

Strategies for the Sentence Completion Section

Of the three Critical Reading sections, the Sentence Completion section of the SAT is most obviously designed to measure your knowledge of college-level vocabulary. Although vocabulary building books are available, the best way to develop a good working vocabulary is to read. Reading a variety of authors in a variety of genres will help you develop not only a good vocabulary but will help you understand the structure of sentences, which in turn will help you comprehend not only what you are reading, but the subtleties hidden to surface readers. Obviously, the more widely read you are, the better you will score on the SAT. Notwithstanding, some clues will help improve your scores when you learn to identify them and how to use them to your advantage. Clues and techniques specifically designed for the Sentence Completion portion will be presented throughout this section and in the answers and explanations sections.

This section tests your ability to understand the composition of a sentence and select the correct word or two words that best complete and complement the overall meaning of the sentence, while retaining the structure and style. Although the sentences generally will be about familiar topics, you need not necessarily know the definitions of all words to correctly answer these questions. In some ways, this section is a warm up, if you will, to the reading passage questions. The Sentence Completion section will front-load your brain with a variety of sentence structures and styles you may well see in the Reading Comprehension sections.

The College Board tells us that instructions for the Sentence Completion section of the SAT will be something like the following:

Each sentence below has one or two blanks, each blank indicating that something has been omitted. Beneath the sentence are five words or sets of words labeled A through E. Choose the word or set of words that, when inserted in the sentence, *best* fits the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

Before looking at a sample set of questions, let's make sure that we understand the instructions. By asking that we choose the word or set of words that "best" fit the meaning of the sentence, we are being warned that there may be more than one word or set of words that actually fit the meaning of the sentence. In other words, do not select the first word or set of words that make sense when inserted into the sentence. Rather, read all answer choices, marking out the ones that do not fit, and then select the one that *best* fits the meaning of the sentence "as a whole." Although this may seem rather rudimentary, the subtleties of tone, mood, and direction within word choices will test the skills of every individual taking the test. Being familiar with these instructions will help you save time on the day of testing. Remember, your focus is to score as many correct answers as possible. Using the following strategies will help you save time, thereby providing you with the opportunity to answer more questions correctly.

Context-Based Questions

The SAT Sentence Completion section can be broken down into two basic subsets: questions using vocabulary in context and questions that are logic-based. Although knowing the definition of the words in the answer choices gives you a better chance of selecting the correct answer, knowing how the words are used in the context of the sentence will help with in-context questions. This subset includes both one-blank and two-blank questions.

1. Male and female loons tend to act _____, actively helping each other forage for food to feed their young.
 - A. aggressively
 - B. surreptitiously
 - C. cooperatively
 - D. defensively
 - E. erratically

The correct choice is **C**.

Explanation: The sentence question is actually asking how loons behave. The missing word is further defined after the comma and suggests that loons are seen “actively helping each other forage for food to feed their young.” Only one word among the choices describes this behavior: *cooperatively*.

- 2.** My grandmother, who never spent a dime and rarely talked, was considered both _____ and _____.
- A. miserly. . . taciturn
 - B. frugal. . . effusive
 - C. stingy. . . garrulous
 - D. thrifty. . . raucous
 - E. munificent. . . reticent

The correct choice is **A**.

Explanation: Quite simply, you are to find the two words that describe my grandmother. One of the words must mean that she did not spend money willingly, and the other must mean that she did not talk much. The correct answer is “miserly. . . taciturn.” Miserly means like a miser or extremely stingy, and taciturn means shy or unwilling to engage in conversation. Note that Choices A through D might meet the first blank criteria of not spending money easily, but only Choices A and E meet the criteria for being silent. As answer Choice A is the only choice meeting the demands of both context-based definitions, it is the correct answer.

Logic-Based Questions

Logic-based questions require you to know the meanings of the words, how the words are used in context, and understand the logical flow of the sentence. This subset also includes both one-blank and two-blank questions.

- 1.** After witnessing a number of territorial skirmishes, Dr. Jarmen had to change his earlier opinion that these particular breeds of chipmunk were always _____ animals.
- A. curious
 - B. harsh
 - C. quarreling
 - D. peaceful
 - E. warring

The correct choice is **D**.

