

ACT English Test: Grammar Review

As you've probably already gathered, the English Test will never *explicitly* ask you to name a grammatical error. But in order to identify and fix errors, you should know 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 section, 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:

An audience of thousands of expectant

people who have come from afar to listen

to live music in an outdoor setting seem

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B. seems

C. have seemed

D. to seem

terrifying to a nervous performer.

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.

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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. For example:

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 does something as a unified whole (“*decides on the annual program*”), then the verb is singular. If the committee are divided in their actions (“*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

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Anything	Each	Someone
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All the indefinite pronouns in the list above should be followed by singular verbs. For example, *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 we gave you.
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 noun. 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. For 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.

For example,

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, and 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

The ACT writers usually include several pronoun-antecedent agreement errors on the English Test.

An antecedent is a word to which a later pronoun refers back. For example, in the sentence "Richard put on his shoes," "Richard" is the antecedent to which "his" refers. When the pronoun does not agree in gender or number with its antecedent, there's an agreement error. For example:

WRONG: Already late for the show, Mary couldn't find their keys.

RIGHT: Already late for the show, Mary couldn't find her keys.

Unless another sentence states that the keys belong to other people, the possessive pronoun should agree in gender and number with "Mary." As far as we can tell, Mary is a singular, feminine noun, so the pronoun should be too.

The example of Mary contained a fairly obvious example of incorrect agreement, but sometimes the agreement error isn't as obvious on the ACT. In everyday speech, we tend to say "someone lost *their* shoe" (wrong) rather than "someone lost *his* shoe" (correct) or "someone lost *her* shoe" (also correct) because we don't want to exclude either gender and because "someone lost *his* or *her* shoe" sounds cumbersome. The common solution? We attempt gender neutrality and brevity by using "their" instead of "his" or "her." In informal speech, such a slip is okay. But if you see it on the test, it's an error.

You will also run into agreement errors where the antecedent is unclear. In these cases, the pronoun is ambiguous. We use ambiguous pronouns all the time in everyday speech, but on the test (you guessed it) they're wrong.

WRONG: Trot told Ted that he should get the mauve pants from the sale rack.

This sentence is wrong because we don't know to whom "he" refers. Should Ted get the pants, or should Trot? Or should neither, because mauve pants are never a good idea? You should restate the original sentence so all the pertinent information is relayed without confusion or multiple meanings, such as "Trot told Ted that Ted should get the pants...."

Pronoun Cases

The ACT writers will definitely include some questions on pronoun cases. Pronoun case refers to the role of the pronoun in a sentence. There are three cases: nominative, objective, and possessive. You don't need to know the names of these cases, but you do need to know the differences between them (and knowing the names doesn't hurt). Here, we'll briefly describe each case.

The Nominative Case

The nominative case should be used when a pronoun is the subject of a sentence—for example, “*I* went to the store” and “*They* walked to the park.” You should also use a nominative pronoun after any form of *to be*:

WRONG: It was me on the phone.

RIGHT: It was I on the phone.

The right sentence may sound awkward to you, but it’s the correct use of the nominative. The people who laid down the rules of grammar considered *to be* a grammatical equal sign, so when you have a sentence like “It was I on the phone,” you should be able to do this: “It” = “I.” If that equation holds true, “I” should be able to take the place of “It” in the sentence: “I was on the phone.”

PRONOUN COMPARISONS

The nominative also follows comparative clauses that usually begin with “as” or “than.” When a pronoun is involved in a comparison, it must match the case of the other pronoun involved. For example,

WRONG: I’m fatter than her, so I’ll probably win this sumo wrestling match.

RIGHT: I’m fatter than she, so I’ll probably win this sumo wrestling match.

In this sentence, “I” is being compared to “her.” Obviously, these two pronouns are in different cases, so one of them must be wrong. Since only “her” is in question, it must be wrong, and therefore “she” is the correct answer.

Another way to approach comparisons is to realize that comparisons usually omit words. For example, it’s grammatically correct to say, “Alexis is stronger than Bill,” but that’s an abbreviated version of what you’re really saying. The long version is, “Alexis is stronger than Bill is.” That last “is” is invisible in the abbreviated version, but you must remember that it’s there. Now let’s go back to the sumo sentence. As in our Alexis and Bill example, we don’t see the word “is” in the comparison, but it’s implied. If you see a comparison using a pronoun and you’re not sure if the pronoun is correct, add the implied “is.” In this case, adding “is” leaves us with “I’m fatter than her is.” That sounds wrong, so we know that “she” is the correct pronoun in this case.

The Objective Case

As may be obvious from its name, the objective case should be used when the pronoun is the object of another part of speech, usually a preposition or a transitive verb (a verb that takes a direct object):

PREPOSITION: She handed the presents to them.

