

FROM THE MAKERS OF THE ACT®

THE  
**OFFICIAL**  
**ACT®**

# ENGLISH GUIDE

SECOND EDITION

A Step-by-Step Guide Outlining the Preparation for the ACT®

## FEATURES

- The only book with real ACT® English questions organized by concept
- Covers basic and advanced topics
- Offers strategies and shortcuts to save you time
- Includes a glossary of grammar terminology
- Includes 100s of official ACT® questions with answers and explanations



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# **THE OFFICIAL ACT**

## **ENGLISH GUIDE**

**ACT**

**WILEY**

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# Introduction

This guide will help you succeed on the ACT English test, which measures your understanding of what you've been taught in your core high school English courses. Reviewing all the grammar rules and writing skills you have learned during high school will take some time. This guide will help remind you of what you have learned and will likely teach you new skills and concepts as well. It covers the content of the ACT English and writing tests and the procedures you'll follow when you're actually taking the ACT English test. This guide also provides strategies for approaching the questions and content-specific test-taking tips.

The following chapters contain questions taken from actual ACT tests that are aimed at enhancing your understanding of the knowledge and skills you'll need to succeed on the test. Each question is followed by a detailed answer explanation. Chapters are organized by grammar and style concepts, which should help you see the patterns among the questions. Near the end of the guide, you will find a bank of real test questions and explanations as they appear on the test. This will give you practice switching gears between question types. A glossary is provided in the appendix to assist you in case you need reminders of common grammatical terminology.

If you already know your areas of strength and weakness when it comes to writing and grammar, you can look through the contents of this guide and focus on improving in those areas. If you are not yet aware of your weaknesses, take a diagnostic test. The *Preparing for the ACT* practice test is available for free online, and *The Official ACT Prep Guide* includes practice tests you can take. You should print the test if you plan to take it in hard copy so you can

practice in the same manner in which you will take your actual test. Being able to cross out answer choices, underline, and star information can help you process the passages and questions.

We hope this guide helps you identify your strengths and improve areas of weakness so that you can show all that you know on your ACT English test.

# **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,

<sup>48</sup> 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. <sup>49</sup>

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 <sup>14</sup> 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 than  
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.

# **Chapter 2:** **Taking the English Test**

This chapter covers two common methods of navigating the questions in the English test. It also reviews how to thoughtfully check your work. Finally, this chapter describes several common question types and provides relevant sample questions with answer explanations.

## **Approaching the Questions**

Before you take the ACT English test, you can use the practice questions in this guide to determine an approach for answering questions that works best for you. Most students like to read a passage until they see a question, finish that sentence, and then attempt the question asked. At times, reading past the underlined portion of the sentence will be necessary in order to gain a greater sense of context. This is particularly true of questions asking about transitions, verb tenses, pronouns, redundancy, or the content of a passage. Some students prefer to read one paragraph at a time. Those students then return to the individual questions within that paragraph.

## **Checking Your Answers**

If you wish to double-check your work, you can do so either at the end of each passage while the content is still fresh in your memory or after finishing the complete English test. Mark questions that you are unsure about with a symbol like a question mark. On the online test, you will have a highlighting tool and will be able to use scrap paper for notes. If you are completing the test digitally, you can write

out the letters of the answer choices (ABCD, for example) on scrap paper and cross them out as you eliminate wrong answers.

When checking your work, be sure to consider the context of the passage. Typically, you should read at least one sentence before and one sentence after the question. If you return only to the underlined questions themselves, you will likely answer the question incorrectly. Also, when changing an answer, try to consciously recognize the reason for the change by saying to yourself, “I am choosing answer B because I now realize \_\_\_\_\_. Answer C is incorrect because \_\_\_\_\_. ”

For example, when initially looking at question 23 in the following example, you might originally think that the correct sentence includes the plural word *artists* and therefore choose answer **C**. Later, you might realize that the word *artist* is singular. You should consciously justify your choice using the method just described. You would then say to yourself, “I am choosing answer **B** because I now realize that the word *artist* is singular and later in the sentence the singular pronoun *she* is used. Answer **C** is incorrect because *s'* is used for plural nouns and the word *artist* here is not plural. Using this explanation technique will help you be mindful of your thought process as you double-check your answers.

<p>The artist Faith Ringgold has made a name for herself with her “story quilts,” lively combinations of painting, quilting, and storytelling. One of these artworks, <i>The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles</i>, depicts a scene of women at work on a quilt in a field of towering yellow flowers that eight African American <sup>22</sup> women sit around the quilt that covers their laps.</p> <p>In reality, these women never met to piece together a quilt. The scene comes out of the <u>artists</u> <sup>23</sup> imagination as a statement of the unity of purpose that she perceives in their lives.</p>	<p>23. A. NO CHANGE B. artist's imagination C. artists' imagination D. artists imagination,</p>
---	---

**The best answer is B** because Ringgold is the only artist being referred to at this point; the singular possessive form of the noun *artist's* is therefore required. Additionally, the sentence uses the singular pronoun *she*, which makes it clear that the word “artist” is singular.

**The best answer is NOT:**

**A** because *artists* is a plural noun, not the singular possessive form of the noun *artist's* that is required.

**C** because *artists'* is a plural possessive form of the noun, not the singular possessive form *artist's* that is required.

**D** because the phrase “artists imagination” uses the plural form of the noun *artists* instead of the singular possessive *artist's* that is required.

## **Types of Questions**

Studying the qualities of the different types of questions on the ACT English test will help you navigate the questions more quickly on test day. For example, questions that include the words NOT or EXCEPT are not as straightforward as most ACT English test questions. Therefore, they require a particular approach. This chapter will review a wide range of question types that appear on the ACT English test. Identifying what type of question you are answering is often the first step to answering that question correctly.

### ***Questions Are Multifaceted***

It is helpful to keep in mind that most questions test multiple grammatical concepts simultaneously. Consider the following question.

The plan worked. By late morning, the crowd cheered as, welded to the two legs of the arch, the final section was hoisted up. Over three decades and more than thirty years of planning and building had come to a conclusion, and the tallest monument in the United States was now complete.

12. Refer to the underlined portion of the passage at number 12, and choose the alternative you consider best.

F. NO CHANGE

G. as the crowd cheered, the final section was hoisted up and welded to the two legs of the arch.

H. as the crowd cheered, welded to the two legs of the arch, the final section was hoisted up.

J. the final section was hoisted up as the crowd cheered and welded to the two legs of the arch.

This question primarily tests if you understand modifiers and how to create a clear and logical sentence. An overwhelming number of grammatical concepts are found in this question, including commas, nonessential clauses, subordinating conjunctions, coordinating conjunctions, and the placement of modifiers. You may know that nonessential information is information that can be cut out of a sentence without affecting the meaning and can be framed by commas. Accordingly, you should be able to eliminate the phrase “welded to the two legs of the arch,” from the original sentence without affecting its meaning. Doing so yields the following: “By late morning, the crowd cheered as the final section was hoisted up.” That is a complete sentence. Though the phrase “welded to the two legs of the arch,” is placed appropriately immediately before the noun it modifies (the final section), it still does not create the clearest and most logical sentence. A modifier should come immediately before or after what it is modifying. In this case, the phrase “welded to the two legs of the arch,” is appropriately describing the final section of the arch; however, answer choice **F** implies that the final section is welded to the arch *before* it is hoisted up, which isn't logical. The correct answer (**G**) creates a logical sentence through its use of the conjunction *and*, which clarifies the order of the events. The final section is hoisted first, and then it is welded to the arch. This question also

demonstrates how important it is to read all of the answer choices because answer choice **F** properly implements several grammar rules, but it is still not the best answer choice.

**The best answer is G** because it provides the most logical and fluent arrangement of the possible parts of this sentence: an introductory dependent clause ("as the crowd cheered") followed by a main clause with a compound predicate ("the final section was hoisted up and welded to the two legs of the arch"). *As* is a subordinating conjunction, which means it will be followed by an independent clause + comma + subject + verb, as is the case here. The corrected sentence reads as follows:

By late morning, *as* the crowd cheered, the final section was hoisted up and welded to the two legs of the arch.

**The best answer is NOT:**

**F** because this arrangement of the pieces of information provides us with the nonsensical image of the final section being hoisted up after it had been welded to the legs of the arch.

**H** because this arrangement of the pieces of information provides us with the absurd image of the crowd being welded to the legs of the arch.

**J** because this arrangement of the pieces of information provides us with the confusing image of the crowd either doing some of the welding or being welded to the legs of the arch.

### ***Sentences in the Context of Paragraphs***

The following is an example of a paragraph from the ACT English test. Question 2 is an example of the type of question that requires an understanding of the context of

that sentence within the paragraph as a whole. Questions are identified with a number under an underlined portion of text. Here, question 2 refers to the portion of the text identified with the number 2 under an underlined portion of the paragraph. The underlined portion is what would be replaced by the answer choices.

<p>My family is part of the Miami tribe a Native American people, with strong ties to territory in <sup>1</sup> present-day Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Growing up in the Midwest, I often heard my grandmother talk about "Miami time." When she was doing something she loved, whether it was <u>making freezer jam or researching tribal history</u>, she refused to be <u>rushed</u> <sup>2</sup> in a hurry. <sup>3</sup></p>	<p>2. At this point, the writer would like to provide a glimpse into the grandmother's interests. Given that all the choices are true, which one best accomplishes this purpose?</p> <p>F. NO CHANGE</p> <p>G. being actively involved in her pursuits,</p> <p>H. things I really hope she'll teach me one day,</p> <p>J. historical research as well as domestic projects,</p>
---	---

**The best answer is F** because "making freezer jam or researching tribal history" gives the most specific and vivid glimpse of what the grandmother was interested in.

### **The best answer is NOT:**

**G** because "being actively involved in her pursuits" is vague and gives no suggestion of what those pursuits are.

**H** because "things I really hope she'll teach me one day" gives no suggestion of what those things are.

**J** because "historical research as well as domestic projects" offers only a general notion of the interests that are more pointedly described in **F**.

### ***EXCEPT and NOT Questions***

Be aware that some questions will include the words EXCEPT or NOT. Though the words EXCEPT or NOT will be capitalized, students often overlook these words and therefore answer a question different from the one being posed. Here are some examples.

These eight women the story explains, strove in their various ways to support the cause of justice in the <sup>21</sup> world.

21. The underlined phrase could be placed in all the following locations EXCEPT:

- A. where it is now.
- B. after the word *support*.
- C. after the word *cause*.
- D. after the word *world* (ending the sentence with a period).

**The best answer is C** because placing the underlined portion after the word *cause* is the only one of the four choices that wouldn't be acceptable. This placement of the phrase "in their various ways" divides the phrase "the cause" from the prepositional phrase that describes the cause, "of justice." Therefore, all of the choices would be acceptable EXCEPT **C**.

**The best answer is NOT:**

**A** because keeping the underlined portion where it is now creates a clear and correct sentence in English.

**B** because placing the underlined portion after the word *support* creates a clear and correct sentence in English.

**D** because placing the underlined portion after the word *world* (and before the period) creates a clear and correct sentence in English.

Notice that the following question 36 is identified differently than the majority of questions in the English section. Instead of the question number appearing under an underlined portion of the text, question 36 is identified by the number 36 appearing in a box because this question is not asking if a portion of the text should be replaced. It is asking why the preceding sentence should NOT be deleted. It is important to know that the word *preceding* means the sentence *before* the number 36. In other words, the question is asking about the following sentence and why it

should be kept: “Méliès's magician's eye led him to discover the basics of special effects.” The original sentence that follows the number 36 is not being replaced. That sentence has been reproduced here in order to clarify the way these questions function.

He experimented with effects such as speeding up and slowing down the action, reversing it for backward movement, and superimposing images of fantastic creatures over real people.

