ACT Sentence Structure Review

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Connecting and Transitional Words

Many sentence structure questions on the ACT ask about connecting and transitional words.

A brief review:

1) Transitional Adverbs

Transitional adverbs are those connection words like however, also, consequently, nevertheless, thus, moreover, and furthermore. These words can be used to join independent clauses together. (Remember than an independent clause is a part of a sentence that could be a grammatically correct sentence by itself). When they do, they must be preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma. Watch out for this on the ACT!

Examples:

| The meeting has been postponed until Friday; nevertheless, the CEO still wants the reports today. |
| Stock prices have been falling this quarter; consequently, there may be some layoffs this month. |

2) Coordinating Conjunctions (or FANBOYS words)

Coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) connect words, phrases, and independent clauses of equal importance in a sentence.

| A coordinating conjunction connecting words: Give a kiss to Grandma and Grandpa. |
| A coordinating conjunction connecting phrases: If you want to get into the program, you need to submit your transcripts or your test scores. |
| A coordinating conjunction connecting clauses: The game was over, but my friend refused to leave until he got Lebron’s autograph. |

Hopefully, you’ve reviewed the comma rules and you remember that—as in the third example—you always need a comma before a coordinating conjunction that is connecting two independent clauses. (Hint: ‘independent clauses’ mean that the clauses could each be sentences by themselves. In the third example above, ‘The game was over’ could be its own sentence. So could ‘My friend refused to leave until he got Lebron’s autograph.’ Since the but, the
coordinating conjunction, is separating two independent clauses, there needs to be a comma before the coordinating conjunction).

3) Subordinating Conjunctions

Earlier, we talked about connecting two clauses of equal importance. What happens when the situation described in one clause causes the situation described in another clause? Such a situation calls for subordinating conjunctions—words like *because, when, since, after, before,* and *until.*

To illustrate, take a look at these two independent clauses:

| His Facebook addiction was too much to handle. |
| His girlfriend left him. |

The implication is that the Facebook addiction led to his girlfriend’s departure, right? You would express this in one sentence using a subordinating conjunction:

| His girlfriend left him *because* his Facebook addiction was too much to handle. |

Two more independent clauses:

| My father called the school office. |
| I was given an incorrect biology grade. |

The implication is that my father called the office as a result of the incorrect grade. To express this:

*After* I was given an incorrect biology grade, my father called the school office.

OR

My father called the school office *because* I was given an incorrect biology grade.

On the ACT, you’ll need to select the most appropriate subordinating conjunction and place it correctly within the sentence. Look out for subordinating conjunctions that are used improperly. Subordinating conjunctions should only be used to show that the events in one clause are subordinate to the events of another clause.

**Fragments and Run-ons**
Hopefully, you feel pretty comfortable picking out sentence fragments or run-ons. Consider the following sentences:

I didn’t go to the concert. Even though I was impressed with his videos on Youtube.

Even though I was impressed with his videos on Youtube, I didn’t go to the concert since I just couldn’t afford the tickets after splurging on a Hummer limousine for prom night.

The sentences should read:

Even though I was impressed with his videos on Youtube, I didn’t go to the concert. I just couldn’t afford the tickets after splurging on a Hummer limousine for prom night.

I didn’t go to the concert, even though I was impressed with his videos on Youtube.

Rusty? Read on for some rules and tips.

1) Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences. Usually, fragments are pieces of sentences that have become disconnected from the main clause:

Incorrect: The health food store carries many vegan options. Such as nondairy cheeses and soy milk.
Correct: The health food store carries many vegan options, such as nondairy cheeses and soy milk.

Incorrect: I need to get a new bicycle as soon as possible. Because the one I have is malfunctioning.
Correct: I need to get a new bicycle as soon as possible because the one I have is malfunctioning.

2) Watch out for fragments with no main verb:

Incorrect: A trail of trash leaking from a hole in the garbage bag.
Correct: I found a trail of trash leaking from a hole in the garbage bag.
Correct: A trail of trash was leaking from a hole in the garbage bag.

3) You can repair run-on sentences in three ways: adding a period, adding a semicolon, or adding a conjunction:

Incorrect: Current admissions practices are unfair they discriminate against qualified students.
Correct: Current admissions practices are unfair. They discriminate against qualified students.
Correct: Current admissions practices are unfair; they discriminate against qualified students.
Correct: Current admissions practices are unfair in that they discriminate against qualified students.

**Misplaced Modifiers**
A modifier is a word or group of words that gives the reader more information about a noun or verb in the sentence. To be grammatically correct, the modifier must be positioned so that it is clear which word is being modified.

Correct the following sentences:

Josh packed his favorite jeans in his duffel bag, which he planned to wear during spring break.
Sizzling on the grill, Dana checked on the Copper River salmon.

These sentences should read:

When packing his duffel bag, Josh packed the jeans he planned to wear during spring break. Dana checked on the Copper River salmon that was sizzling on the grill.

Not sure why? Read on!

In the first example above, the phrase “which he planned to wear during spring break” is a modifying phrase describing Josh’s jeans. In the second example, “sizzling on the grill” is a modifying phrase describing the Copper River salmon. But read carefully. Are the modifying phrases in the right place?

The modifying phrases should be right next to the word they are modifying, but in the above examples, they are not. If you read carefully, it almost sounds as if Josh is going to wear his duffel bag over spring break. The second example actually sounds really creepy—it sounds as if Dana is sizzling on the grill. Yikes!

Some more examples:

Incorrect: Flying for the first time, the plane’s loud engines frightened the small child, and he began to cry as the plane roared down the runway.
Correct: Flying for the first time, the child was frightened by the plane’s loud engines, and he began to cry as the plane roared down the runway.

Incorrect: The sad little girl found her missing doll playing in the back yard on the trampoline.
Correct: While playing in the backyard on the trampoline, the sad little girl found her missing doll.

**Parallelism**
In grammar, parallelism is a balance of two or more similar words, phrases, or clauses. Using parallelism in sentence construction can improve writing style and readability. Faulty parallelism occurs when different grammatical forms are used to express equal ideas.

Correct the following sentences:

Julie enjoys cheerleading, swimming, and to play tackle football.
The manager taught her employees how to use the cash register, how to organize the break room, and how to work with irate customers and deal with deadlines.
They are small, breakable, and cost far too much.

These sentences should read:

Julie enjoys cheerleading, swimming, and playing tackle football.
The manager taught her employees how to use the cash register, how to organize the break room, how to work with irate customers, and how to deal with deadlines. (OR: The manager taught her employees how to use the cash register, organize the break room, work with irate customers, and deal with deadlines).
They are small and breakable and they cost far too much.

Not sure why? Read on!

1. Parallel constructions must be expressed in parallel grammatical form: all nouns, all gerunds (-ing words), all prepositional phrases, or all clauses. In the first two examples above, the different parts of the construction are not written in the same form.

2. Watch out for cases where a sentence uses parallel structure even though it should not. In the third example above, parallel structure is used but the items are not similar. To check this, ask yourself—could you say ‘they are small,’ ‘they are breakable,’ and ‘they are cost far too much?’ Since the answer to that last question is no, this sentence should not contain parallel construction.