Declining Test Scores

Since the test expanded to three sections in 2005, the mean scores for both the Critical Reading and the Writing Sections have declined annually. This steady decrease in performance has occurred in spite of (or, perhaps, partially because of) the hundreds of study guides that promise shortcuts to a perfect score.

Q: Why do SAT scores keep dropping?
A: Many causes have been suggested. Some of them (a broader range of test-takers; funding cuts) are beyond the control of educators. There are, however, many factors we can control that have contributed to declining scores:

Modernized Simplified Curricula: Schools are assigning progressively fewer 19th-Century novels, and are replacing “The Classics” with prose from newspapers, magazines, and weblogs. More and more teachers are simplifying grammar lessons, or skipping them altogether. This shift in educational priorities puts 21st-Century students at a disadvantage: standardized exams are testing students on formal skills they were never taught in the first place.

Test-Prep Methods Shortcuts: The globalization of “standardized testing” is changing the way we learn: usually, for the worse. Students worldwide are opting to spend their valuable time preparing for a test, as opposed to the alternative: learning. All statistical data point to a strong correlation between “test-tip secrets” and decreases in performance. This culture of “test-cracking” is unfortunate not only because it prevents children from learning, but also because it simply doesn’t work. The multimillion-dollar test-prep industry seems to be making our kids dumber.

Q: What kind of score increase can I expect?
A: That’s up to you. If you learn all the skills in this book, you should see a significant increase. Students who complete this textbook consistently exceed the 90th percentile, with several having achieved the 800-point plateau of a perfect score on the SAT Writing Section, or its equivalent on other standardized exams.

Q: How, precisely, can I raise my score?
A: The best (and only) way to significantly raise one’s score is to get smarter. If there were a “magic formula” to raise test scores without putting in any effort, everyone would be doing it. Rather than trying to trick the test, it is quicker—and more effective—simply to learn the relevant skills that the College Board is testing for. This volume is designed to teach students the skills (not secrets) necessary to achieve a perfect score:

Grammar in Context: most grammar books are full of artificial examples—i.e., “see Spot run” or “Jack kicks the ball”—which will never appear on a test, nor will they be useful in real life. This volume teaches every relevant concept with examples from famous writers like Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, and Woolf, just to name a few.

Addressing Misconceptions: this volume clearly explicates the right and (just as importantly) the wrong way to approach writing skills. Students are taught the in-depth mechanics behind English sentences, paragraphs, and essays. This material is useful not only on standardized exams, but also for university classes and professional careers.

Setting Goals (optional): If you’ve taken the SAT before and are unsatisfied with your results, you may consider setting ambitious—but-realistic goals to motivate you:

Writing Target: ________ / 800
Critical Reading Target: ________ / 800
Mathematics Target: ________ / 800
Introduction: What is Grammar?

Wrong Approach(es) to Grammar: (1) "Choose the answer that sounds right" [colloquial speech that sounds right often violates the rules of standard English; likewise, formal academic speech often "sounds wrong" to our ears]; (2) "Choose the most detailed or descriptive answer" [all sentences give details and descriptions; this is irrelevant]

Right Approach to Grammar: Grammatical errors occur whenever a precise rule is violated. If you can identify a particular error, then fix it. If you don't see any errors, leave things as they are.

Avoid Overthinking: Unlike word-problems in mathematics and paragraphs in prose passages, "Grammar" does not require one to form "mental pictures." Counter-intuitively, in fact, students tend to improve their writing mechanics when they ignore the "bigger picture" meaning of an expression. Consider the following sentence:

After losing their way in the wake of an equipment failure, the RMS Baltic successfully navigated the remainder of her journey by following star signs.

A. their
B. successfully navigated
C. the remainder
D. star signs
E. No Error

If you picture the words merely as "values" inserted into a syntactical equation, you'll have an easier time spotting the error. When evaluating this question, don't picture a ship sailing through the sea. Instead, picture something like this: [prepositional phrase / plural possessive pronoun] + [independent clause / singular feminine subject]. Notice that the error is easier to spot when you distance yourself from the content of the sentence.