Explanation: Following the logical flow of the sentence will help alleviate incorrect answer choices. First, the introductory word “After” informs the reader that the information at the beginning of the sentence is going to impact what comes later in the thought or logical process. The word “change” informs the reader that there is a different thought or reaction than that previously described in the sentence. Events described in the beginning of the sentence are seen as the catalyst for the change, whatever it might be. Finally, the logic of the flow of ideas tells the reader what is changing, “. . . his earlier opinion that these particular breeds of chipmunk were always _____ animals.” The word that best fits the blank necessarily should convey a meaning of revision after seeing the animals fighting. Answer Choice D, peaceful, is the only plausible selection.

2. Although teasers for the film were absolutely _____, the film itself was well presented, well timed, and represented a rather _____ work.
- A. scintillating. . . blasé
 - B. tasteless. . . amateur
 - C. risqué. . . bawdy
 - D. breathtaking. . . familiar
 - E. crude. . . polished

The correct choice is E.

Explanation: The introductory word “Although” in the first clause informs the reader that the tone in the second clause will be dichotomous to the first. This means that we are looking for basic antonyms in our correct choice. Answer Choices A, D, and E all qualify for a difference in tone. Additionally, however, the second word must complement the tone of well presented and well timed. In this case, looking at the second word choice actually leaves us with the only correct choice, E.

Practical Strategies

Having covered the basic format of the Sentence Completion section, we need to look at some practical strategies to use during the actual test. It is important to practice these strategies before the test to see which work best for you. Although all of the strategies are proven to help increment scores, some may work better for you personally.

- Begin by reading the entire sentence saying “blank” for the blank(s). This accomplishes a couple of things. First, it gives you a feel for the flow of the language used. Second, it helps you mentally diagnose any clue words including those setting up a transition, negative comparison, tone, introductory phrase, or positive reaffirmation.
- Generally speaking, standard definitions of words are used in the Sentence Completion section of the SAT. You needn’t spend time looking for alternative definitions or nonstandard definitions.
- Try to insert words that make the sentence meaningful for you before looking at the answer choices. If you find a synonym for the word you chose, it is probably the correct choice.
- Introductory and transitional words are extremely important and clue the reader to the logic of the sentence. These words tell you what the relationship between two parts of the sentence will be. They may be complementary or indicate a contradiction. These are sometimes called signal words because they signal the relationship of the sentence parts to the reader. A listing of some introductory or transitional words or phrases follows:

Generic Transitions	Inclusion	Resultants	Other
Albeit	Additionally	Accordingly	Abnormal
although	also	because	anomalous
but	and	consequently for	illogical
despite	as	hence	incongruous
even though	besides	in order to	ironic
except	furthermore	therefore	never
however	in addition	thus	no
in contrast	in other words		not
in spite of	likened to		odd
instead	likewise		paradoxical

(continued)

<i>Generic Transitions</i>	<i>Inclusion</i>	<i>Resultants</i>	<i>Other</i>
nevertheless	moreover		surprising
nonetheless	therefore		unexpected
on the contrary			
on the other hand			
rather than			
regardless			
still			
yet			