<p>[1] Undaunted, Méliès honed his photographic skills to tell fantasy stories instead. [2] Méliès, a French magician, was fascinated by the workings of the new motion picture camera. [3] Specializing in stage illusions, he thought the camera offered potential to expand its spectacular magic productions. [4] By <sup>33</sup> 1895, he was working with the new invention. [5] He found out, however, that the public preferred <sup>34</sup> live magic acts to filmed versions. <sup>35</sup></p> <p>Méliès's magician's eye led him to discover the basics of special effects <sup>36</sup>. He experimented with effects such as speeding up and slowing down the action, reversing it for backward movement, and superimposing images of fantastic creatures over real people. Using overhead pulleys and trapdoors, he was able to do interesting things.</p>	<p>36. The writer is considering deleting the preceding sentence from the essay. The sentence should NOT be deleted because it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>F. describes Méliès's ability as a magician, which is important to understanding the essay.</li><li>G. begins to explain the techniques of trick photography that Méliès eventually learned.</li><li>H. creates a transition that provides a further connection between Méliès the magician and Méliès the filmmaker.</li><li>J. indicates that Méliès's interest in learning about trick photography existed before his interest in magic.</li></ul>
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**The best answer is H** because the sentence under consideration should NOT be deleted; it creates a transition between the preceding paragraph, about Méliès the magician, and this paragraph, which focuses on Méliès's exploration of special film effects.

**The best answer is NOT:**

**F** because the sentence under consideration mentions Méliès's “magician's eye” but doesn't otherwise describe his ability as a magician.

**G** because the sentence under consideration mentions “the basics of special effects” but doesn't begin to

explain any of the techniques of trick photography.

**J** because the sentence under consideration doesn't indicate "that Méliès's interest in learning about trick photography existed before his interest in magic." The preceding paragraph, in fact, describes Méliès's interests as beginning with magic, then moving into filmmaking.

### ***LEAST Questions***

Some questions ask about what answer choice would be LEAST acceptable. These questions can typically be reworded as follows: "Eliminate acceptable alternatives." For these questions, typically three of the answers are quite similar to each other. The correct answer tends to be the answer that differs the most from the others. For example, three of the words might have a positive or neutral connotation while the fourth may have a negative connotation. The connotation of a word is its implied meaning. For example, the word *frugal* describes a person who is conscientious about spending. The connotation of this word is positive, while the word *miserly* describes a person who hoards money out of selfishness. Though *frugal* and *miserly* have similar denotations, or literal meanings, their connotations are quite different from one another.

Méliès could <u>arouse</u> his audience's curiosity with unconstrained fantasy.  <small><sup>43</sup></small>	43. Which of the following alternatives to the underlined word would be LEAST acceptable?  A. whet B. stimulate C. awaken D. disturb
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**The best answer is D** because *disturb* is the only one of the four alternatives that, in the context of the sentence, can't reasonably be used as a substitute for the underlined word (*arouse*). "Disturb his audience's curiosity" is neither

a conventional expression in standard English nor an appropriate innovation here. Therefore, *disturb* is the LEAST acceptable alternative to *arouse*.

**The best answer is NOT:**

**A** because the word *whet*, meaning here to stimulate or excite curiosity, is an acceptable, idiomatically appropriate alternative to the word *arouse*.

**B** because the word *stimulate*, meaning here to encourage or increase curiosity, is an acceptable, idiomatically appropriate alternative to the word *arouse*.

**C** because the word *awaken*, meaning here to stir up or stimulate curiosity, is an acceptable, idiomatically appropriate alternative to the word *arouse*.

He or she learns where the hazards lurk and the special weapons are hidden. Pinball, though, can't be predicted with such accuracy.

52. Which of the following alternatives to the underlined portion would be LEAST acceptable?

- F. therefore,
- G. however,
- H. by contrast,
- J. on the contrary,

**The best answer is F.** Notice that this question asks for the LEAST acceptable answer. In other words, the best answer is the weakest choice. If you read the paragraph carefully, you will see that the idea presented in this sentence (pinball is unpredictable) is meant to contrast with the idea in the preceding sentence (video games are predictable). Given this context, using the transitional word *therefore* at this point is illogical and confusing.

**The best answer is NOT:**