Wrong Approach: the navigation was difficult; change choice "B" to "managed to successfully navigate."

Wrong Approach: “the remainder” sounds too mathematical; change choice “C” to “the rest.”

Wrong Approach: we should give more details; change choice “D” to “several star signs.”

Wrong Approach: this is a descriptive sentence; everything is adequately described; choose choice “E.”

Right Approach: “their” is plural/neutral; “RMS Baltic” is singular/feminine. Change Choice “A” to “her.”

Language Games: In perhaps the most famous linguistic analogy of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously compares language to a “game.” Let’s imagine for a moment that the words in our sentences are like the pieces on a chessboard. How does this change the way we look at them?

Versatility: In a game of Chess, pieces can make several different “moves.” Even the simplest chess piece, a pawn, can be moved forward one or two spaces, diagonally to the left or right (to capture other pieces), or exchanged with another piece in the back row. Language is similar: even simple words can make different "moves" in the context of a sentence. It is misleading to think of “one word” as standing for “one object” or “one action.” Consider a simple word like “sound,” which, depending on its context, can make many different word-moves: “That is sound advice” (adjective); “That is sound asleep” (adverb); “That sound is annoying” (noun); “That sounds terrible” (verb); “Sound the alarm!” (command)—and that doesn’t even include other connotations like whale noises (sounding) or boasting (sounding off). You will be a more successful grammarian if you worry less about a word’s meaning, and more about its behavior. Ask yourself, “how is this word functioning in this particular line?”

Rules: In a game of Chess, there are certain moves that cannot be made without “violating the rules.” Language is similar: words must follow a certain order, or they risk losing their meaning. This order is what we call “syntax.” It is perfectly natural for us to say “a big red balloon,” whereas the alternative “a red big balloon” sounds awkward. Switching these words around would be like trying to move a King across a chessboard more than one space at a time.

Variability: One thing that makes chess interesting is that there are theoretically an infinite number of possible moves that can be made. Similarly, there is no limit to the number of "word-moves" we can make: there are syntactically infinite possibilities, and language allows us to construct never-before-seen sentences (this one, for example) while still being understood. Language, of course, is far more complicated than chess, so there is a far greater degree of ambiguity when trying to figure out which moves are possible.

When taking a test, forget about the “bigger-picture meaning” of a sentence: ask yourself, how is this word-piece being moved? Is it “describing” something (adj or adv); is it “connecting” sentence elements (con); is it showing a relationship between substantives (prep)? And, most importantly, is it being moved correctly?
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**Verbs**

**Misconception:** A verb is an action word; an action word is a verb.

**The Reality:** Verbs sometimes express actions, but not always. In easy sentences like “I wrote an essay,” the action “wrote” functions as the verb. Yet look what happens in more complex sentences:

“Madame Maramballe… was exhausted from the exertion of descending the stairs.” [Guy de Maupassant, “Alexandre”]

The words “exhausted” and “descending” both express some kind of state or action; most students will identify them as verbs. You might be surprised to learn that neither of these is acting as a verb. In fact, both are what we call “verbals” (we’ll learn more about these shortly).

**Adjective (past participle):** “exhausted” is describing Madame Maramballe

**Noun (Gerund):** “descending” is the object of a preposition; it is the “thing” Madame is doing.

The verb, rather, is the word that completes the subject:

- “Madame Maramballe” [noun/subject] “was” [verb/predicate]

“To be” requires no physical movement; it does not express an action. This sentence demonstrates that action words are not always verbs (they can also be nouns), and verbs are not always action words (they can also express states of being). Contrary to what you probably learned in primary school and/or watching *Schoolhouse Rock* videos, verbs and actions only overlap some of the time:

**Conjugation of the infinitive “to be”** (present tense):

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<th><strong>SINGULAR</strong></th>
<th><strong>Plural</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Person</td>
<td>I am</td>
<td>We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Person</td>
<td>You are</td>
<td>You are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Person</td>
<td>He / She / It is</td>
<td>They are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample Conjugations of “to be”:**

- Past, Plural, 1st Person: “We Were”
- Present, Singular, 3rd Person: “She is”
- Future, Singular, 2nd Person: “You will be”

**Warm-up:** The following predicate (boldface) contains four separate verb elements. Which is agreeing with the subject?

