GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION RULES TO KNOW

Every rule commonly tested on ACT English is below, nothing more, nothing less. So know these rules.

RULE 1: NUMBER AGREEMENT

The most tested agreement rule on the ACT is this: Singular nouns must match with singular verbs and pronouns, and plural nouns must match with plural verbs and pronouns.

A common error in this area involves the use of the word *they*. It's plural, but in everyday speech, we often use it as singular.

WRONG:	"If a student won't study, they won't do well."
PROBLEM:	A *student* (singular) and *they* (plural) don't agree in number.
CORRECTION:	"If students won't study, they won't do well," or "If a student won't study, he or she won't do well."

RULE 2: PRONOUNS IN COMPOUNDS

Another common agreement or matching error concerns compounds, which are phrases that join two words with *and* or *or*.

WRONG:	"The fool gave the wrong tickets to Bob and I."
PROBLEM:	*I* can't be the object of the preposition to.
CORRECTION:	"The fool gave the wrong tickets to Bob and me,"

Hint: Try dropping the rest of the compound *(Bob and).* "The fool gave the wrong tickets to I" should sound funny to you, which is your first hint it's a problem.

RULE 3: COMMAS OR DASHES AROUND PARENTHETICAL PHRASES

Parenthetical phrases must begin and end with the same punctuation mark. Such phrases can be recognized because, while they add information to a sentence without them the sentence would still be complete. For Instance: "Bob, on his way to the store, saw a large lizard in the street." If you dropped the phrase "on his way to the store," the sentence would still be complete. Thus, this phrase is parenthetical. It could be marked off with commas, parentheses, or dashes, but the same mark is needed at both ends of the phrase.

WRONG:	Bob-on his way to the store, saw a lizard."
PROBLEM:	The parenthetical phrase starts with a dash but finishes with a comma.
CORRECTION:	"Bob, on his way to the store, saw a lizard."

RULE 4: RUN-ONS AND COMMA SPLICES

You can't combine two complete sentences into one with a comma (though you can with a semicolon or a comma plus a conjunction).

WRONG:	"Ed's a slacker, Sara isn't."
PROBLEM:	Two complete sentences are spliced together with a comma.
CORRECTION:	"Ed's a slacker, but Sara isn't, "or" "Ed's a slacker; Sara isn't," or "Ed, unlike Sara is a slacker."

RULE 5: FRAGMENTS

This rule goes hand-in-hand with the previous one. **A sentence must contain at least one complete idea.** A fragment is writing that could be a subordinate part of a sentence but not a whole sentence itself.

WRONG:	"Emily listened to music. While she studied."
PROBLEM:	"She studied" would be a sentence, but *while* makes this a fragment.
CORRECTION:	"Emily listened to music while she studied."

RULE 6: *-ly* ENDINGS (ADVERBS AND ADJECTIVES)

The ACT expects you to understand the difference between adverbs (which often end in *–ly) and adjectives.* The two are similar because they're both modifiers—they modify, refer to, or describe another word or phrase in the sentence. Nouns and pronouns must be modified by adjectives, while verbs, adjectives, and adverbs themselves must be modified by adverbs.

WRONG:	"Anna is an extreme gifted child, and she speaks beautiful too."
PROBLEM:	Extreme and beautiful are adjectives, but they're supposed to modify and adjective (*gifted*) and a verb (*speaks*) here, so they should be adverbs.
CORRECTION:	"Anna is an extremely gifted child, and she speaks beautifully too."

RULE 7: *- er* AND *- est, More* AND *Most* (COMPARATIVES AND SUPERLATIVES)

Whenever you see the dings *- er* or *- est* or the words *more* or *most*, double-check to make sure they're used correctly. Words with *- er* or *more* are only used to compare exactly two things. If there are more than two things involved, use *- est* or *most*.

WRONG:	"Bob is the fastest of the two runners."
PROBLEM:	The comparison is between just two things, so *- est* is Inappropriate.
CORRECTION:	"Bob is the faster of the two runners."

RULE 8: COMMONLY INVERTED WORDS

There are several word pairs that we commonly switch around in spoken English, even when it breaks grammatical rules. On the ACT, some of these will be tested, so you will want to know how to use them correctly. Note: Don't get bogged down with these; they will rarely be tested on more than one question total.

GOOD OR WELL

Good is an adjective (modifies a noun or pronoun); *well* is an adverb (modifies verbs, adjectives, adverbs).

WRONG:	"Joe did good on the ACT."
PROBLEM:	Good is an adjective, but here it's modifying a verb *(did),* so use an adverb.
CORRECTION:	"Joe did well on the ACT,"

One exception: *well* can also be an adjective when it means "healthy," So "Joe was well again by the morning of the ACT" is correct.

