

ACT English Test: Writing Strategy Review

Writing strategy involves improving the effectiveness of a passage through careful revision and editing. Frequently, strategy questions will ask you to choose the most appropriate topic or transitional sentence for a paragraph. Almost as frequently, you will have to choose the best option for strengthening an argument by adding information or evidence. In other questions, you may also have to choose which sections of an argument can be deleted. You will also have to identify the purpose of a passage—its audience or its message—in other strategy questions.

The following strategy topics are covered in this section:

1. Transitions and Topic Sentences
2. Additional Detail and Evidence
3. Big Picture Purpose

Transitions and Topic Sentences

These questions ask you to figure out the best way to open or conclude paragraphs within a passage. Here's an example of a strategy question:

[2]

Victorian novelists were often

concerned with issues of character, plot,

and the Victorian social world. Dickens's

novels, for example, were several-

hundred-page-long works documenting

the elaborate interweaving of his

characters.

[3]

 Their “modernist” novels tended

47. The writer wishes to begin Paragraph 3 with a sentence

that strengthens the focus of the paragraph, while providing a transition from Paragraph 2. Which of the following would be the best choice?

- A. In the early twentieth century, novelists began to reject the Victorian emphasis on social context and look for a new focus for the novel.
- B. Victorian novels ended with the Victorian era.
- C. In the early twentieth century, novelists further developed this emphasis on characters' inner lives.
- D. World War I significantly affected British culture in the twentieth century.

to focus on the characters' inner lives, which they depicted through a stylistic technique called "stream of consciousness." Several of the best-known modernist novels were written in this stream-of-consciousness style. **48**

Question 47 asks you to choose a sentence that will simultaneously serve as a topic sentence ("a sentence that strengthens the focus of the paragraph") for Paragraph 3 and as a transition sentence between the two paragraphs ("while providing a transition from Paragraph 2"). In order to answer this question correctly, you need to understand what the two paragraphs are saying. We suggest that you reread Paragraph 3 first. By developing a good sense of what that paragraph says, you can eliminate answer choices that clearly do not work as topic sentences. After you've eliminated any choices, make sure that you understand Paragraph 2. From the remaining choices, you can identify the best transition sentence.

Done that? We hope that you immediately eliminated choices B and D from your list of possible topic sentences. Choice B talks exclusively about the Victorian novel, making it an inappropriate topic sentence for a paragraph on modernist novels. Choice D doesn't talk specifically about novels at all. Its focus is World War I, which is not mentioned elsewhere in the paragraph. So now you've narrowed the selection down to A and C. These sentences have similar constructions, but they say radically different things: choice A claims that twentieth-century novelists rejected Victorian ideas, while choice C claims that they embraced and developed Victorian ideas. In order to figure out which one of these claims is true, you need to have read Paragraph 2 in addition to Paragraph 3. Paragraph 2 tells you that Victorian novelists were primarily concerned with the social world. In Paragraph 3, you discover that modernist novelists were primarily concerned with characters' thoughts and inner

lives. Thus Paragraph 3 describes a *change* in novel writing that occurred between the Victorian era and the early twentieth century. The correct answer to the question is **A**.

The example above is fairly typical of transition and topic sentence questions you will encounter on the English Test. Sometimes you'll be asked to select only a topic sentence or only a transition sentence from the answer choices. Those questions are usually less complex than the example above because you have to perform one fewer step. You may also be asked to choose a concluding sentence for a paragraph. These questions are similar to transition questions because a good concluding sentence tends to be one that easily and sensibly makes the transition to the next paragraph.

Additional Detail and Evidence

These questions ask you to flesh out a paragraph by selecting the answer choice that provides the best additional detail or evidence. For example,

[3]

47 Their "modernist" novels tended

to focus on the characters' inner lives,

which they depicted through a stylistic

technique called "stream of

consciousness." Several of the best-

known modernist novels were written

in this stream-of-consciousness

style. 48

48. The writer wishes to add information here that will further support the point made in the preceding sentence. Which of the following sentences will do that best?
- F. Today, this style is not as

popular as it once was.