“I am going to try biking this afternoon.”

In this sentence, the words “am,” “going,” “to try,” and “biking” all contain verb-parts. How can we tell which one is agreeing with the subject? There are several ways to test for agreement:

**Method #1:** the conjugated verb is usually the first verb in the verb phrase (in this case, “am”).

**Method #2:** The conjugated form can be paired with the subject to form a grammatically-possible statement:

FAIL: “I going,” “I to try,” “I biking”
FANTASTIC: “I am”

**Method #3:** change the person, number, or tense of the sentence. The verb that changes form to agree with the subject will usually be the conjugated form.

**Changing “Person”** (1st to 3rd): She is going to try biking this afternoon.

**Changing “Number”** (singular to plural): We are going to try biking this afternoon.

**Changing “Tense”** (present to past): I was going to try biking this afternoon.

Notice that only one of the verb forms is changing—different forms of the verb “to be” (am / is / are / was)—so we know that “going,” “to try,” and “biking” cannot be verbs.
Subj ects & Predicates

Warm-up: The following sentence contains six nouns (in boldface); which is acting as the subject of the verb “was”?

“A smallish, frail figure, the meagerness of his body merely emphasized by the blue overalls which was the uniform of the party.”

If you labeled the first noun you saw (i.e., “figure”), you’re wrong. If you labeled the noun closest to the verb (i.e., “uniform”), you’re also wrong. In fact, none of these nouns agree with the verb: the subject is actually the pronoun “which.” In this case, “which” is referring to “overalls” (plural): thus, we must change the verb from “was” (singular) to “were” (plural). The correct sentence reads as follows:

“A smallish, frail figure, the meagerness of his body merely emphasized by the blue overalls which were the uniform of the party” [George Orwell, 1984]

Label Verbs First: it is recommended to identify verbs before guessing at the subject. Notice that the sentence contains six nouns and a pronoun, but only one verb. If you label “S” for the first noun you see, there is a good chance you will be wrong.

(1) A Subject is a noun, pronoun, phrase, or clause that has a predicate attached to it (i.e., it agrees with a verb). Subjects can take many forms:

Noun: Usain Bolt repeated as Olympic Champion.

Pronoun: He repeated as Olympic Champion.

Noun Phrase: Repeating as Olympic Champion was Usain Bolt's greatest achievement.

Noun Clause: That Usain Bolt repeated as Olympic Champion came as no surprise.

Compound Subject: Usain Bolt and Yohan Blake finished first and second.

(2) A Predicate contains a verb and anything that belongs to the verb (excluding the subject and any modifiers or modifying phrases). Predicates can take many forms:

Linking Verb + Adjective: Usain Bolt is fast.

Linking Verb + Noun: Usain Bolt is an athlete.

Action Verb + Adverb: Usain Bolt sprinted quickly around the corner.

Action Verb + Direct Object: Usain Bolt broke the record.

Compound Verb Phrase: Usain Bolt has been training.

Compound Predicate: Usain Bolt turned the corner and sprinted to victory.

(3) Inverted Sentences place the verb before the subject. They often begin “there was” or “there were.” Errors commonly occur when a singular verb is paired with a plural or compound subject:

Fail: There was scarcely six months between them.

Fantastic: “There were scarcely six months between them.” [Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights]

Uninverted: Scarcely six months were between them.

Fail: Such was the appearance and mental flavor of Mr. Raffles.

Fantastic: “Such were the appearance and mental flavor of Mr. Raffles.” [George Eliot, Middlemarch]

Uninverted: The appearance and mental flavor of Mr. Raffles were such.

