

# ACT English Tips

---

[mdek12.org](http://mdek12.org)



MISSISSIPPI  
DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION



## VISION

To create a world-class educational system that gives students the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and the workforce, and to flourish as parents and citizens



## MISSION

To provide leadership through the development of policy and accountability systems so that all students are prepared to compete in the global community



1

**ALL** Students Proficient and Showing Growth in All Assessed Areas



2

**EVERY** Student Graduates from High School and is Ready for College and Career



3

**EVERY** Child Has Access to a High-Quality Early Childhood Program

**EVERY** School Has Effective Teachers and Leaders

4



**EVERY** Community Effectively Uses a World-Class Data System to Improve Student Outcomes

5



**EVERY** School and District is Rated “C” or Higher

6



- 75 Questions in 45 minutes
- Step into the shoes of a writer, who must use their knowledge and English language skills to revise a series of passages.



- Conventions of Standard English: 51-56%
- Production of Writing: 29-32%
- Knowledge of Language: 13-19%



- Gives readers a road map to understanding the logic behind a sentence
- Shows you how to understand and read sentences
- Six main areas of punctuation covered on the English section:
  - Commas
  - Apostrophes
  - Semicolons
  - Colons
  - Parentheses and Dashes
  - End Marks

The most common offender from the punctuation questions is the comma. There are several way commas are used:

- Separate independent clauses *joined by a conjunction*
- Delineate items in a series
- Separate nonessential, consecutive adjectives modifying a noun
- Set off dependent clauses and phrases from the main clause
- Set off nonessential phrases and clauses
- Set off appositives

- Have both a subject and a verb
- Can stand alone, unlike dependent clauses
- Commas used to join these independent clauses will also be accompanied by a coordinating conjunction. [FANBOYS]
  - For
  - And
  - Nor
  - But
  - Or
  - Yet
  - So

Where should the commas go?

- Mr. Stanford felt ill so he went to the Doctor.
- The ACT was terribly hard but we still made it through the test.
- Steve and Carl are having fun but soon Steve will ruin their fun.
- I like cheese but not milk.

Where should the commas go?

- Mr. Stanford felt ill, so he went to the Doctor.
- The ACT was terribly hard, but we still made it through the test.
- Steve and Carl are having fun, but soon Steve will ruin their fun.
- I like cheese but not milk. [No Change]

- A series contains three or more of something.
- Items in series are not limited to nouns.
- Can also be verb phrases.

- The hungry Mr. Stanford devoured a chicken a plate of peas and a pterodactyl.
- Terry realized he was late for school rushed upstairs threw on some clothes and brushed his teeth.
- I ate eggs toast and orange juice for breakfast.

- The hungry Mr. Stanford devoured a chicken, a plate of peas, and a pterodactyl.
- Terry realized he was late for school, rushed upstairs, threw on some clothes, and brushed his teeth.
- I ate eggs, toast, and orange juice for breakfast.

When two or more nonessential adjectives modify a noun, they should be separated by a comma. But what makes an adjective essential or nonessential? Luckily, there's a simple rule that can help you: the order of nonessential adjectives is interchangeable.

- Steven's new giraffe has long, silky hair.
- The loud, angry protestors mobbed the building.

*Or*

- My mother hates noisy electronic music.

Unlike independent clauses, **dependent phrases and clauses are not sentences in themselves**; rather, **they explain or embellish the main clause of a sentence**. When they appear at the beginning of a sentence, they should be set off from the main clause by a comma.

- Scared of eels, Mr. Stanford stays far away from the eel tank in his house.
- After planning the lesson for himself, Mr. Stanford was quite exhausted.

The first example shows a dependent clause (“Scared of monsters”) acting as an adjective modifying “Tina.” The second example shows a dependent clause acting as an adverb. **Since the adverbial clause is at the beginning of the sentence, it needs to be set off from the main clause by a comma.** Adverbial clauses should also be set off by commas if they appear in the middle of a sentence. However, if an adverbial clause appears at the end of a sentence, you do not need to use a comma.

- Anne was too tired to eat after preparing an elaborate meal for herself.

These are like nonessential adjectives in that they embellish without limiting or specifying the noun. Nonessential phrases and clauses should be set off by commas from the rest of the sentence:

- Everyone voted Carrie, who was the least popular girl in the school, prom queen.
- The ugly building, which was built in the 1800s, finally fell down.
- The average world temperature, *however*, has continued to rise significantly
- Company managers, *seeking higher profits*, hired temporary workers to replace full-time staff.

