6 Non-Essential & Essential Clauses

To review, non-essential elements (words, phrases, and clauses) can be removed from a sentence without affecting its essential meaning or grammatical structure.

Non-essential clauses often begin with "w-words" such as *which* and *who,* but they can also begin with nouns (appositives) or participles (*-ing, -ed*).

Correct: The Tower of London**, which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078,** is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

The sentence contains a clause that is surrounded by commas and that begins with the word *which.* If we cross out that clause, the remaining sentence makes complete sense on its own:

Correct: The Tower of London...is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

If one or both of the commas are removed, however, the sentence is incorrect.

Incorrect: The Tower of London**, which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078** is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

Incorrect: The Tower of London **which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078,** is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

Incorrect: The Tower of London **which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078** is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

In order to fix the sentence, you must recognize that it will still make sense if the clause *which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078* is removed. Commas must therefore be added around that clause.

Correct: The Tower of London**, which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078,** is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

Sometimes non-essential clauses can be very long. In such cases, you must make sure to look all the way back to the beginning of the sentence in order to identify the beginning of the non-essential clause. You should also be prepared to cross out a lot of information in order to determine whether a non-essential clause is present.

To reiterate: if a sentence still makes sense when a word or phrase is crossed out, two commas must be placed around that information.

On the SAT, any part of a non-essential clause can be tested. In some cases, only the beginning of the clause will be underlined, in which case you must read ahead to identify the end. In other cases, only the end of the clause will be underlined, in which case you must backtrack to the beginning. Either way, you must consider the sentence as a whole in order to determine how the clause should be punctuated.

Let's look at an example.

The city of London, which was built by the Romans more than two thousand years _____ a number of extremely modern neighborhoods.



1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ ago contains

Ⓑ ago; contains

Ⓒ ago, containing

Ⓓ ago, contains

If you focus only on the portion of the sentence that is directly asked about, you might sense that a break is required between "ago" and "contains," but you'll be working more on intuition than on understanding. The key is to go back to the beginning of the sentence, before the blank, and recognize that the word *which* signals the start of a non-essential clause. The only logical place for that clause to end is right after "ago."

Crossed out:

The city of London, ~~which was built by the Romans more than two thousand years~~ _____ a number of extremely modern neighborhoods.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ ~~ago~~ contains

Ⓑ ~~ago;~~ contains

Ⓒ ~~ago,~~ containing

Ⓓ ~~ago,~~ contains

The end of the non-essential clause must be marked by a comma, narrowing the answers to (C) and (D). The *-ing* form ("containing") in (C) creates a fragment, so that answer can be eliminated. (D) correctly supplies a conjugated verb ("contains"), so it is the answer.

Thinking about where non-essential clauses begin and end can also help you avoid getting "lost" when sentences are very long. For example:

The city of London, ~~which was originally built by the Romans along the banks of the Thames more than two thousand years~~ _____ a number of extremely modern neighborhoods.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	~~ago~~ and contains
Ⓑ	~~ago,~~ it contains
Ⓒ	~~ago,~~ containing
Ⓓ	~~ago,~~ contains

With the non-essential clause removed, it becomes much clearer that (A), (B), and (C) will all produce fragments when plugged into the sentence. Only (D) correctly places a verb immediately after the comma, supplying a main verb that corresponds to the subject and creating a coherent sentence.

Important: two commas do not always equal a non-essential clause!

One common mistake is to assume that the presence of two commas in a sentence automatically signals a non-essential clause. That, however, is not necessarily the case. Compare the following two sentences:

Sentence 1: London, which was one of the largest and most important cities in Europe during the Middle Ages, remains an important financial and cultural center today.

This sentence contains a non-essential clause that can be removed without altering its basic meaning:

Correct: London~~, which was one of the largest and most important cities in Europe during the Middle Ages,~~ remains an important financial and cultural center today.

Now take a look at this sentence:

Sentence 2: During the Middle Ages, London was one of the largest and most important cities in Europe, and today it remains an important financial and cultural center.

Although there are two commas, we get nonsense when we cross out the information between them.

Incorrect: During the Middle Ages~~, London was one of the largest and most important cities in Europe,~~ and today it remains an important financial and cultural center.

In addition, some sentences that contain commas setting off non-essential clauses also contain commas that serve unrelated purposes. In such cases, you may need to read carefully in order to tell where non-essential clauses in the middle of a sentence are actually located.