G. However, there are many famous early twentieth-century works not written in this style.

H. Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, was written in this style, and it is widely considered one of the most important books of the century.

J. Ford's *The Good Soldier*, although less read today, is a great example of this style.

This question asks for additional information to support the point of the preceding sentence (“Several of the best-known modernist novels were written in this stream-of-consciousness style”). To answer this question correctly, you need to understand the point being made, so read the sentence carefully. You should be able to eliminate choices F and G immediately. Choice F talks about the popularity of this style among contemporary authors—an issue that the preceding sentence does not address. You can eliminate choice G almost immediately because it starts with “however,” which indicates that it is going to make a statement that attempts to contradict, not support, the previous point. Now you’ve successfully limited the answer choices to H and J. Both would provide the paragraph with an example of a stream-of-consciousness work. The key to deciding which of these sentences is correct lies in the preceding sentence, which talks about the “best-known modernist novels.” On the one hand, choice J tells you that *The Good Soldier* is “less read today” and also, presumably, less well known. On the other hand, choice H tells you that *Ulysses* is “widely considered one of the most important books of the century.” This statement suggests that the novel is famous, so choice **H** is the best answer to the question.

Big Picture Purpose

On each English Test, you’ll probably encounter a few Big Picture Purpose questions. These questions always come at the end of a passage. We call them Big Picture Purpose questions because they ask you to look at the big picture and identify a passage’s main point, intended purpose, or intended audience.

These questions in many ways resemble some of the questions on the Reading Test. BPP questions do, after all, test your comprehension of the passage—and comprehension is also what the Reading Test assesses. Because these questions test your overall comprehension, they are difficult to prepare for outside the context of a whole passage. Therefore, we suggest you prepare for these questions by studying our Reading Test chapter.

Before you start flipping through the book, we’ll give you an idea of how these questions look on the English Test. They will often be phrased like this:

Suppose the writer has been assigned to write an essay explaining the development of the British novel from 1799 to 1945. Would this essay successfully fulfill the assignment?

The answer choices to these questions come in two parts: the first part will respond either “No” or “Yes” to the question, and the second part will give an explanation for this answer. For example,

- A. No, because the essay restricts its focus to the American novel from 1850 to 1945.
- B. No, because the essay omits mention of famous poets.
- C. Yes, because the essay focuses on the novel’s birth in the eighteenth century.
- D. Yes, because the essay describes changes in novel writing from the end of the French Revolution to the end of World War II.

Without reading the entire passage, you’re probably unable to answer a definite “No” or “Yes” to this question, but you can eliminate an incorrect answer or two because of irrelevant or nonsensical explanations. In this example, you can immediately cross off choice B because the explanation calls for a discussion of famous poets in the essay. Famous poets, however, do not necessarily belong in an essay on the novel’s development. You can also cross off choice C. It claims that the passage *successfully* fulfills the essay requirements because it discusses the novel’s birth in the eighteenth century. However, the assignment calls for a discussion of the novel starting in 1799 (the end of the eighteenth century), so choice C cannot be correct. By reading and understanding the passage, you’ll be able to choose from the two remaining answers. If the passage indeed focuses on the American novel, choice A is correct, and the essay does not succeed; if the essay describes the novel from the end of the French Revolution (1799) to the end of the World War II (1945), choice D is correct, and the essay does succeed.

Organization

Organization questions deal with the logical structuring of the passage on the level of the sentence, the paragraph, and the passage as a whole. These questions ask you to organize sections to maximize their coherence, order, and unity by asking three types of questions:

1. Sentence Reorganization
2. Paragraph Reorganization
3. Passage Reorganization

Sentence Reorganization

Sentence reorganization questions often involve the placement of a modifier within a sentence. Your ability to reorder a sentence correctly will depend on how well you have absorbed your grammar lessons above—specifically the “Misplaced Modifiers” section. For example,

Austen wrote about a society of manners, in

which love triumphs over a rigid social hierarchy

despite confinement to her drawing room.

