Sentence structure is the Big Deal when it comes to Usage/Mechanics problems. Of the 40 Usage/Mechanics questions, almost half of them (18 to be exact) will test you on your knowledge of sentence structure, the topics of which include:

1. Connecting and Transitional Words
2. Subordinate or Dependent Clauses
3. Sentence Fragments
4. Comma Splices
5. Run-on Sentences
6. Misplaced Modifiers
7. Parallelism

Connecting and Transitional Words

We've already mentioned coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *for*, etc.) and transitional adverbs (*however*, *nevertheless*, *moreover*, etc.) in "Punctuation." Here you'll learn more about these and other transitional words.

Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *yet*) connect words, phrases, and independent clauses of equal importance in a sentence.

> *WORDS:* You can hand the bottle to Seamus *or* Bea.
>
> Liz *and* Amanda got down on the dance floor.
>
> *PHRASES:* To get there, you must drive over a bridge *and* through a farm.
>
> We walked by the park *but* not by the river.
>
> *CLAUSES:* Tim can go to the store, *or* Jen can go instead.
>
> It's only ten o'clock, *yet* I feel really sleepy.

When joining two words or phrases, you should not use a comma, but (as demonstrated in "Commas") if you have a list of more than two words or phrases, commas should separate them and precede the conjunction. A comma also needs to precede the coordinating conjunction when it joins two independent clauses, as in the sentence "Tim can go to the store, or Jen can go instead," above.

Transitional Adverbs

Like coordinating conjunctions, these adverbs (*however*, *also*, *consequently*, *nevertheless*, *thus*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, etc.) can join independent clauses. When they do, they should be preceded by a semicolon (see "Semicolons") and followed, most of the time, by a comma. Short adverbs, such as "thus," do not need a comma. Here are some examples of transitional adverbs in action:

> Joe always raves about soccer*; however,* he always refuses to watch a match.
>
> If you can't go to the prom with me, let me know as soon as possible*; otherwise,* I'll resent you and your inability to communicate for the rest of my life.

You need to remember that transitional adverbs must be accompanied by semicolons. If you see a transitional adverb on its own or preceded by a comma on the English Test, you should immediately know there's an error.

Subordinating Conjunctions

When you have two independent clauses, but you feel that one is more important than the other, you can use a subordinating conjunction to connect them. In other words, you use a subordinating conjunction (*because, when, since, after, until, although, before*, etc.) to make one clause dependent on the other. By subordinating one clause, you show the reader the relationship between the two clauses. For example, take the following two sentences:

> I ate a rotten egg.
> I became violently ill.

It seems likely that eating the rotten egg caused the violent illness. To make that relationship grammatically clear, you can rephrase the sentences as:

> *Because* I ate a rotten egg, I became violently ill.

Let's try another example:

> I found out my dog was really a rat.
> I called the exterminator.

Put them through the subordinating conjunction transformation machine:

> *After* I found out my dog was really a rat, I called the exterminator.
> I called the exterminator *after* I found out my dog was really a rat.

In these examples, "I found out my dog was really a rat" becomes subordinate to "I called the exterminator." You can base your decision on which clause to subordinate by determining the relationship between the clauses. In the example above, the discovery about the "dog" leads to the call; in other words, the discovery is the cause and calling the exterminator the result. Subordinating the cause to the result often makes the most sense when forming these sentences. For further discussion of this topic, move on to the next section.

Subordinate or Dependent Clauses

When you're tested on subordinate conjunctions, you'll need to select the most appropriate conjunction and place it correctly within the sentence. When you're tested on subordinate and dependent clauses, you'll need to decide how to form the whole sentence correctly. As touched upon above, not all clauses deserve the same emphasis in a sentence. Equality is a good thing, but in the writing world you've got to give preference to some clauses over others.

You can run into problems if you're too liberal with your coordinating conjunctions and transitional adverbs (the adverbs that link independent clauses). These adverbs assume that the clauses being connected deserve equal weight in a sentence. Take a look at this sentence:

> Everyone regards Ginger as the most promising student in the class, and she gets the highest grades; also, she is the president of the student council.

This sentence doesn't read very well. Subordinating some of the clauses will improve the flow of the sentence:

> Everyone regards Ginger as the most promising student in the class *because* she gets the highest grades and is the president of the student council.