> Correct: Sumo wrestling, a full-contact sport in which competitors attempt to force one another out of a circular ring, originated in Japan, which remains the only country in the world where the sport is practiced.

There is just one non-essential clause in the middle of the sentence that can be removed without a problem:

> Correct: Sumo wrestling~~, a full-contact sport in which competitors attempt to force one another out of a circular ring,~~ originated in Japan, which remains the only country in the world where the sport is practiced.

If the information between a different set of commas is removed, however, we are left with nonsense:

> Incorrect: Sumo wrestling, a full-contact sport in which competitors attempt to force one another out of a circular ring~~, originated in Japan,~~ which remains the only country in the world where the sport is practiced.

If you cannot hear where the non-essential clause belongs, take your pencil (not a pen!), draw a line through the section you want to test, and read the sentence without it. If that doesn't work, erase the line, cross out a different section, and try again. It is very important that you go through this process because it is the only means you have of figuring out the answer logically.

Note: On the digital SAT—unlike the paper-based test or prep materials—you will obviously not have the option of taking your pencil and physically crossing out text to test out where non-essential clauses begin and end. (There is an annotation tool, but you may find it awkward to work with for this purpose.) As a result, **it is very important that you learn to identify non-essential clauses mentally and visually**.

That said, if you have any difficulty spotting them, **I strongly encourage you to physically cross out information as much as you need to in the earlier stages of your preparation process**—this will help you develop your recognition of these clauses to the point where you can identify them by sight only.

Exercise: Identifying Non-Essential Words and Phrases (answers p. 208)

In the following sentences, place commas around non-essential phrases as necessary. If you are uncertain whether a section of the sentence is non-essential, cross it out and read the sentence without it. Note that some sentences contain additional, unrelated commas.

1.	The cesium fountain atomic clock, the most precise form of timekeeper available, is expected to become inaccurate by less than a single second over the next 50 million years.
2.	Frank Gehry's buildings, critics agree, are among the most important examples of contemporary architecture found in the United States.
3.	The most common types of coral which are usually found in clear, shallow waters require sunlight in order to grow.
4.	Used in some martial arts, the Red Belt one of several colored belts intended to denote a practitioner's skill level and rank originated in Japan and Korea.
5.	Testing animal cognition is tricky, and comparing and contrasting across species lines especially when distinct species-specific tests are used is particularly challenging.
6.	New Zealand one of the last lands to be settled by humans developed distinctive animal and plant life during its long isolation.
7.	Forensic biology the application of biology to law enforcement has been used to identify illegal products such as ivory and investigate bird collisions with wind turbines.
8.	Human computers who once performed basic numerical analysis for laboratories were behind the calculations for everything from the first accurate prediction of the return of Halley's Comet to the success of the Manhattan Project.
9.	The wingspan of the monarch butterfly a species commonly mistaken for the similar-looking viceroy butterfly ranges from 8.9 to 10.2 centimeters.

10.	Some traditional assumptions about how to treat jellyfish stings have recently been called into question: rinsing the affected areas with seawater for example only spreads the stings to a larger area.
11.	The world's first copyright law which was established in Great Britain in 1709 was intended to protect books from illegal copying and distribution.
12.	The unusually large size of the Komodo dragon the largest species of lizard has been attributed to one of its ancient ancestors, the immense varanid lizard.
13.	Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* was through an unprecedented worldwide grassroots movement exhibited to more than a million people in six countries on three continents.
14.	According to the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* a magisterial six-volume compilation of myths and legends collected by folklorists in the early twentieth century many cultures have told similar stories to explain the occurrence of solar eclipses.
15.	A new software called DXplain some hospitals report is helping doctors make diagnoses and avoid the types of errors that can sometimes cause harm to patients.

Two Commas vs. Period or Semicolon

Many introductory and transitional phrases that are often used to **begin** clauses can also be used non-essentially **within** clauses—often in the middle (surrounded by commas), but sometimes also at the end (after a single comma).

For example, the sentence below can be written multiple ways.

Correct: **Many scholars believe** that the Tower of London retained its original form until the reign of Richard the Lionheart at the end of the twelfth century.

Correct: The Tower of London retained its original form**, many scholars believe,** until the reign of Richard the Lionheart at the end of the twelfth century.

Correct: The Tower of London retained its original form until the reign of Richard the Lionheart at the end of the twelfth century, **many scholars believe**.

Although the second and third versions may sound odd to you, they are acceptable as long as the sentence makes sense when the non-essential information is removed.

The same is true of single-word transitions. Some common examples include *however, therefore, in fact, indeed, for example,* and *moreover.* (We actually saw some of these transitions used non-essentially in the previous chapter.)

As discussed earlier, these transitions should follow a period or semicolon when they are used to begin a sentence or clause. In the sentence below, for instance, the transition *however* is used to begin the second sentence/clause:

Correct: The Tower of London was built during the Norman **Conquest. However, (or: Conquest; however,)** nearly a thousand years later, it still remains standing.

That transition can also be used non-essentially in the **middle of the sentence**. This construction is typically used for **contradictors** such as *however* and *though.*

Correct: The Tower of London was built during the Norman Conquest. Nearly a thousand years later**, however,** it still remains standing.

The commas around *however* tell us that if we cross out that word, the sentence will still make sense. And sure enough, when we eliminate it, we are left with a grammatically acceptable sentence:

Correct: Nearly a thousand years later…it still remains standing.

We can also place the transition at the end of the sentence.

Correct: The Tower of London was built during the Norman Conquest. Nearly a thousand years later it still remains standing**, however.**

In terms of meaning, placing the transition at the end of the clause rather than at the beginning or in the middle has no effect—the transition still serves to indicate the relationship between the second sentence and the first.

What we **cannot** do is this:

Incorrect: The Tower of London was built during the Norman Conquest**, however,** nearly a thousand years later, it still remains standing.

In the above version of the sentence, the two commas imply that the word *however* can be removed without affecting the sentence's essential meaning. But if we remove those commas, we end up with two independent clauses placed back-to-back, without any punctuation between them.

Incorrect: The Tower of London was built during the Norman Conquest nearly a thousand years later, it still remains standing.

Colon or Dash

Note that in some cases, a **colon** or **dash** may also be used after a non-essential word or phrase at the end of a sentence. This construction is acceptable when an explanation or definition follows.

Correct: Since the eighteenth century, artisans have attempted to reproduce the sound of a Stradivarius violin. None of them have succeeded, **however: the** tonal quality remains unique and unmatched by any other instrument maker.

Correct: Since the eighteenth century, artisans have attempted to reproduce the sound of a Stradivarius violin. None of them have succeeded, **however—the** tonal quality remains unique and unmatched by any other instrument maker.

In the sentence above, the colon or dash is acceptable because the statement following it serves to explain what is meant by *None of them have succeeded.*

Note: It is unlikely (although not impossible) that you would be asked to decide between a period or semicolon and a colon/dash in this question type, at least not without an additional error present. The emphasis is on testing your ability to identify which sentence non-essential information belongs to, not on asking you to make fine distinctions between punctuation marks.

To Summarize:

The need for two commas vs. a period, semicolon, or colon is determined solely by context. **If you are unsure which type of punctuation should be used, use the answer choices to plug in the necessary word(s), and read the passage without the transition.**

- If a single, logical sentence remains, the word or phrase is non-essential and must be set off by commas.
- If there are two sentences, the transition is being used to start a new sentence or clause and must come after a period, semicolon, or colon.
- If a transition is used non-essentially at the end of a sentence, it connects that sentence to the previous sentence or section of the passage. It must come after a comma and can be followed by a period, semicolon, or colon.

Punctuating Transitions

On the SAT, some questions will ask you to determine whether transitions are used non-essentially (set off by commas) or used to begin a clause (after a period, semicolon, or colon).

For example, consider the question below.

Led by a team from the University of California, San Diego, researchers have developed a new series of algorithms enabling four-legged robots to navigate challenging terrain while avoiding obstacles. Until now, most approaches have involved either vision or speed and sense of _____ the new system combines both options, allowing robots to anticipate changes in their environment and change course when an object is in their way.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	movement, however,
Ⓑ	movement, however;
Ⓒ	movement; however,
Ⓓ	movement however,

The presence of *however* with various combinations of commas and semicolons indicates that the question is testing whether this transition is being used non-essentially or to start a clause.

To determine, that, we're going to plug the noun *movement* back into the sentence and read the two statements without the transition.

1) Until now, most approaches have involved either vision or speed and sense of movement.

2) The new system combines both, allowing robots to anticipate changes in their environment and change course if required.

Both of these are complete sentences, and they express contrasting ideas. Logically, then, *however* belongs at the beginning of the second sentence.

A transition that is used to begin a sentence must follow a period, semicolon, or colon, so (C) is the only acceptable option.

On the next page, we're going to look at something a bit more challenging.