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- 43.A. NO CHANGE
- B. (Place after *love*)
- C. (Place after *Austen*)
- D. (Place after *society*)

You probably guessed that the underlined phrase does not modify “hierarchy,” “love,” or “society.” The pronoun “her” in the underlined phrase should tip you off that “Austen” is being modified. If you read “Misplaced Modifiers” in the previous chapter, you should already know the cardinal rule of

placing the modifier next to the modified word. So the correct answer is **C** because the underlined part modifies “Austen.”

Approximately half of the organization questions on the English Test will ask you to reorder sentences. All of these sentence reorganization problems will look similar to the one above. Study up on your modifier placement in order to get them right.

Paragraph Reorganization

A couple of questions will ask you to reorder sentences within a paragraph. They will look much like this:

[1] In April, I’m usually in a bad mood because

of my debilitating pollen allergies. [2] In

November, despite the graying trees and the

short days, I’m elated because I can

celebrate both Thanksgiving and my birthday.

[3] My mood changes with the months.

[4] In the summer months I feel happy

from days spent in the sun. 61

61. Which of the following provides the most logical ordering of the sentences in the preceding paragraph?

- A.** 1, 4, 3, 2
- B.** 3, 4, 2, 1
- C.** 3, 1, 4, 2
- D.** 2, 1, 4, 3

The best way to approach these questions is to decide which sentence should come first, and then to eliminate incompatible answer choices. Ask yourself: which sentence logically comes first in this sequence? Sentence 3 makes a good topic sentence because it provides a general argument that can be followed and supported by examples. By deciding that Sentence 3 should come first, you can immediately eliminate choices A and D because they do not begin with Sentence 3. Now you can

move on to arranging the rest of the paragraph. Each of the remaining sentences talks about a different time of year: April, summer, and November. The three sentences should fall in that chronological order (April, summer, November), as this is the most logical arrangement in this example. Therefore, the correct answer is **C**.

If you are totally lost on a paragraph reorganization question, you can often look to the answer choices for clues. You can look at the first sentences given to you by the answer choices and see whether any of them sound like topic sentences. If you can identify a topic sentence, you're well on your way to getting the correct answer.

Passage Reorganization

These appear at the end of passages. They will ask you either to insert a sentence where it best belongs in the passage or to move a paragraph to a different location in the passage. Questions that ask you to insert a sentence will generally look like this:

72. The writer wishes to include the following sentence in the essay: "That summer, I spent so much time on the beach that I could smell only a combination of sand and seaweed when I finally returned to school." That sentence will fit most smoothly and logically into
- Paragraph:
- F. 2, before the first sentence.
 - G. 3, after the last sentence.
 - H. 4, before the first sentence.
 - J. 5, after the last sentence.

This question is basically a strategy question disguised as an organization question. It asks you to identify the sentence provided as an appropriate topic or concluding sentence for Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, or 5. When the answer choice calls for the sentence to be placed "before the first sentence," then it would become the topic sentence of the paragraph. When the answer choice calls for the sentence to be placed "after the last sentence," then it would become the concluding sentence. Questions that ask you to relocate a paragraph will generally look like this:

74. For the sake of the unity and coherence of this essay, Paragraph 4 should be placed:
- F. where it is now.
 - G. after Paragraph 1.
 - H. after Paragraph 2.
 - J. after Paragraph 5.

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To answer this question, look at (and perhaps underline) the topic sentences of each paragraph. These topic sentences, removed from the passage, should follow a logical chain of thought. For example, look at these topic sentences:

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Topic Sentence 1: | Seasonal variations affect many aspects of my life. |
| Topic Sentence 2: | This April, the sight of leaves and the sounds of returning birds cheered me so much that I hugged a tree. |
| Topic Sentence 3: | The return of the warm weather also meant that I got some much-needed exercise after being stuck indoors all winter. |
| Topic Sentence 4: | My mood changes with the months. |
| Topic Sentence 5: | The weather's effect on my mood and my fitness always reminds me of the undeniable connection between people and nature. |

Even without reading the whole passage, you can take an educated stab at the correct answer. Consider the logical organization of an essay: introduction, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion. According to this structure, Topic Sentence 1 should present the passage's argument, and it should be followed by three paragraphs supporting the argument and a final paragraph presenting a conclusion.

