



Chapter 1: An Overview of the ACT English and Writing Tests

Each ACT is different in its makeup and content. This chapter gives you an idea of what you can expect when you take the ACT English test and the ACT writing test.

The Structure of the English Test

The 45-minute ACT English test contains 75 questions in five passages. Each passage includes 15 questions, as follows:

- Passage I Questions 1–15
- Passage II Questions 16–30
- Passage III Questions 31–45
- Passage IV Questions 46–60
- Passage V Questions 61–75

If you divide your time evenly, you will spend 9 minutes per passage, and each question should take about 36 seconds to answer. The passages cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from texts about legendary athletes such as Roberto Clemente to scientific articles about exploring Mars.

At times, a concluding paragraph will be accompanied by questions about specific conventions and word choice, and then the final question will be a big-picture-meaning question, typically asking something like, “Suppose the writer’s goal had been to write a brief essay concerning his experience with Miami time. Would this essay successfully fulfill that goal?” Since these types of questions are formatted differently from other questions, students may mistake them for directions and skip over them.

Remembering that each passage has 15 questions can help you realize that the last question related to a passage will end in a five or a zero. This should help you avoid accidentally skipping the last question.

In the following example, you will see how these questions will be formatted. Brackets are used to identify the number of a sentence within a paragraph and the paragraph numbers. Questions about an entire paragraph or passage will be identified by a box. Most question numbers appear below an underlined portion of a sentence. Be careful to replace *only* the underlined portion of the sentence as you test out the answer choices. Changes that have been made in previous sentences *should* be taken into account when answering subsequent questions. You will see this frequently in the chapter on subject-verb agreement. **Note:** The word *omit* means to delete or leave out.

Passage IV: Pinball and Chance

[1]

Doesn't anyone play pinball anymore? I was disappointed the other day when I took my kids to a game arcade. Afterwards, I went to the movies.

Not one of the many colorful machines with flashing lights were a pinball machine. Video games filled the room.

[2]

[1] I can understand why video games might seem more attractive than pinball. [2] Video screens which have been populated by movie stars, monsters,

and heroes. [3] You can blow up cities, escape from dungeons, and battle all sorts of villains. [4] Pinball machines, on the other hand, are essentially all the same. [5] Some machines are bigger and fancier than others, but the object of pinball never changes: you have to keep a steel ball in play long enough to rack up a high score and win a free game. [49]

46. Refer to the underlined portion of the passage at number 46, and choose the alternative you consider best.

F. NO CHANGE

G. I made my way to the movie theater after that.

H. (The movie theater was my next stop.)

J. OMIT the underlined portion.

47. Refer to the underlined portion of the passage at number 47, and choose the alternative you consider best.

A. NO CHANGE

B. was a

C. were an actual

D. would have been an actual

48. Refer to the underlined portion of the passage at number 48, and choose the alternative you consider best.

F. NO CHANGE

G. that are

H. are

J. OMIT the underlined portion.

49. For the sake of the logic and coherence of Paragraph 2, Sentence 4 should be:

A. placed where it is now.

B. placed after Sentence 1.

C. placed after Sentence 5.

D. OMITTED, because the paragraph focuses only on video games.

Some questions will ask about the passage as a whole. They will be formatted like number 15 in the following example.

By the time we found our way back to the car, the sun was high in the sky. We had taken three hours to complete a hike we usually finished in forty-five minutes. Yet the hike felt shorter than ever. As ¹⁴ we drove off, I remembered something else my grandmother used to say: “Miami time passes all too quickly.”

14. F. NO CHANGE

G. more shorter then

H. the shortest than

J. shorter than

Question 15 asks about the preceding passage as a whole.

15. Suppose the writer’s goal had been to write a brief essay conveying a personal experience with “Miami time.” Would this essay successfully fulfill that goal?

A. Yes, because it presents the narrator’s firsthand experience of a morning spent in Miami time.

B. Yes, because it reveals that after a conversation with the grandmother, the narrator decided to live in Miami time.

C. No, because it shares the views of more than one person with regard to the meaning of Miami time.

D. No, because the term “Miami time” belonged to the grandmother, not to the narrator.

Content of the ACT English Test

The ACT English test measures your ability to use the Conventions of Standard English to edit passages, accomplish a certain task and purpose in writing, and create a style and tone through word choice. It focuses on three reporting categories that organize the types of questions you will answer and also make up the composite score you will receive. Each reporting category has a different number of questions associated with it on the ACT English test. You will not see the specific number of questions given in a category but rather the percentage of the total test score each will represent. Here is a brief description of the three reporting categories and their percentages in the total score of the English test.