To reiterate: A transition placed at the end of a sentence connects that sentence to the previous sentence. So even though a question may appear to ask only about the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next, you may also need think about a third sentence: the one before the question.

If this sounds a bit head-spinning, we're going to look at an example.

Traditionally, most approaches to robotic navigation have involved either vision or speed and sense of direction. A new system developed by a team from the University of California, San Diego, along with other researchers, combines both _____ created by the group are able to anticipate changes in their environment and change course when an object is in their path.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	systems, though the four-legged robots
Ⓑ	systems, though. The four-legged robots
Ⓒ	systems, though, the four-legged robots
Ⓓ	systems; though, the four-legged robots

The various placements of *though* before and after a period vs. comma tell us that the question is testing which sentence the transition belongs to.

(D) can be eliminated immediately because the subordinating conjunction *though* cannot be set off by a comma at the beginning of a clause, but after that, we need to look at the passage as a whole.

If we just look at the statements involved in the question, minus the transition, we get the following:

1) A new system developed by a team from the University of California, San Diego, along with other researchers, combines both systems.

2) The four-legged robots created by the group are able to anticipate changes in their environment and change course when an object is in their path.

Both of these statements are full sentences, but they express similar ideas. *Though* is a contradictor, so it does not make sense to place it between them.

Working from the answer choices, you can notice that (B) gives us the option of putting the transition at the end of the first statement. Placed there, it serves to connect that sentence to the previous sentence—the first sentence of the passage. So now we get this:

1) Traditionally, most approaches to robotic navigation have involved either vision or speed and sense of direction.

2) A new system developed by a team from the University of California, San Diego, along with other researchers, combines both systems.

The second sentence presents a contrast to the first, so it makes sense to end the second sentence with a contradictor. (B) is thus correct.

One more.

Because he is commonly viewed as a champion of free scientific inquiry, Galileo is generally thought of as a strict proponent of rationalism. He was also deeply influenced by humanistic _____ he derived much of his inspiration from art, particularly Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	inquiry, however:
Ⓑ	inquiry, however,
Ⓒ	inquiry however
Ⓓ	systems, however

This question follows the same pattern as the previous one, although we can actually eliminate more answers upfront.

(C) and (D) can be eliminated right away because "however" must always come after some form of punctuation and be followed by a comma. The real question is whether the transition is being used to end a sentence or begin one.

Again, we can consider statements before and after the blank without the transition:

1) He was also deeply influenced by humanistic inquiry.

2) He derived much of his inspiration from art, particularly Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

The statements express similar ideas (humanistic inquiry = art), so a contradictor should not be placed between them. In addition, they are complete sentences, so "however" would need to follow a period or semicolon, not a comma.

That eliminates (B) and leaves (A) as the only option.

When "however" is placed at the end of the second sentence and plugged back into the passage, it makes perfect sense: the first sentence indicates that Galileo is *generally thought of as a strict proponent of rationalism,* an idea that stands in contrast to the statement that he was deeply influenced by the humanities.

The colon is acceptable because the information following it explains the assertion that Galileo valued humanistic inquiry by providing a specific example (Dante's *Divine Comedy*) of a work that influenced him.

Quick Check: Punctuating Transitions (answers p. 208)

1. The difference between hot things and cold things is the level of agitation in their molecules. For example, the water molecules in a hot kettle are in a state of excitement, careening around and colliding into each other rapidly. When they condense on a pane of _____ the very same water molecules are in a much calmer state.

Ⓐ glass, though

Ⓑ glass, though,

Ⓒ glass. Though,

Ⓓ glass though

2. Weighing in at 165 tons or more, blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) are the largest animals on Earth. They have been the subject of decades of _____ still have many unanswered questions about their biology and ecology.

Ⓐ research, though, scientists

Ⓑ research; though, scientists

Ⓒ research, though. Scientists

Ⓓ research, though scientists

3. According to one study, dolphins appear to refer to one another by using specific series of clicks and squeaks. Whether these vocalizations should truly be considered names and are used in a way that is comparable to human ones remains controversial among animal _____ preliminary findings suggest that that may in fact be the case.

Ⓐ researchers, however,

Ⓑ researchers; however,

Ⓒ researchers, however;

Ⓓ researchers however,

4. The quest to decipher the Rosetta Stone was complicated by the unique nature of ancient Egyptian writing. The scholars who sought to decode it had primarily worked with alphabetic languages like English and French, in which letters represent different sounds. Hieroglyphic _____ was a hybrid system. Its hundreds of characters alternately represented sounds, objects, and ideas.