Now take a look at Topic Sentence 4. It makes a general argument about the weather's effect on the author's mood. Ask yourself where the paragraph best fits into the passage: is it a supporting paragraph or a conclusion? It's unlikely that Paragraph 4 is a conclusion because it narrows the focus of the essay to talk about the author's mood, while other paragraphs in the essay discuss the author's physical condition. If it's a supporting paragraph, then where does it belong? Eliminating choice J (which would make it the conclusion) leaves you with three options for a supporting paragraph. Your next step should be to take a look at the remaining Topic Sentences. Topic Sentence 2 also discusses the weather's effect on the author's mood, but it deals specifically with April weather. Topic Sentence 3 discusses the weather's effects on the author's physical health. If you choose Choice F and keep Paragraph 4 where it is, the passage will be ordered like this: introduction, weather/mood, weather/health, weather/mood, conclusion. This order doesn't make much sense because it inexplicably divides the weather/mood discussions. Choices G and H place the weather/mood paragraphs side by side. Choice G puts Paragraph 4 (general weather/mood) before Paragraph 2 (April weather/mood), while choice H puts 2 before 4. When writing an essay, moving from the general to the specific makes more sense than moving in the opposite direction because you want to support your claims with specific evidence. So by using good writing strategy, you will arrive at the correct answer: **G**.

Style

Style questions generally concern effective word choice. They often ask you to choose the most appropriate word for a sentence in terms of its tone and clarity. Other times, they'll ask you to eliminate redundant words or phrases. In the next section, we discuss the following style topics:

1. Redundancy
2. Appropriate Word Choice and Identifying Tone

Redundancy

The ACT writers will test you on your ability to spot redundant statements. Redundant statements say the same thing twice, and you should always avoid redundancy on the English Test (in life too, if possible). For example,

WRONG: The diner closes at 3 a.m. in the morning.

RIGHT: The diner closes at 3 a.m.

“In the morning” is redundant because it is implied in “a.m.” Here’s another example of a redundant statement:

WRONG: In my opinion, I think we should go get some food.

“I think” and “In my opinion” mean the same thing, so you can eliminate one of the phrases from the sentence:

RIGHT: In my opinion, we should go get some food.

ALSO RIGHT: I think we should go get some food.

Either one of those phrases gets the point across; using both merely makes the sentence cumbersome.

Redundancy questions almost always give you the option to “OMIT the underlined portion.” If you spot a phrase or word that means the same thing as the underlined portion, then you should always choose to “OMIT.”

Appropriate Word Choice and Identifying Tone

Identifying the appropriate word choice can be as simple as figuring out whether a sentence should use the word “their,” “there,” or “they’re.” But word choice can also be more complicated, involving many words working together to create a tone. For example, the sentence “Lloyd George rocks!” probably does not belong in an essay on World War I. It doesn’t fit because it’s written in a casual, slangy tone, and history essays are generally neither casual nor slangy. The sentence might belong, however, in a passage on your awesome new friend, Lloyd George.

The content of a passage will generally give you a clue about the appropriate tone. Essays on history and culture will probably be written in a fairly formal style—a style that omits youthful slang, casual contractions, and familiar personal pronouns (such as “I” and “you”). A personal essay on your experiences driving a bulldozer, on your great-grandmother, or on your new skateboard calls for a relatively informal style of writing. These personal essays can exhibit varying degrees of informality. An essay by a young writer may be more colloquial and relaxed than an essay by a mature writer recalling past experiences.

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Tone is one of the most important elements in correctly answering word choice questions. You will encounter quite a few questions that look like this:

During the Great War, the British Public believed

that Lloyd George rocked. He was widely admired

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- 7.A. NO CHANGE
- B. rocked!
- C. was an effective political leader.
- D. had the ability to unify the government and thus to unify Britain.

for his ability to unify the government and thus
to unify Britain.

Because we already told you that informality does not belong in a history essay, you can immediately eliminate choices A and B, even though B correctly changes the verb tense. If you read the section above, you should also be able to eliminate D because it is redundant—it repeats the information given in the next sentence. That leaves the correct answer, C.