- Read all sentences and answer choices carefully. This is especially true toward the end of the Sentence Completion section as the degree of difficulty increases as you go further into the section. Keeping up with the twists and turns of the direction and flow of the sentence will help you focus on the correct answer choice. Many errors are made because the reader failed to keep up with a transition and selected an answer that would have been correct if the sentence didn't change direction and ask for the negative rather than the positive or vice versa.
- This is not your classroom vocabulary review. You will encounter words you have never heard of before. Don't panic. Use the skills covered in this book and reduce some of the incorrect choices to improve your percentage of correct answers. Use context clues within the sentence to help understand alien words. Remember to use your prefix and suffix definitions to help align meaning. Think of parts of the root word you may understand in a different word. Finally, let your ears lend you a helping hand. Read the sentence with the remaining word choices to help determine which sounds correct. As a final check, reread the sentence with the answer choice filled in to satisfy yourself that it makes sense.
- When dealing with two blank questions, try to eliminate some answer choices based on just one blank at a time.
 - Sometimes, it is best to start with the second blank. To decide which blank to start with, read the question and select the blank that seems easier for you. If they both seem about the same, look at the answer choices to determine which set of words in the answer choices contain the most synonyms and start with the alternative set. This will help you alleviate incorrect answer choices rapidly.
 - After you have alleviated as many answer choices as possible with the first selected blank, repeat the process with the alternative set of choices and eliminate any that do not match for that blank.
 - If only one set of choices is left, this is the correct answer. If more than one set is left, go on to the next steps.
 - Now, combine both answer choices together and reread the sentence using both words in place of the blanks to determine which one makes the most sense and fulfills the requirement of being the best fit.
 - Finally, listen. Read with your ear and make the best selection.
- Keep in mind that the instructions for all the Sentence Completion questions ask that you choose the best answer. In order to make sure that you fulfill this requirement, you must read all the answer choices, not just until you find one that fits. Here is where your ability to comprehend the tone and texture of the sentence comes into play. This is really where having read extensively will help you more than any other preparation you attempt.

Let's take a look at a sample question that on the surface seems like a simple vocabulary question.

1. A decision based upon limited facts must be called _____.
- A. harsh
 - B. deliberate
 - C. sensible
 - D. premature
 - E. fair

The correct choice is **D**.

Explanation: If we practiced our strategies in order, we first read the sentence and substituted the word “blank” where the blank occurs. Then we predicted plausible words that would complement the meaning, flow, and logic of the sentence. Some prediction words might have been “rash” or “short-sighted” or “ill-informed.” As we review the answer choices, we notice that none of our prediction words are present, so we go ahead and read the sentence attempting to eliminate answer choices that don’t make sense. Since answer Choices B, “deliberate” and C, “sensible” suggest that the decision would have been made on an informed and educated basis, they can be eliminated immediately. We need to look a little closer at the remaining choices. Certainly, the word “harsh” could apply if we were talking about retaliation, potentially causing injury to someone before we knew all the facts. As the sentence does not lend itself to a judgment leaning toward harshness any more than leniency, we can eliminate Choice A. Likewise, the sentence does not lend itself to any degree of fairness, particularly in light of the decision being made with limited information. Answer Choice E, “premature” can, therefore, be eliminated as well. This leaves answer Choice D. Although “premature” was not one of our predictions, “rash,” short-sighted,” and “ill-informed” all have similar connotations as “premature.”

Before we get into Sentence Completion skill sets, let’s recap some of the highlights presented thus far:

- Familiarize yourself with all instructions prior to test day.
- Answer easy questions first, addressing the more difficult ones as time permits. Remember, sentence completion questions are arranged from easiest to hardest, so allocate your time accordingly.
- Begin by reading each sentence substituting the word “blank” for the actual blank(s) to help give you a feel for the overall flow of the sentence.
- Focus on the standard definitions as you know them to be for the words in the sentence and the answer choices. Although secondary or alternative meanings may be encountered in later sections, the Sentence Completion section usually relies on primary meanings.
- Use your prior knowledge and skills to determine meanings. Recognize like root words, prefixes, and suffixes to assist with word definitions. Utilize any context clues possible to help. Finally, allow your ear to help when necessary.
- Be extremely cognizant of key introductory and transitional words. These determine how different parts of the sentence relate to one another. They may set up a reaffirmation, a contrast, or a change in tone. And remember to be especially mindful of negatives that reverse answer choices.
- While reading through the sentence, think about the logic therein and predict plausible word substitutes that complement the logical flow of the sentence in meaning and tone. As you review answer choices, look for those predictions or words that connote similar meanings.
- When dealing with two-blank questions, determine which set to attack first. Remember, if you can eliminate one word of a two-word answer choice, the entire choice can be eliminated.
- Read through all answer choices before making a final selection. Remember, the SAT reviewers want the ‘best’ answer choice, not the first plausible choice.
- Reconfirm your selection by reading the entire sentence with your answer choice in place of the blank.
- Finally, eliminate as many choices as practical, read to let your ear assist in your judgment, and make an educated guess if necessary.