LIE OR LAY

In short, *lie* is something a subject <u>does </u>("I'm going to lie down for a while"), whereas *lay* is something a subject <u>does to an object</u> ("I'm going to lay the book down for a while.") A reliable way to test this is to replace the word with "put"—if you can (I'm going to put the book down"), you can use *lay*. If you can't (I'm going to put down for a while"), you need *lie.*

WHO OR WHOM

Your rule to never miss this question again: *who* goes where *he* goes; *whom* goes where *him* goes! If the answer to the question being asked is *he*, the form should be *who*. If the answer is *him*, the form should be *whom*.

WRONG:	"Always remember who you're speaking to."
PROBLEM:	Who is wrong. Ask: Speaking to who? Speaking to him, not to he. So it should be whom.
CORRECTION:	"Always remember whom you're speaking to."

LESS OR FEWER

The word *less* is used only for uncountable things. When things can be counted, they are *fewer*.

WRONG:	"I have fewer water than I thought, so I can fill less buckets."
PROBLEM:	You can count buckets; you can't count water.
CORRECTION:	"I have less water than I thought, so I can fill fewer buckets."

BETWEEN OR AMONG

The word *between* is used only when there are exactly two things involved. When there are more than two things, or an unknown number of things, use *among*.

WRONG:	"I will walk among the two halves of the class, between the many students in class."
PROBLEM:	Use between for two things and among for more than two.
CORRECTION:	"I will walk between the two halves of the class, among the many students in class."

RULE 9: *Be* and *was* (forms of the verb *to be*)

The ACT tests the use of proper verb forms, especially of the verb to be. You must use the following forms. Memorize them if you have to.

Present Tense: I am, we are, you are, they are, he/she/it is

Past Tense: I was, we were, you were, they were, he/she/it was

Future Tense: I/we/you/they/he/she/it will be

Perfect tense: I/we/you have been, he/she/it has been

Past Perfect: I/we/you/he/she/it had been

Future Perfect: I/we/you/he/she/it will have been

You can decide which form (*am, are, is, were, was, will be, have been, had been, will have been*) is correct by determining what the subject is and what the verb tense is. In many dialects, the words *be* and *was* are used instead of the special forms given.

For example, many speakers might say, "They be going home" or "They was going home." On the ACT, the correct form is "They are (or were) going home."

RULE 10: PUNCTUATION

The ACT doesn't test uncommon rules of punctuation. However, it does expect you to know what punctuation marks mean and how they are commonly used. Here are some common punctuation marks and their uses:

Use a **comma** (,) or **commas** to do the following:

- Set off items in a list of three or more items

- Combine two independent clauses with a FANBOYS conjunction (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So)

- Set off an introductory phrase from the rest of the sentence

- Separate nonessential information (something that could be considered a parenthetical phrase) from the rest of the sentence

- **Note:** You may have learned different or even conflicting rules about whether to put a comma before the and in a list (known as the serial or Oxford comma), as in this example:

  "At the store, we need bread, juice, **and** eggs."

As opposed to:

"At the store, we need bread, juice **and** eggs."

Different schools and publications have different rules, but the ACT does use the serial/Oxford comma, so you should always be on the lookout for lists!

Use a **semicolon** (;) to do the following:

- Combine two independent clauses when a FANBOYS word is not present. "Emily studied for hours; she had a big test the next day."

- Separate items in a series or list if those items already include commas. "At the grocery store, George needed milk, eggs, and butter; Alice needed cereal, bread, and juice; and Dan needed apples, water and ice cream."

Use a **colon** (:) to introduce or emphasize a short phrase, quotation, example explanation, or list.

"Peter needed to study three topics before Test Day: punctuation, transitions, and sentence structure."

"One wild animal causes suburban pet-owners more stress than any other: the skunk."

Use a **dash** (—) or **dashes** to set off an explanatory or parenthetical phrase in a sentence.

Use an **apostrophe** (') to do the following:

- Indicate the possessive form of a noun (not a pronoun).

- Stand in for a missing letter or letters in a contraction.

SPECIAL RECOGNITION: Its, It's, or Its'

Because apostrophes are not used to create the possessive form of pronouns (you wouldn't say "it's his' book" or "it's her's car"), the word its follows very specific rules:

- It's means "It is" or "It has." That's it. There are no other uses for it's.

    "It's going to be a little bit before the movie starts."

    "It's been a while since last time we went to the movies."

- Its is the possessive form of it.
    "The car was safe in its spot when I came outside."

- Its' is not a word. Don't use it. Ever. You always mean one of the other forms.