- Conventions of Standard English (usage and mechanics): 51–56%
- Production of Writing (topic development, organization, unity, and cohesion): 29–32%
- Knowledge of Language (word choice, style, and tone): 13–19%

A reporting category is composed of a set of skills that you are expected to have; each question is based on one or more of these skills. For instance, for Conventions of Standard English questions, the skills range from correcting errors in grammar to recognizing the proper use of punctuation. You might find questions about subject-verb agreement, commas with coordinating conjunctions, and sentence fragments. Production of Writing questions might relate to logical transitions and evidence for arguments, and Knowledge of Language questions might ask about the mood and tone of a passage. The number of questions per category is not important. What matters is the percentage of each category in the test that will weight your final score. Following is a more detailed breakdown of the skills that fall under each category.

Conventions of Standard English

Conventions of Standard English test the following knowledge and skills:

- Determine when to use punctuation marks, including periods, colons, semicolons, dashes, and parentheses.
- Determine when to use subordinating and coordinating conjunctions to join clauses or revise awkward-sounding fragments or fused sentences.
- Use logical verb tenses in contexts.
- Recognize and correct disturbances in sentence structure, such as faulty placement of adjectives, participial phrase fragments, missing or incorrect relative pronouns, dangling or misplaced modifiers, faulty parallelism, run-on sentences, and weak conjunctions between independent clauses.
- Maintain consistent and logical verb tense and voice and personal pronouns within a paragraph or passage.

Production of Writing

Production of Writing questions test knowledge and skills in two areas of English composition.

Topic Development in Terms of Purpose and Focus

Examples of knowledge and skills tested in these questions include the following:

- Determine the relevance of material to the topic or the focus of the passage or paragraph.
- Identify the purpose of a word or phrase (for example, identify a person, define a term, or describe an object).
- Use a word, phrase, or sentence to accomplish a specific purpose, such as convey a feeling or attitude or illustrate a given statement.

Organization, Unity, and Cohesion

Examples of knowledge and skills tested in these questions include the following:

- Determine the need for transition words or phrases to define relationships in terms of time or logic.
- Determine the most logical place for a sentence in a paragraph.
- Provide a suitable conclusion for a paragraph or passage (for example, summarizing the main idea).
- Provide a suitable introduction for a paragraph or passage.
- Rearrange sentences in a paragraph or paragraphs to achieve a logical flow.
- Determine the most logical place to divide a paragraph to achieve a stated goal.

Knowledge of Language

Knowledge of Language questions test your ability to clearly and succinctly express yourself in written English. Knowledge and skills tested in these questions include the following:

- Revise unclear, clumsy, and confusing writing.
- Delete redundant and wordy material.
- Revise an expression to make it conform it to the style and tone used throughout the passage.
- Determine the need for conjunctions that create logical connections between clauses.
- Choose the most appropriate word or phrase in terms of the sentence content.

Questions assess your understanding of grammar and style rules in the context of the whole passage. You must pay attention not only to a single sentence with an error but also to the other sentences and paragraphs. The questions in the ACT English test never directly ask about grammar rules. For example, the test won't ask, "Can a subject of a verb be found within a prepositional phrase?" or "Which of the following is a relative clause?" Instead, you will be asked to revise sentences that include grammar and style errors. Spelling is not assessed in the ACT English test. At times, "NO CHANGE" will be the correct answer choice if the sentence was grammatically and stylistically correct in the first place.

The Content of the Writing Test

The optional writing test has important differences from the English test. It measures your ability to write a unified, coherent essay about an issue stated in the prompt. Rather than answering questions within reporting categories, you will follow each of the steps listed in the essay task. Your score, given from a low of 2 to a high of 12, depends on how well you have done each of the steps and completed the task. Here are the steps you will need to follow on the ACT writing test:

- Clearly state your own perspective on the issue and analyze the relationship between your perspective and at least one other perspective.
- Develop and support your ideas with reasoning and examples.
- Organize your ideas clearly and logically.
- Communicate your ideas effectively in Standard written English.

Chapters 8-13 of this guide will review each of these points, show samples of actual student essays, and explain the use of writing skills in their responses.

How to Use This Guide

This guide will give a brief description of each category followed by official sample questions associated with each category. It will review essential skills, present questions on those skills, and explain approaches to answering them. As you may notice, the English test covers many of the skills you need for writing. In the optional writing test, you respond to a prompt and compose an essay. This guide includes a review of both tests because they each call for such closely related skills.