(4) Timeless Verbs express unchanging conditions; they share the same form as the present simple. The following categories are always timeless:

Definitions / Universal Truths: In 1890, the Sherman Antitrust Act defined monopolies as businesses that unfairly limit competition. [the defining occurred at a specific time in the past; the definition is timeless]

Doctrines: Jean Baptiste Colbert believed that Mercantilism is the best policy for a nation’s economic and military strength. [the believing occurred at a specific time in the past; the belief itself is timeless]

Literature: Romeo and Juliet both die at the end of their eponymous tragedy, which Shakespeare wrote in the mid-1590’s. [the writing occurred at a specific time in the past; the plot is timeless]
Verbals: Gerunds & Infinitives

Warm-up: Which sentence is correct? Check the box for the sentence with no errors:

□ Shakespeare to write *King Lear* between 1603 and 1606.
□ Shakespeare writing *King Lear* between 1603 and 1606.
□ Shakespeare written *King Lear* between 1603 and 1606.

Hopefully you left the boxes blank; they’re all nonsense. Each sentence is missing a verb. The words “to write” (infinitive), “writing” (gerund), and “written” (participle) do not agree with a subject. They are what we call “verbals.”

Verbals, also called “non-finite verbs,” are words that contain verb-parts, but do not agree with a subject (i.e., they cannot function as the main verb of a clause). English features three main “verbal” categories.

(1) Infinitives are the base form of a verb, before it is conjugated to agree with a subject. Almost all infinitives begin with the function word to: “to be,” “to write,” etc.

(1a) Function: Infinitives usually act as nouns. They can also be “postmodifiers” (i.e., modifiers that come after the words they describe) when acting as adverbs or adjectives.

   Noun (subject of a verb): “To err is human; to forgive, divine.” [Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*]

   Adjective (describing “things”): “A cheerful confidence in *things to come*.” [William Wordsworth, *Prelude*]

   Adverb (describing “swift”): “O mischief, thou art swift / To enter in the thoughts of desperate men!” [Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*]

(1b): When used with modal or auxiliary verbs, infinitives usually (but not always) drop the “to”:

   “Daddy, may I *to have* more ice cream for breakfast?”
   “No; you should really *to go* on a diet.”
   “How rude! Who said you can *to speak* to me like that?”

Exception: “You ought *to respect* your elders, young lady.”

(1c): Infinitives also drop the word “to” when used with the following verbs: feel, hear, help, let, make, see, & watch.

   Fail: Can you hear him *to play* the piano?
   Awesome: Would you like him *to play* the piano?

(1d) Listing: Consecutive infinitives may either retain the “to” before each infinitive, or to drop the “to” from all but the first infinitive, as long as all infinitives are parallel.

   Omitted: “Let us dare *to read, think, speak, and write*.” [John Adams, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*]

   Retained: “Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / *To strive, to find, and not to yield*.” [Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*]

(2) Gerunds are verbs ending in “-ing” that act as nouns.

   Gerund (subject of a verb): “Giving up smoking *is* the easiest thing in the world. I know because I’ve done it thousands of times.” [Mark Twain]

   Gerund (object of a preposition): “I have never taken any exercise except *sleeping*.” [Mark Twain]

(2a): In most cases, gerunds and infinitives are interchangeable.

   Gerund: I like *singing*.

   Infinitive: “I like *to sing*.” [Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*]

(2b) Gerunds are preferred if the action is general, or if the subject is not directly participating:

   Fail: Of music and *to dance* he was passionately fond.

   Fantastic: “Of music and *dancing* he was passionately fond.” [Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*]

(2c) Infinitives are preferred to express specific actions, purposes, or intentions, especially if the subject is directly participating in the action:

   Awkward: She would probably have liked *quarreling*. [does she enjoy it when other people quarrel, or does she like to quarrel herself?]

   Awesome: “She would probably have liked *to quarrel*.” [Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*]

   Awkward: We sailed out of the port *for fishing*.

   Awesome: “We sailed out of the port *to fish*.” [Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*]
Verbals: Past & Present Participles

(2) Present Participles are verbs that end in “-ing.”