This new sentence explains why Ginger is "the most promising student" by subordinating the clauses that cite her high grades and student council presidency.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences that tend to look like this on the English Test:

> We didn't go outside. *Even though the rain had stopped.*
>
> Tommy could not pay for his lunch. *Having spent his last dollars on sunglasses.*
>
> *Always a bit shy.* She found herself unable to talk to the other kids.

The sentence fragments above are not sentences on their own. They can be attached to the independent clauses next to them to form complete sentences:

> We didn't go outside*, even though the rain had stopped.*
>
> *Having spent his last dollars on sunglasses,* Tommy could not pay for his lunch.
>
> *Always a bit shy,* she found herself unable to talk to the other kids.

The answer choices on English Test questions will often make clear whether you should incorporate a fragment into a neighboring sentence. For example:

We didn't go <u>outside. Even</u> though the rain 17	**17. A.** NO CHANGE **B.** outside; **C.** outside; even **D.** outside, even

had stopped.

Notice how choices B, C, and D all give you the option of combining two sentences into one. That should give you a good clue as to what's required. The variation between the last three choices occurs in punctuation. If you agree that A is incorrect, you can rely on your punctuation skills to decipher the correct answer. The answer, by the way, is **D** because B and C, with their use of the semicolon, continue to isolate the sentence fragment from the sentence.

Other sentence fragment questions on the English Test will ask you to turn a fragment into its own full sentence rather than simply to incorporate it into a different sentence. Again, you'll be able to tell from the answer choices what the ACT writers want:

We didn't go outside.<u>While the</u>rain continued 18	**18. F.** NO CHANGE **G.** Although the **H.** The **J.** Since the

to fall.

Answers F, G, and J don't solve the sentence fragment problem. By choosing those, you still end up with a subordinate clause posing as a sentence (G and J simply replace one subordinating conjunction with another). But by getting rid of the subordinating conjunction altogether, you form a real sentence: "The rain continued to fall." The correct answer is **H**.

Most sentence fragments on the English Test will be subordinate or dependent clauses trying to be complete sentences. By studying your subordinate and dependent clauses and learning what they look like, you'll be able to catch them committing sentence fragment crime.

Comma Splices

The ACT writers may test your ability to weed out illegal comma splices. A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined together by a comma with no intervening conjunction. For example,

> Bowen walked to the *park, Leah* followed behind.

The comma between "park" and "Leah" forms a comma splice. Although the sentence may sound correct because the comma demands a short pause between the two related clauses, the structure is wrong in written English. Instead, two sentences are necessary:

> Bowen walked to the *park. Leah* followed behind.

Or, if you explicitly want to show the relationship between the clauses, you can write:

> Bowen walked to the *park, while* Leah followed behind.
>
> *OR*
>
> Bowen walked to the *park, and* Leah followed behind.

Inserting "while" subordinates the "Leah" clause to the "Bowen" clause. In the second sentence, the "and" joins the two clauses on equal footing.

Think about the comma splice in construction terms: the comma (a wimpy nail) is too weak a punctuation mark to join together two independent clauses (two big heavies). In order to join them, you have to add a conjunction (super glue) to the comma or use a period (a bolt) instead.

Run-on Sentences

You can think of run-on sentences as comma splices minus the commas. For example:

> Joan runs every day she is preparing for a marathon.
>
> John likes to walk his dog through the park Kevin doesn't.

To fix run-on sentences, you need to identify where they should be split. The first example should be broken into two parts: "Joan runs every day" and "she is preparing for a marathon." These are two independent clauses that can stand on their own as sentences:

> Joan runs every day. She is preparing for a marathon.

Alternatively, you may choose to show the relationship between these sentences by subordinating one to the other:

> Joan runs every day *because* she is preparing for a marathon.

The second example, when split, becomes: "John likes to walk his dog through the park" and "Kevin doesn't." The following sentences are correct alternatives to the original run-on:

> John likes to walk his dog through the park. Kevin doesn't.
>
> John likes to walk his dog through the park*, but* Kevin doesn't.
>
> John likes to walk his dog through the park; *however,* Kevin doesn't.

These are just a few ways you can join the two clauses. We could go on and on, showing different relationships between the two clauses (but we won't).

