to achieve a high score on your use of sentences, you need to be able to properly combine different types of clauses in different ways. The two basic clauses you need to know how to use are independent clauses and dependent clauses.

❖ Independent Clauses

- Independent clauses contain both a subject and a verb and do not begin with a subordinating conjunction. An easy way to remember this is that an independent clause can stand alone as a simple sentence.
- Here are the rules you should know for combining two independent clauses:
 1. Use a comma to separate independent clauses when you use a coordinating conjunction. (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet)
 - i. Ex: It rained on Sunday, so I didn't take my dog to the park.
 2. Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses if there are no coordinating conjunctions.
 - i. Ex: It rained on Sunday; I didn't take my dog to the park.
 3. Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses when you use a conjunctive adverb. (however, therefore, thus, consequently, finally, nevertheless)
 - i. Ex: It rained on Sunday; consequently, I didn't take my dog to the park.

❖ Dependent Clauses

- Dependent clauses are clauses that begin with a subordinating conjunction, so they rely on an independent clause to complete their meaning. A sentence could have anywhere from one to one hundred dependent clauses as long as there is at least one dependent clause to complete its meaning. A sentence that contains only dependent clauses would be considered a fragment, or incomplete sentence.
- Here are the rules for combining dependent clauses with independent clauses:
 1. If the dependent clause comes first, use a comma to connect it to the independent clause.
 - i. Ex: When the weather is pleasant, I like to take my dog to the park on Sundays.
 2. You do not need to use any punctuation if the dependent clause follows the independent clause. (The subordinating conjunction links the two clauses adequately without a need for punctuation.)
 - i. Ex: I like to take my dog to the park on Sundays when the weather is pleasant.

Tip #4 – Avoid Misplaced or Dangling Modifiers

Misplaced and dangling modifiers often create humorous, illogical sentences that do not reflect the desired meaning. While they might be good for a laugh, if your goal is clear and concise writing, it is imperative that you free your writing of such errors.

1. Misplaced Modifier – A word or phrase meant to modify one word in a sentence that is not properly placed with the result of modifying the wrong word.

Ex: Incorrect - Maya found her keys walking home.

Correct – While walking home Maya found her keys.

2. Dangling Modifier – A word or phrase meant to modify a word has been left out of the sentence.

Ex: Incorrect – After several hours of searching, the lost homework was found.

Correct – After several hours of searching, Billy found the lost homework.

Tip #5– Subjective (Nominative)Pronouns vs. Objective Pronouns

Ever have trouble deciding whether to use he or him? Or the ubiquitous decision of deciding between who and whom? Learning the difference between nominative and objective pronouns can help take away your anxiety.

Nominative pronouns refer to pronouns that take the place of the subject in a sentence.

Objective pronouns refer to objects in the predicate that receive action, such as direct objects.

Nominative Pronouns

I
You
He
She
It
We
They
Who

Objective Pronouns

Me
You
Him
Her
It
us
Them
Whom

When you write a sentence, use a nominative pronoun as the subject and an objective pronoun as the object in the predicate.

Ex: I went to the mall with them.

Who sent the package to me?

He went to the movies with whom? **Or** Who went to the movies with him?

Tip #6 – Ambiguous Pronouns

While pronouns can be a great way of varying our diction, it is important that we always make sure that what the pronoun refers to is completely clear to our readers. If you see a sentence where you cannot clearly tell to what a pronoun refers use a noun to clear up the meaning. If you see a sentence with an ambiguous pronoun on the SAT you can be sure that sentence is wrong.

Ex 1: Farmers need to feed the cows early to make sure they do not get irritated.
(Who gets irritated? The farmers? The cows?)

Ex 2: A grasshopper eats grass because it is nice.
(What is nice? The grasshopper? The grass?)

Tip #7 – Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Make sure your pronoun always agrees with the noun, or antecedent, to which it refers. Using a singular pronoun with a plural noun or vice versa is a common error that can cause confusion in your writing.

Ex: Incorrect – The team won their last game.
Correct – The team won its last game.

Tip # 8 – Subject -Verb Agreement

One of the first things you should check for on Error ID questions to make sure the subject and the verb of the sentence match. It is important that plural nouns go with plural verbs and singular nouns with singular verbs.

Ex.1: Incorrect- He look at the sky.
Correct – He looks at the sky.

Ex. 2: Incorrect – In the spring flowers all over town blooms.
Correct – In the spring flowers all over town bloom.

Tip #9 – Compound Subjects

There are a few rules that you need to know for dealing with compound subjects.

1. Nouns joined by and are considered plural.

Ex.: Claire and the kids went to the park.

2. Nouns joined by “either” and “or” or “neither” and “nor” follow the **proximity rule**. The noun closest to the verb determines the tense.

Ex. 1: Either the dog or the cats were responsible for the mess.

Ex. 2: Neither the cats nor the dog was anywhere in sight.

Tip #10 – Verb Tense Agreement

Verb tense agreement errors occur when two verbs in a sentence use different tenses when they should use the same tense. The tense of the verb determines the time the verb occurs, so when verb tenses disagree, it can confuse your intended meaning. There are six different possible verb tenses:

Tense	Example
Present	I walk.
Past	I walked.
Future (will or shall + infinitive)	I will walk.
Present Perfect (have or has + past participle)	I have walked.
Past Perfect (had + past participle)	I had walked.
Future Perfect (will have or shall have + past participle)	I will have walked.

Always look at your sentences to make sure that you change verb tenses within a sentence unless you are consciously depicting changes in tense.

Ex. Incorrect - The car careened through the narrow streets and stops short at the light.

Correct – The car careened through the narrow streets and stopped short at the light.

Tip #9 – Always Use Parallel Structure for Lists

Items in a list should always have a parallel, or uniform, structure. Sentences using parallel structures can also be used for effect in writing by emphasizing the connections between important ideas.

Ex. 1: Incorrect- The girl hopped, skipped, and jumps on her way to school.

Correct – The girl hopped, skipped, and jumped on her way to school.

Ex. 2: Incorrect – Writing, revising, and to proofread are all important parts of the writing process.

Correct - Writing, revising, and proofreading are all important parts of the writing process.

Tip #10 – Compare Comparables

Whenever you come across a comparison check to make sure that the comparison is between compatible items. You can compare apples to apples and people to people, but you really don't want to compare apples to people.

Ex. 1: Incorrect: She likes coffee better than me.

Correct: She likes coffee better than I like coffee.

Ex. 2: Incorrect: Jane Austen's novels have lasted longer than many other authors of her time.

Correct: Jane Austen's novels have lasted longer than many books by authors of her time.

Tip #11– Use Easily Confused Word Pairs Correctly

Do you ever get confused by all of the word pairs in our language that are spelled differently and mean different things but sound almost exactly the same? I'm talking about pairs like accept/except or principle/principal. Using these easy to confuse words

properly will help boost your ethos as a writer by making your writing sound more sophisticated.

Tip #12– Know Your Common Idioms

Like the pet peeves, these idioms are items you just have to know.

Responsible for	Differ from	Jealous of
Responsibility to	Transition from	Threat of
Try to	Debate over	Consist of
Conform to	Dispute over	Angry about
Required to	Define as	Worried about
Compare to	Depict as	Concerned about
Argue with	Regard as	Believed to be
Tamper with	Provide for	Conviction that
Associate with	Reasons for	Notion that
Buy from	In search of	Surprising that
Divergent from	Resentful of	

Tip #13 – Articulate Actively by Avoiding Passive Voice

Passive voice, often seen as a sign of weak writing, occurs when the subject and object in a sentence are reversed. This can make your writing seem less confident, and can confuse the intended meaning of your sentence. You can avoid this error by learning how to change sentences from the passive to the active voice.

Ex 1: Passive- The store is closed every Sunday.

Active – The owner closes the store every Sunday.

Ex 2: Passive -The dog is walked everyday by the lady.

Active- The lady walks the dog everyday.

Also, avoid the use of the verb “to be” when you have another option available. This verb form is overused, often forms a passive voice, and contributes to wordiness.

Tip #14 –Wordiness

Don't say in 20 words what can just as easily be said in five. This is a frequent error that occurs when you aren't sure what words or sentence construction to use to get your idea across in a clear and concise manner. Learning to eliminate wordiness will help you write cleaner sentences that will express your ideas clearly to your reader.

Some methods for reducing wordiness include:

1. Replace forms of the verb “to be” with action verbs.
2. Reduce clauses to phrases and phrases to words
3. Exclude redundant words or phrases
4. Cut out any extra small words that are not essential to the meaning of your sentence

Wordy Example: For the most part I am generally not a big fan of the vegetable known as asparagus while I must admit I am quite partial to the taste of broccoli.

Correct Example: I hate asparagus but love broccoli.

Tip #15 - Vary Your Sentences

A sophisticated writer uses their knowledge of language to create sentences of varying length and construction for a specific purpose. Some of the ways sentences can be varied are:

1. Openings – Who wants to read a boring paragraph where every sentence begins with the article “the”. Spice up your writing with a variety of different openings.
2. Length – A passage with sentences that are all the same length can get monotonous. Changing the length of your sentences can shape the flow of your ideas in a way pleasing to a reader.
3. Structure – This goes hand in hand with varying your length. Consciously use a combination of simple, compound, complex, compound-complex and parallel sentences in your writing to promote clarity, flow and voice in your writing.