(2a): Present Participles are most commonly used in the Continuous Tenses (also called progressive tenses). Continuous tenses are formed with the verb “to be” + “present participle” and show continuing or ongoing action.

Present Continuous: “I was waggling my foot.” [James Joyce, Ulysses]

Present Continuous: “You are always giving her the preference.” [Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice]

Future Continuous: “The others will be wondering.” [C.S. Lewis, Chronicles of Narnia]

(2b): The continuous tense is only appropriate when describing a continuous action:

Fail: We had been sitting together at one summer’s end.

Fantastic: We sat together at one summer’s end.” [W.B. Yeats, “Adam’s Curse”]

(2c): Present participles can function as modifiers: most commonly as adjectives, and occasionally as adverbs.

Adjective: “Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” [Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”]

Adverb: “That party was freaking crazy!” [anonymous college sophomore]

(2d): Participles of linking verbs are usually redundant; they are only acceptable when describing an ongoing process:

Fail: The schoolgirls are being twelve years old.

Fantastic: The schoolgirls are twelve years old.

Fantastic: “I shall see the little girls who are being educated.” [Henry James, Portrait of a Lady]

(2e): Words ending in “-ing” are often incorrectly used in meaningless phrases: i.e., “being that” or “ seeming as.” Such words can function as participles or gerunds, but never prepositions or conjunctions:

Fail (misused conjunction): Genevieve forgot to study; being as such, she failed her exam.

Fantastic (gerund): “There is no moment of its existence in which its Being as such is not an issue.” [Martin Heidegger, Being and Time]

(3) Past Participles are verbal / participial forms that do not end in “-ing.” They most commonly end in “-ed,” but irregular forms may end in “-en,” “-ought,” “-unk,” etc.

(3a) Function: Past participles are usually used in Perfect Tenses, for which the formula is “to have” + “Past Participle.” Past participles can also function as adjectives.

Past Perfect: “George had been staring intently” [John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men]

Present Perfect: “That sad overthrow and foul defeat / Has lost us Heaven.” [John Milton, Paradise Lost]

Future Perfect: “Before the evening probably he will have come” [Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge]

Adjective: “Dombey sat in the corner of a darkened room.” [Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son]

(3b): If a verb has multiple accepted participles, they can be used interchangeably.

Fantastic (Participle #1): The first unshaved waiter appeared.

Fantastic (Participle #2): The first unshaven waiter appeared.

Fantastic (Participle #3): “The first unshorn waiter appeared.” [William Thackeray, Vanity Fair]

(3c): Participles cannot be used interchangeably with the past simple tense.

Fail: They had interviews together every morning when he shaven.

Fail: They had interviews together every morning when he shorn.

Fantastic (Past Simple): “They had interviews together every morning when he shaved.” [William Thackeray, Vanity Fair]

(3d): The past simple should not be used when a participle is required.

Fail: A huge misfortune has took place.

Fantastic: “A huge misfortune has taken place.” [Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis]

Fail: Our ship was twice in danger of being sank.

Fantastic: “Our ship was twice in danger of being sunk.” [Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels]
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<td>To take</td>
<td>Took</td>
<td>Taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To tear</td>
<td>Tore</td>
<td>Torn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To throw</td>
<td>Threw</td>
<td>Thrown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To undergo</td>
<td>Underwent</td>
<td>Undergone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To wake</td>
<td>Woke</td>
<td>Woken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To wear</td>
<td>Wore</td>
<td>Worn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To weave</td>
<td>Wove</td>
<td>Woven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To withdraw</td>
<td>Withdrew</td>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To write</td>
<td>Wrote</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3e) Other Irregulars: Of the hundreds of irregular past participles in the English language, most are impossible to confuse because they feature identical past simple and past participle forms:

**Past Simple**: I slept soundly.

**Past Participle**: I have slept too much lately.

Note: Preferred British Spelling occasionally differs concerning the spelling of participles (i.e., “spelt” instead of “spelled”); standardized tests such as the SAT, however, will only test Standard American English.