These are not set off by commas because they limit the meaning of the sentence and are necessary to understand the sentence as a whole.

- The girl *who is sick* missed three days of school.
- The leg *that was broken* gave way under pressure.
- *The sixth-century philosopher* *Boethius* was arrested, tortured, and bludgeoned to death.
- The woman *who interviewed you* is my sister.

These are like nonessential phrases. An appositive renames or restates the modified noun usually enhancing the idea of the noun.

- Everyone voted Carrie, who was the least popular girl in the school, prom queen.
- Mr. Stanford, my favorite English teacher, smells like cheese.

Apostrophes are the second most commonly tested punctuation mark on the English Test. Apostrophes primarily indicate possession, but they also take the place of omitted letters in contractions (for example, “was not” becomes “wasn’t” and “it is” becomes “it’s”). You will be tested chiefly on your knowledge of the apostrophe’s possessive function.

- A woman’s hat
- The man’s shoes
- The weirdo’s weird stuff

Even if it ends in an –s ...

- My boss’s shoelaces were an ugly shade of magenta.

Most plural nouns can be **made possessive by simply adding the apostrophe.**

- The boys' teacher was in the room.
- My mom forgot the dogs' food.
- We removed the bottles' labels.

Unless they are **irregular** and do not end in an –s

- The children's grades have been rising.
- The teeth's roots are gross and wonky.

Think of how you pronounce these to determine whether to add an –s. However, the typical rule is that **proper names ending in an –s receive an apostrophe.**

- James’s hat fell into the volcano

Unless their last name ends in an –s

- The Watsons’ home was dilapidated and smelled like feet.

Names (typically historical ones) that end in -es do not receive an apostrophe and an “S.” These just get the apostrophe.

- Moses’
- Achilles’

Unlike these ...

- Jesus’s
- Odysseus’s

These are used to separate two *closely related* but independent clauses. In these cases, the semicolon functions as a “weak period.” It suggests a short pause, whereas a period suggests a full stop before moving on to a less-related thought. Generally, a period between these independent clauses would work just as well as a semicolon, so the ACT won’t offer you a choice between period or semicolon on the English Test. But you may see the semicolon employed as a weak period in an answer choice; in that case, you should know that it is being used correctly.

- I ate fifteen cheeseburgers; Carl ate sixteen.
- Josh needed new guitar strings; he went to the store.

If the sentence already contains commas for other reasons then the semicolon must replace the comma in items in a series. Without the semicolon in this situation, the sentence below would be near impossible to read.

- The tennis tournament featured the surprise comeback player, Koch, who dropped out last year due to injuries; the up-and-coming star Popp, who dominated the junior tour; and the current favorite, Farrington, who won five of the last six tournaments.
- I went to Jackson, Mississippi; Austin, Texas; and Tallahassee, Florida.

Use a hyphen to connect words that you wish to act as a unit. The hyphen brings words together to act and read as a single unit. These words will form a single concept that describes the following word. However, if this description comes after the word it describes then do not use a hyphen.

- My **eleven-year-old** nephew got a new iPad, and I am jealous.

In this case, I'm not saying "my eleven, year, old nephew." This would be like saying "My eleven and year and old nephew."

- My nephew who is eleven years old got a new iPad, and I am jealous.

Here the words describing nephew come after the noun (nephew), so no hyphen is needed.

These are used after complete sentences to introduce related information that usually comes in the form of a *list*, an *explanation* or a *quotation*.

- The class had everything to facilitate learning: computers, brains, and Mr. Stanford.
- The class had everything to facilitate learning: the students clearly grew from day to day.
- Mr. Stanford's excitement was clearly displayed: "You weirdoes and weirdettes are learnin' sumpin' now!"

A colon should always be preceded by an independent clause.

- **WRONG:** The ingredients I need to make a cake: flour, butter, sugar, and icing.
- **RIGHT:** I need several ingredients to make a cake: flour, butter, sugar, and icing.

There should never be more than one colon in a sentence.

- **WRONG:** He brought many items on the camping trip: a tent, a sleeping bag, a full cooking set, warm clothes, and several pairs of shoes: sneakers, boots, and sandals.
- **RIGHT:** He brought many items on the camping trip: a tent, a sleeping bag, a full cooking set, warm clothes, sneakers, boots, and sandals.