Olivia made a cake for Emily, Sarah, and me.

Between whom did you sit?

TRANSITIVE VERB: Harry gave me the tickets.

Call me!

Did you take him to the movies?

In the second preposition example, two names appear between “for” and “me.” If this confuses you, eliminate “Emily, Sarah, and” to get “Olivia made a cake *for me*.” Then you’ll see that “me” is the correct pronoun case, not “I” (as in “Olivia made a cake for I”). This strategy of crossing out intervening words also works in spotting the correct case for an object of a transitive verb.

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In informal, spoken English, you will not hear “whom” used frequently, but in written English (particularly written ACT English), you must remember the all important “m.” As in the third preposition example, “between whom” is correct; “between who” is not. A good way to figure out if you should use “who” or “whom” in a sentence is to see whether the sentence would use “he” or “him” (or “they” or “them”) if it were rearranged a little. If the sentence takes “he” or “they,” you should use “who”; if it takes “him” or “them,” you should use “whom.”

If you rearrange “Between whom did you sit?” you get:

Did you sit between them?

Now you can see that you need to use “whom” in the original sentence.

The Possessive Case

You already know to use the possessive case when indicating possession of an object (see “The Possessive and Pronouns” under “Apostrophes”):

My car

Her dress

Its tail

Whose wheelbarrow

You should also use the possessive case before a gerund, a verb form that usually ends with “ing” and is used as a noun. For example,

When it comes to *my studying* for the ACT, “concentration” is my middle name.

Despite hours of practice, *her playing* is really terrible.

You can think of gerunds as turncoat verbs that are now nouns, so they need to be preceded by the same possessive pronouns that precede noun objects.

The following chart shows you all the pronoun cases we’ve just discussed:

Nominative Case	Objective Case	Possessive Case
I	me	my
you (<i>s.</i>)	you	your
she	her	her
he	him	his
we	us	our
you (<i>pl.</i>)	you	your
they	them	their
it	it	its

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who	whom	whose
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Now that you know something about pronoun cases, try the following sample problem:

Me and Jesse went to Cosmic Bowling

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4.F. NO CHANGE

G. Jesse and me

H. Jesse and I

J. I and Jesse

Night at the Bowladrome.

Knowing when to use “I” and when to use “me” can be difficult, especially within compound nouns. If you’re not sure which is correct, use the crossing-out trick: cross out “and Jesse” and see what you have left.

Me went to Cosmic Bowling Night at the Bowladrome.

Unless you’re doing your Ralph Wiggum imitation, that sentence sounds (and is) wrong. The correct sentence?

Jesse and I went to Cosmic Bowling Night at the Bowladrome.

So the answer to the problem is **H**. Choice J, which also contains the correct pronoun “I,” is wrong because the conventional rules of grammar require that you show a little deference in forming sentences involving yourself. “I” should always come after the other people involved in the activity.

Verb Tenses

Most verb tense errors on the English Test will be pretty easy to spot, since we don’t often make tense errors in everyday speech. When you read a tense error on the test, it will most likely sound wrong to you. Your ear is your most reliable way of spotting tense errors.

Different Verb Tenses in One Sentence

Nowhere is it written that you must use the same tense throughout a sentence. For example, you can say, “I used to eat chocolate bars exclusively, but after going through a conversion experience last year, I have broadened my range and now eat gummy candy too.” That sentence has tense switches galore, but they are logical: the sentence uses past tense when it talks about the past, and present tense when it talks about the present, and the progression from past to present makes sense. Another acceptable example:

They *are* the best team in baseball, and I think they *will* triumph over what could *could have been* devastating injuries.

But you can’t throw in different tenses willy-nilly. They have to make sense. You can’t say:

Next year, I *was* on an ocean voyage.

“Next year” refers to the future, and “was” refers to the past. The sentence doesn’t make any sense unless you’re doing some time travel. Your most powerful weapon against tense switch questions is logic. We could prattle on for paragraph after paragraph about present tense, simple past, general present, and present perfect, but remembering the millions of different tense forms, and when to use which, is both difficult and unnecessary. For the English Test, if you don’t hear an error the first time

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you read a sentence, and you don't see a pronoun problem, check out the tenses and figure out whether they're OK.

Tricky Verbs You're Likely to See on the ACT

By tricky verbs, we mean those verbs that never sound quite right in any tense—like “to lie,” or “to swim.” When do you lay and when do you lie? When do you swim and when have you swum? Unfortunately, there's no easy memory trick to help you remember when to use which verb form. The only solution is to learn and remember.

You LIE down for a nap.

You LAY something down on the table.

You LAY down yesterday.

You SWIM across the English Channel.

You SWAM across the Atlantic Ocean.

You HAD SWUM across the bathtub as a child.

“To lie” and “to swim” aren't the only two difficult verbs. Below, you'll find a table of difficult verbs in their infinitive, simple past, and past participle forms. You don't have to memorize all of these forms; you'll probably only see one tricky-verb question. Still, it is well worth your time to read the list below carefully, and especially to make sure you understand those verbs that you've found confusing before.

Infinitive	Simple Past	Past Participle	Infinitive	Simple Past	Past Participle
Arise	Arose	Arisen	Lead	Led	Led
Become	Became	Become	Lie (<i>to recline</i>)	Lay	Lain
Begin	Began	Begun	Lie (<i>tell fibs</i>)	Lied	Lied
Blow	Blew	Blown	Put	Put	Put
Break	Broke	Broken	Ride	Rode	Ridden
Choose	Chose	Chosen	Ring	Rang	Rung
Come	Came	Come	Rise	Rose	Risen
Dive	Dived/dove	Dived	Run	Ran	Run
Do	Did	Done	See	Saw	Seen
Draw	Drew	Drawn	Set	Set	Set
Drink	Drank	Drunk	Shake	Shook	Shaken

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Drive	Drove	Driven	Shine	Shone	Shone
Drown	Drowned	Drowned	Shrink	Shrank	Shrunk
Dwell	Dwelt/dwelled	Dwelt/dwelled	Shut	Shut	Shut
Eat	Ate	Eaten	Sing	Sang	Sung
Fall	Fell	Fallen	Sink	Sank	Sunk
Fight	Fought	Fought	Sit	Sat	Sat
Flee	Fled	Fled	Speak	Spoke	Spoken
Fling	Flung	Flung	Spring	Sprang	Sprung
Fly	Flew	Flown	Sting	Stung	Stung
Forget	Forgot	Forgotten	Strive	Strove/strived	Striven/strived
Freeze	Froze	Frozen	Swear	Swore	Sworn
Get	Got	Gotten	Swim	Swam	Swum
Give	Gave	Given	Swing	Swung	Swung
Go	Went	Gone	Take	Took	Taken
Grow	Grew	Grown	Tear	Tore	Torn
Hang (<i>a thing</i>)	Hung	Hung	Throw	Threw	Thrown
Hang (<i>a person</i>)	Hanged	Hanged	Wake	Woke	Woke/woken
Know	Knew	Known	Wear	Wore	Worn
Lay	Laid	Laid	Write	Wrote	Written

The ACT writers are going to get a little sneaky and use the tenses we *do* get wrong when we talk. One notoriously annoying trick is the difference between “lie” and “lay” and all their variations. Here are the rules:

LIE: to recline or to disguise the truth

RIGHT: We *lie* down on the hammocks when we want to relax.

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I *lie* to my mother about eating the cookies.

LAY: to place

RIGHT: Just *lay* down that air hockey table over there.

I *lay* the book on the table.

The tricky part is that the past tense of “lie” is “lay.”

She *lay* down yesterday, and today she’ll *lie* down again.

The past tense of “lay” is “laid.”

She *laid* down the law with an iron fist.

The Conditional

Another thorny tense issue arises with something called the conditional. The conditional is the verb form we use to describe something uncertain, something that’s conditional upon something else. You can memorize the conditional formula; it goes “If . . . were . . . would.” Look at this sentence:

WRONG: If I were running for president, my slogan *will be* “I’ll Fight for Your Right to Party.”

The use of “will be” in this sentence is wrong because you’re not certain you’re going to run for president (as suggested by “If I were”); consequently, the word “will” is too strong. “Will” implies you’re definitely going to campaign for president. You should use “would” instead—the conditional form of “will”—to indicate that running is still only a possibility.

RIGHT: If I were running for president, my slogan *would be* “I’ll Fight for Your Right to Party.”

Notice also that the correct form is “If I *were*” not “If I *was*.” You’ll often hear people use “was” incorrectly in “If . . .” phrases like this, but now you’ll know better. Sentences beginning with “If . . .” call for the subjunctive form of the verb. In English, the subjunctive is often the same as the regular past tense verb, but in certain cases, notably *to be*, the forms are irregular:

If I were, you were, s/he were, we were, they were, who were, it were

Adverbs and Adjectives

The ACT writers will test you once or twice on your ability to use adjectives and adverbs correctly in sentences. To describe a noun, you use an adjective. To describe a verb, adjective, or adverb, you use an adverb. Look at the following example:

WRONG: My mom made a *well* dinner.

RIGHT: My mom made a *good* dinner.

Since “dinner” is a noun, the descriptive word modifying it should be an adjective.

Now look at this example:

WRONG: My mom made dinner *good*.

RIGHT: My mom made dinner *well*.

Here, the word modified is “made,” a verb, so the descriptive word modifying it should be an adverb. Don’t let the placement of the adverb fool you: just because it’s next to the noun “dinner” doesn’t mean that “dinner” is the word modified. Often, though, you *will* find the modifier next to the modified word:

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WRONG: I didn't do *good* in the game last night.

RIGHT: I didn't do *well* in the game last night.

In the example above, how the athlete did (a verb) is being described, so you need an adverb (“well”) rather than an adjective (“good”).

Adverb/adjective errors are pretty common in everyday speech, so don't rely entirely on your ear.

WRONG: She shut him up *quick*.

RIGHT: She shut him up *quickly*.

WRONG: I got an A *easy*.

RIGHT: I got an A *easily*.

The wrong examples above may sound familiar to you from everyday speech, but they are incorrect in written English.

Idioms

You *should* trust your ear when you're being tested on idioms. Idioms are expressions and phrasings that are peculiar to a certain language—in the ACT's case, the English language. They include odd expressions like “through the grapevine” and “rain check” as well as simple ones like “bring up” (meaning “raise”). Idiom questions on the English Test will often ask you to identify the correct prepositions used in certain expressions. This task is difficult because there are no laws governing idioms. You have to be able to read a sentence and think, “That sounds plain old wrong.”

Fortunately, you probably won't encounter more than a few idiom errors on the English Test you take. Take a look at this idiom error:

WRONG: We spent days *wading into* the thousands of pages of reports.

“Wading into” sounds wrong. Instead, we say:

RIGHT: We spent days *wading through* the thousands of pages of reports.

Why do we use some prepositions instead of others? That's just the way it is. The following is a list of proper idiomatic usage:

He can't <i>abide by</i> the no-spitting rule.	It's terrible to <i>discriminate against</i> parakeets.
She <i>accused me of</i> stealing.	I have a plan to <i>escape from</i> this prison.
I <i>agreed to</i> eat the broccoli.	There's no <i>excuse for</i> your behavior.
I <i>apologized for</i> losing the hamsters.	You can't <i>hide from</i> your past.
She <i>applied for</i> a credit card.	It was all he'd <i>hoped for</i> .
She pretends to <i>approve of</i> my boyfriend.	I must <i>insist upon</i> it.
She <i>argued with</i> the bouncer.	It's impossible to <i>object to</i> her arguments.

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I <i>arrived at</i> work at noon.	I refuse to <i>participate in</i> this discussion.
You <i>believe in</i> ghosts.	<i>Pray for</i> me.
I can't be <i>blamed for</i> your neuroses.	<i>Protect me from</i> evil.
Do you <i>care about</i> me?	<i>Provide me with</i> plenty of Skittles.
He's <i>in charge of</i> grocery shopping.	She stayed home to <i>recover from</i> the flu.
Nothing <i>compares to</i> you.	I <i>rely on</i> myself.
What is there to <i>complain about</i> ?	She <i>stared at</i> his chest.
He can always <i>count on</i> money from his mommy.	He <i>subscribes to</i> several trashy magazines.
Ice cream <i>consists of</i> milk, fat, and sugar.	I <i>succeeded in</i> fooling him.
I <i>depend on</i> no one.	<i>Wait for</i> me!
That's where cats <i>differ from</i> dogs.	<i>Work with me,</i> people!

Comparative and Superlative Modifiers

Comparative modifiers compare one thing to another, while superlative modifiers tell you how one thing compares to everything else. For example:

COMPARATIVE: My boyfriend is *hotter* than yours.

That purple-and-orange spotted dog is *weirder* than the blue cat.

Dan paints *better* than the other students.

SUPERLATIVE: My boyfriend is the *hottest* boy in the world.

That purple-and-orange spotted dog is the *weirdest* pet on the block.

Of all the students, Dan paints *best*.

You will probably see only one or two comparative and superlative modifier questions on the English Test, and they will likely ask you to distinguish between the two types of modifiers. Remember that comparative modifiers are used in relative statements; in other words, they compare one thing to another. Just because my boyfriend is *hotter* than yours, it doesn't mean that my boyfriend is hotter than Sue's. However, if I used the superlative and told you that my boyfriend is the *hottest* boy in the world, then there's no way that Sue's boyfriend is hotter than mine, unless, as is probably the case, I'm exaggerating.

Comparative statements always require a comparison with something else. Simply saying "my boyfriend is hotter" may get your meaning across in a heated dispute with your friends, but in proper English you need to finish that sentence with a "than" phrase: "my boyfriend is hotter *than Jude Law*" or "my boyfriend is hotter *than your dog*."

<http://www.sparknotes.com/testprep/books/act/chapter2.rhtml>