Misplaced Modifiers

Does the following sentence sound odd to you?

> Having eaten six corn dogs, nausea overwhelmed Jane.

Nausea didn't eat six corn dogs. Gluttonous Jane did. However, the sentence above says that nausea was the one "having eaten six corn dogs." This is a case of a misplaced modifier. When you have a modifier like "having eaten six corn dogs," it must come either directly before or directly after the word that it is modifying.

> *Having eaten six corn dogs,* Jane was overwhelmed by nausea.
>
> Jane, *having eaten six corn dogs,* was overwhelmed by nausea.

These two sentences make it clear that Jane was the one wolfing down the corn dogs.
Modifiers are not necessarily phrases like the one above. They can be adverbial phrases, adverbial clauses, or single-word adverb modifiers. You've already seen how adverbial-phrase modifiers work in the example above. The simple rule for phrase modifiers is to *make sure phrase modifiers are next to the word(s) they modify*. The same rule applies to clause modifiers. Misplaced clause modifiers look like this:

> Bill packed his favorite clothes in his suitcase, *which he planned to wear on vacation.*

Now do you really think this guy is planning to wear his suitcase on vacation? Well, that's what the sentence says. It'll be a pretty heavy outfit too, since the suitcase is packed with clothes. If Bill decides to wear his clothes instead of his suitcase, you should say:

> Bill packed his favorite clothes, *which he planned to wear on vacation,* in his suitcase.

Of course, he'll be a slightly more conventional dresser, but the clothes will probably fit better than the suitcase.
The placement of single-word adverbs is slightly trickier than that of clause and phrase modifiers. You need to make sure that adverb modifiers (such as *just, almost, barely, even,* and *nearly*) are modifying the word you intend them to modify. If they aren't, the sentence will probably still make sense, but it will have a different meaning than you intended.
Take the sentence "Jay walked a half hour to the grocery store." Now add to that sentence the adverbial modifier "only." The placement of "only" within the sentence will alter the meaning of the sentence:

> *Only Jay* walked a half hour to the grocery store.

The sentence above means that no one but Jay made the walk.

> Jay *only walked* a half hour to the grocery store.

Here, "only" modifies the verb "walked," and the sentence means that Jay did nothing but walk—he didn't run, and he didn't swim—to the store.

> Jay walked *only a half hour* to the grocery store.

Hey, the walk to the grocery store isn't too bad. According to the sentence above, it took Jay only a half hour to get there.

> Jay walked a half hour to *only the grocery store.*

Now we find out that Jay's single destination was the grocery store (and we were about to accuse him of having ulterior motives for taking that walk).

Parallelism

When you see a list underlined on the English Test, look for a parallelism error. Parallelism errors occur when items in a list are mismatched. For example, if you have a list of verbs, then all items in the list must be verbs of the same tense. For example,

> *WRONG:* In the pool area, there is no *spitting*, no *running*, and *don't throw* your cigarette butts in the water.

The first two forbidden activities end in "ing" (they're called gerunds, though that doesn't really matter), and because of that, the third activity must also end in "ing".

> *RIGHT:* In the pool area, there is no *spitting*, no *running*, and no *throwing* your cigarette butts in the water.

By simply converting the final verb to gerund form, you have parallel structure. Parallelism is also important when you have expressions linked by the verb *to be*. Because you should think of *to be* as an equal sign, the words on either side of the sign must be parallel. For example:

> *WRONG: To grow* tired of London is *growing* tired of life.
> *RIGHT: To grow* tired of London is *to grow* tired of life.
> *WRONG: Growing* tired of London is *to grow* tired of life.
> *RIGHT: Growing* tired of London is *growing* tired of life.

The examples above are not parallel when the verb forms are different on either side of "is." You can make them parallel by simply changing the form of one verb to the form of the other.
If you have a list of nouns, you must also maintain parallel construction. For example,

> The personal ad said that she likes "*books*, good *food*, and *to take* long walks on the beach."

She apparently *doesn't* like parallelism. "Books" and "food" are nouns, but "to take" is a verb infinitive. If she's hoping to get a call from the grammarian of her dreams, she should rewrite her ad to look like this:

> The personal ad said that she likes "*books*, good *food*, and long *walks* on the beach."

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