- Concise - giving a lot of information clearly and in a few words; it's brief but comprehensive.
- Redundant - (of words or data) able to be omitted without loss of meaning or function. (of words or data) able to be omitted without loss of meaning or function.

- Questions at the end of the passage ask about the passage as a whole. For these questions:
- If the shortest answer has all the information as the longer answers, **THE SHORT ONE IS CORRECT.**
- ACT is not looking for wordiness and intelligent sounding writing, they want clear, straightforward, concise writing
- If an answer repeats thoughts (or exact words!) that were just stated, that answer is incorrect because it is redundant.

- Subject/verb agreement
- Pronoun/antecedent
- Adjectives/adverbs with corresponding nouns and verbs
- Verb forms
- Pronoun forms and cases
- Comparative/superlative modifiers

All subjects must agree with their verbs in number. If a subject is singular, then you must use a singular verb. If a subject is plural, then you must use a plural verb.

- **First-person:**

I **am** a hard worker.

We **are** hard workers.

- **Second-person:**

You **are** going to study and practice hard for the ACT!

- **Third-person:**

She **was** excellent at Geometry.

He **is** weak in Geometry and needs to study.

Josh **is** going to travel for the holidays.

- A singular subject takes a singular verb.  
*Steve **studies** before any big test.*
- A plural subject takes a plural verb.  
*Steve and LaKeshia **study** together before any big test.  
They **were** going to study, but they had a project due.*
- Verbs won't always come after the subject.  
*The cars in the lot **looked** quite expensive.*

- Collective nouns represent more than one person (such as a group, a team, a family, etc.). They are singular and take singular verb forms.

*The church council **is** reviewing the candidates for new preacher.*

*The family **was** over how to spend their holiday break.*

- Sometimes, collective nouns take plural verbs. If the noun refers to a group of many individuals and not the group as a whole.

*A number of people **are** interested in running for governor.*

- Plural collective nouns take plural verbs.

*The church councils **are** reviewing the candidates for new preacher.*

*The families **are** over how to spend their holiday break.*

- Compound subjects are joined by a conjunction and take a plural verb.

Carl and Karen **hate** gym class.

- Subjects connected by “either/or” or “neither/nor” take a singular verb.

Either Reggie or John **is** bringing the study materials.  
Neither Doug nor Garret **is** studying for the test.

- When a singular and plural subject are connected by “either/or” the verb must agree with the item closest to it.  
*Either Reggie or the girls **are** going to the game.*  
*Either the girls or Reggie **is** going to the game.*
- Here are some common words that will always require singular verbs: *each, everyone, every one, everybody, anyone, someone, and somebody.*  
Keep a list of these rules next to you as you study and get in the habit of “matching” a sentence’s subject to its verb!

All pronouns must agree with their antecedents (what the pronoun is referring to) in number and gender. If an antecedent is singular, then you must use a singular pronoun. If an antecedent is plural, then you must use a plural pronoun. The same applies for gender.

- Simple Tenses

**Simple Present:** The boy runs. (He's running right now)

**Simple Past:** The boy ran yesterday. (He ran in the past)

**Simple Future:** The boy will run tomorrow. (He will run in the future)

- Perfect Tenses

**Present Perfect:** I have practiced, so I am ready for the recital.

The present perfect often indicates something that you have just done, or something that you did in the past and may continue to do or are doing at the moment. Think of this example where we use present perfect vs. past: John (worked / has worked) at the coffee shop for three years. Notice that “worked” would tell us that John no longer works at the coffee shop; he’s talking about three years of his life that have already passed. If we use “has worked,” though, it suggests that John has worked at the shop for three years and continues to work there.

**Past Perfect:** I had practiced, so I played well at the recital.

The past perfect is used to indicate an action that occurred before another action in the past. Notice that both the practicing and the recital took place in the past, but we want to communicate the order of events: practicing took place before the recital. Thus, we use the past perfect for the practicing, and the simple past for the “playing well.”

**Future Perfect:** I will have practiced, so I will play well in the recital.

The future perfect is used to indicate an action that took place before another action in the future. We know that the practicing and the recital will both take place in the future; I will certainly practice before the recital but haven’t done so yet. This example sentence suggests that I have made a prediction about events in the future. It’s like saying: “Don’t worry about me. By the time the recital comes around, I will have practiced, and I will be great.”



# ACT English Tips

Updated 2022

[mdek12.org](https://mdek12.org)



MISSISSIPPI  
DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION

