

FROM THE MAKERS OF THE ACT®

THE

# OFFICIAL ACT®

## ENGLISH GUIDE

THIRD 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

Includes  
Writing  
Section!

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# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1: An Overview of the ACT English and Writing Tests](#)

[The Structure of the English Test](#)

[ACT Test Formats: Paper and Online](#)

[Content of the ACT English Test](#)

[Content of the ACT Writing Test](#)

[How to Use This Guide](#)

[Chapter 2: Taking the English Test](#)

[Approaching the Questions](#)

[Checking Your Answers](#)

[Types of Questions](#)

[Chapter 3: Conventions of Standard English: Sentence Structure, Formation, and Usage](#)

[Sentence Structure](#)

[Verbs and Verb Phrases](#)

[Indefinite Pronouns](#)

[Relative Clauses](#)

[Using the Relative Pronoun \*Which\*](#)

[\*Which\* versus \*That\*](#)

[Chapter 4: Conventions of Standard English Concepts and Sample Questions: Sentence Structure and Usage](#)

[Parallel Structure](#)

[Correlative Conjunctions](#)

[Sentence Fragments](#)

[Run-on Sentences](#)

[Modifiers](#)

[Subject-Verb Agreement](#)

[Pronouns and Antecedents](#)

[\*Who\* versus \*Whom\*](#)

[Possessive Pronouns](#)

[Frequently Confused Words](#)

[Chapter 5: Conventions of Standard English and  
Sample Questions: Punctuation](#)

[Commas](#)

[Within Sentence Breaks](#)

[Apostrophes and Possession](#)

[Chapter 6: Production of Writing](#)

[Organization, Unity, and Cohesion](#)

[Conclusion Questions](#)

[Topic Development](#)

[Chapter 7: Knowledge of Language](#)

[Concision](#)

[Precision](#)

[Style](#)

[Chapter 8: An Overview of the ACT Writing Test](#)

[Subject Matter](#)

[Scoring](#)

[The Scoring Rubric](#)

[Chapter 9: The Setup of the Writing Test](#)

[Introductory Paragraph in the Prompt](#)

[Perspectives in the Prompt](#)

[Essay Task Box](#)

[Planning Page](#)

[Directions](#)

[Chapter 10: The Essay](#)

[Organization](#)

[Addressing the Counterargument](#)

[Knowing What Is Expected for the Rubric Categories](#)

[Chapter 11: Preparing to Write Your Essay](#)

[Purpose and Point of View](#)

[Audience, Tone, and Clarity](#)

[Prewriting](#)

[Outlining](#)

[Anecdotal Support](#)

[Timing During the Actual Test](#)

[Revising](#)

[Basic Strategies for Improving Your Writing](#)

[Revising Your Practice Essays](#)

[Chapter 12: Strengthen Your Essay with Vocabulary, Writing Mechanics, and Other Strategies](#)

[Vocabulary](#)

[Varied Sentence Structures and Punctuation](#)

[Rhetorical Questions](#)

[Avoiding Simplistic Thinking](#)

[Brainstorming about Your Values](#)

[Building Your Fund of Knowledge](#)

[Avoid What You Don't Know](#)

[Chapter 13: Sample Prompts and Essays with Analysis](#)

[Writing Test: Innovation](#)

[Writing Test: Students and Sleep](#)

[Chapter 14: Practice Questions](#)

[Chapter 15: Answers and Explanations](#)

[Answer Key: Practice Test 1](#)

[Explanatory Answers: Practice Test 1](#)

[Answer Key: Practice Test 2](#)

[Explanatory Answers: Practice Test 2](#)

[Answer Key: Practice Test 3](#)

[Explanatory Answers: Practice Test 3](#)

[Answer Key: Practice Test 4](#)

[Explanatory Answers: Practice Test 4](#)

[Appendix: English Test Glossary](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

## List of Tables

Chapter 5

[\*\*Table 5.1\*\* Its versus It's versus Its'](#)

[\*\*Table 5.2\*\* Their, They're, and There](#)

Chapter 6

[\*\*Table 6.1\*\* Transition Words and Phrases](#)

Chapter 11

[\*\*Table 11.1\*\* Suitable Words to Use in Your Essay](#)

THE  
**OFFICIAL**  
**ACT**

**ENGLISH GUIDE**

Third Edition

**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 these tests. This guide also provides strategies for approaching the questions and content-specific test-taking tips.

The following chapters contain items (questions) that are representative of the items you'll see when taking the ACT test. Some have appeared on actual ACT tests. These questions 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 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.

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 35-minute ACT English test consists of six or seven passages, or essays, each of which is accompanied by a sequence of multiple-choice test questions. In total, the English test contains 50 questions, 40 of which are scored.

The length of the essays on the English test will vary; longer essays of approximately 340 words will be accompanied by 10 questions, while shorter essays of approximately 185 words will be accompanied by five questions. A combination of either four longer essays and two shorter essays or three longer essays and four shorter essays will make up each test. Though the number of essays varies, each test will have the same number of total items. Different essay types—including informational, argumentative, and narrative—are employed to provide a variety of rhetorical situations. The essays cover a wide range of topics, from texts about legendary athletes such as Roberto Clemente to scientific texts about exploring Mars.

If you divide your time evenly across the English test's 50 questions, you will have 42 seconds to answer each question, including reading the required parts of the essay. If you'd rather read an essay before starting on its associated questions, spending 1 ½ minutes skimming through each

long essay and roughly half that for each short essay leaves you about 30 seconds to respond to each question. These are general guidelines, but some question types will likely take less time to answer, while others will likely take more.

Another way to think about pacing is that you have 35 minutes to answer all the questions, giving you approximately 7 minutes for each long essay and its questions and 3 ½ minutes for each short essay and its questions.

In the following example, you will see how certain types of questions will be formatted on the paper test. Brackets are used to identify the number of a sentence within a paragraph and the paragraph numbers. Questions about an entire paragraph 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.

## 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. Not one of the many colorful machines with flashing lights were a<sup>47</sup> 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<sup>48</sup> 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

47. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

- A. **No Change**
- B. was a
- C. were an actual
- D. are an actual

48. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

- E. **No Change**
- F. that are
- G. are

H. **Delete** the underlined portion.

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

- A. where it is now.
- B. before Sentence 1.
- C. after Sentence 1.
- D. after Sentence 5.

Some questions will ask about the essay 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 we drove off, I remembered something else my grandmother used to say: “Miami time passes all too quickly.”

Question 15 asks about the preceding passage as a whole.

15. Suppose the writer’s primary purpose had been to write a brief essay conveying a personal experience with “Miami time.” Would this essay accomplish that purpose?
- 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.

## **ACT Test Formats: Paper and Online**

The ACT is available as a paper test and as an online test for both National (weekend) and State/District testing. For National testing, you may select to test on computer or paper, based on your personal preference and the available testing centers in your area. For in-school testing, the decision for computer or paper format is made by either the state or the district.

Questions will look slightly different online than they do on paper. On the computer-based ACT English test, when a portion of text is associated with a question, that text will be highlighted instead of underlined. Instead of numbers in boxes to refer to certain questions, you will see highlighted asterisks in brackets in the essay. If a question calls for sentence or paragraph numbering, the numbers of sentences within paragraphs and the paragraph numbers will be bracketed as they are on the paper test. The online test also includes tools allowing you to strike through answer choices you're ready to eliminate and flag questions you'd like to return to.

Regardless of format, what is most important is the knowledge and skills you have developed over your course of study. If you know the material, whether you choose answers by marking them on paper or clicking an option on a computer screen will likely make little difference.

## **Content of the ACT English Test**

The ACT English test is designed to measure your ability to make the wide variety of decisions involved in revising and editing a given piece of writing. 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. 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 (punctuation, usage, and sentence structure): 38-43%

- Production of Writing (topic development, organization, unity, and cohesion): 38–43%
- Knowledge of Language (word choice, style, and tone): 18–23%

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 an essay. Following is a more detailed breakdown of the skills that fall under each category.

### ***Conventions of Standard English***

Conventions of Standard English questions test the following knowledge and skills:

- Determine when to use punctuation marks, including periods, commas, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, dashes, and parentheses.
- Determine when to use subordinating and coordinating conjunctions to join clauses or revise fragments or fused sentences.
- Recognize and correct errors in subject-verb agreement.
- 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.

- Determine appropriate pronoun use, including correcting errors in agreement and case and clarifying ambiguous pronoun use.
- Use frequently confused words appropriately in context.

## ***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 essay or paragraph.
- Identify the purpose of a word, phrase, or sentence (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.
- Determine whether a text or paragraph has met a specific goal.

### **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 or text.
- Provide a suitable introduction, conclusion, or transition within a text.
- Rearrange sentences in a paragraph to achieve a logical flow.
- Determine whether or where 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:

- Use effective and appropriate stylistic effects.
- Eliminate redundant and wordy material.
- Revise an expression to make it conform it to the style and tone used throughout the essay.
- 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 essay. 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.

## **Content of the ACT Writing Test**

The optional writing test differs from the English test in that it consists of a single task: writing a unified, coherent essay about an issue described in the prompt. Your essay will be evaluated according to the following task criteria, each of which corresponds to a specific domain in the Writing Test scoring rubric. Your essay will be assigned a score ranging from 2 to 12 for each domain.

- 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 criteria, show samples of actual student essays, and explain the varying levels of writing skill demonstrated in each response.

## **How to Use This Guide**

This guide will provide a brief description of each category followed by sample questions associated with each category.

Items (questions) are representative of the items you'll see when taking the ACT test. Some have appeared on actual ACT tests. The guide will also review essential skills and explain approaches to answering various types of questions. 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 an essay 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, pronouns, redundancy, or the content of an essay. 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 essay 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 or, if you are taking the test on a computer, flag those questions or note their numbers on your scrap paper.

When checking your work, be sure to consider the context of the essay. Typically, you should read at least one sentence before and one sentence after the question. If you return only to the underlined text itself, 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.

In reality, these women never met to piece together a quilt. The scene comes out of the artists imagination<sup>23</sup> as a statement of the unity of purpose that she perceives in their lives.

23. A. **No Change**  
B. artist’s imagination  
C. artists’ imagination  
D. artists imagination,

**The best answer is B** because 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 that is required.

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

**D** because the phrase “artists imagination” uses the plural form of the noun *artists* instead of the singular possessive form 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. 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 some questions test multiple grammatical concepts simultaneously. Consider the following question.

Immersed in the icy water off the Antarctic Peninsula, Lynne Cox wasn't sure if she could accomplish her goal to be the first person to swim a mile through the glacier-strewn sea. At forty-five, she would of<sup>12</sup> been training for two years for this event, and she hoped her preparations would pay off.

12. Which choice makes the sentence most grammatically acceptable?

F. **No Change**

G. had to of

H. have

J. had

This question tests both subject-verb agreement and frequently confused words. Sometimes questions that test multiple concepts will include choices that contain multiple errors; in this question, each choice contains one error related to one of the skills being tested.

**The best answer is J** because it includes a verb that agrees with the subject *she* and avoids introducing any errors related to frequently confused words. The corrected sentence reads as follows:

At forty-five, she had been training for two years for this event, and she hoped her preparations would pay off.

**The best answer is NOT:**

**F** because it erroneously uses the word *of* rather than the word *have*.

**G** because it also makes the mistake of using *of* instead of *have*.

**H** because the verb *have* is plural and does not agree with the singular subject *she*.

## ***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 a sentence within the paragraph as a whole. Questions are identified with a number under an underlined portion of text; the underlined portion is what would be replaced by the answer choices.

My family is part of the Miami tribe a Native American people,<sup>1</sup> with strong ties to territory in 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 making freezer jam or researching tribal history,<sup>2</sup> she refused to be rushed in a hurry.<sup>3</sup>

2. The writer wants to provide a glimpse into the grandmother’s interests. Which choice best accomplishes that goal?

F. **No Change**

G. being actively involved in her pursuits,

H. things I really hope she’ll teach me one day,

J. at home or elsewhere,

**The best answer is F** because “whether it was making freezer jam or researching tribal history” gives the most specific information about what the grandmother was interested in.

indirect object. This sometimes answers the question “to whom?” To whom was the train given?

### **Interrogative adjective**

an adjective that asks questions.

**Examples:** What? Which? Whose? How many?

### **Linking verbs**

verbs that show what a subject is. They connect the subject with modifiers that express a state of being or feeling.

**Examples:**

appear	feel	stay	smell	taste
become	remain	seem	sound	turn

### **Modifiers**

adjectives, adverbs, and participial phrases that provide further information about a noun, verb, or adjective.

### **Noun**

a person, place, or thing.

### **Noun phrase**

describes a person, place, or thing in more than just one word. Typically, a noun phrase is made up of an adjective and a noun the adjective modifies.

### **Participial phrase**

a phrase that typically begins with a word ending in *-ing*. It functions like an adjective to describe the noun immediately before it.

**Example:** The town has installed many solar panels, powering lights across the town.

### **Past participles**

a part of the past perfect, future perfect, and present perfect tenses. Past participles usually end in the following: *ed*, *-d*, *-t*, *-en*, or *-n*.

**Examples:** I had **woken** up early that morning. At the end of the month, I will have **cooked** breakfast for myself for twenty-one days. I have **taught** this book for five years.

### **Past perfect**

a verb tense that describes actions that happened in the past before another past tense event. Had + past participle.

**Example:** By the time summer was over, I had read ten books.

### **Phrase**

a group of related words that does not include a subject and a verb.

### **Possessive adjectives**

an adjective that shows ownership.

**Examples:** my, your, his, her, its, their, our, your, and whose

### **Predicate**

the verb phrase of a sentence that includes the main verb along with its auxiliaries, modifiers, and objects.

### **Present perfect**

this tense is used to describe a past action that was completed. The form is has/had + the past participle.

**Example:** I **have eaten** octopus.

### **Pronoun**

a word that takes the place of a specific or proper noun after it is first introduced.

**Referent**

the word that a pronoun refers back to.

**Relative clause**

a clause that begins with relative pronouns such as *who*, *whose*, *where*, *when*, *which*, and *that*. They provide further information about a noun.

**Relative pronoun**

a pronoun that introduces a subordinate clause that provides information about who, which, that, and when. In other words, a relative pronoun answers question about identity, specification, and timing.

**Subject**

the noun phrase that identifies the person, place, or thing shown acting or being in a sentence. This noun phrase of the subject includes the main noun along with its modifiers.

**Subordinate clause**

a clause that includes a subject and a verb. It is usually introduced by a subordinating conjunction and is dependent on the main independent clause

**Subordinating conjunction**

a conjunction that introduces a subordinate clause.

## **NOTES**