Ⓐ script, in contrast,

Ⓑ script in contrast

Ⓒ script, in contrast:

Ⓓ script; in contrast

Non-Essential Clauses with Dashes and Parentheses

Many of the non-essential clauses you are asked to work with on the SAT will be constructed using commas; however, these clauses can also be set off by **dashes** and **parentheses**.

Correct: The Tower of London—**which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078**—is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

Correct: The Tower of London **(which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078)** is one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

Why use dashes or parentheses? For stylistic reasons. In comparison to commas, dashes create a stronger break. Parentheses imply that information is less important than either commas or dashes do.

Despite these differences, **two commas, two dashes, and two parentheses are all grammatically interchangeable**.

The only **exception** involves **transitions** (e.g., *however, therefore, in fact)*, which **must be surrounded by commas** when they are used non-essentially.

Otherwise, you will not be asked to choose among these types of punctuation when they are used correctly. You will, however, be asked to recognize when they are used *incorrectly*.

The most important thing to know is that either two commas, two dashes, or two parentheses should be used—you cannot mix and match.

For instance, a non-essential clause begun by a comma should not end with a dash or close parenthesis, and a non-essential clause begun by an open parenthesis should not end with a comma or dash.

For example, consider the sentence below.

The Norman _____ that occurred in 1066—marked an important step in the development of the English language.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	Conquest, an event
Ⓑ	Conquest—an event
Ⓒ	Conquest an event
Ⓓ	Conquest: an event

If you know that a dash must only be paired with another dash to create a non-essential clause, you can immediately choose (B).

Likewise:

Today, the city of London (which was originally built by the Romans along the banks of the Thames more than two thousand years _____ home to a number of extremely modern neighborhoods.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	ago, is
Ⓑ	ago; is
Ⓒ	ago is
Ⓓ	ago) is

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to back up to the beginning of the sentence and notice the parenthesis after *London*. A parenthesis must be paired with another parenthesis, so (A) and (C) can be automatically eliminated. (B) can also be eliminated because a semicolon can only separate two sentences, and *is home to a number of extremely modern neighborhoods* is not a sentence. That leaves (D), which is correct.

Another potential error involves placing both commas and parentheses around a non-essential clause. **As a general rule, either commas or parentheses should be used. Because these two types of punctuation signal non-essential information, it is redundant to use both.** (The one exception is discussed below.)

For example, consider the following question.

In the decades following the Norman invasion of England in 1066, many important defensive structures were built. For example, the Tower of _____ remains one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in England.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	London, (which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078),
Ⓑ	London, (which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078)
Ⓒ	London (which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078),
Ⓓ	London (which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1078)

All of the incorrect answer choices above violate the "one punctuation type" rule. The only grammatically acceptable answer is (D), which places commas neither before nor after the parentheses.

Now we're going to make things a little harder. As discussed above, it is incorrect to use both a close parenthesis and a comma for the sole purpose of marking the end of a non-essential clause.

When a comma is grammatically necessary for other reasons, however, it is acceptable to place one after a close parenthesis.

For example, take a look at the following question:

The Tower of London was constructed as a prison in the eleventh century (the year _____ but over the centuries it has been used as everything from a treasury to an armory.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	(1078 to be exact);
Ⓑ	1078, to be exact,
Ⓒ	1078 to be exact),
Ⓓ	1078 to be exact—

The non-essential clause begins with a parenthesis, so it must end with one as well. That eliminates (B) and (D). (A) does not fit either because a semicolon should not be placed before a FANBOYS conjunction (*but*).

A FANBOYS conjunction should, however, follow a comma that is used to separate two independent clauses. And if we cross out the parenthetical information, that is exactly what we get.

Correct: The Tower of London was constructed as a prison in the eleventh **century** ~~**(the year 1078 to be exact)**~~**, but** over the centuries it has been used as everything from an armory to a treasury.

(C) is thus correct.

Exercise: Non-Essential Clauses with Commas, Dashes, and Parentheses (answers p. 209)

1. Despite the fact that parrots are well known for their long lives and advanced _____ their lifespans and relative brain size are comparable to those of primates—it is unclear whether the two traits have influenced each other.

Ⓐ	cognition—
Ⓑ	cognition,
Ⓒ	cognition
Ⓓ	cognition:

2. Carnivorous species of flora such as the pitcher plant use a variety of techniques (including nectar, smells, and bright _____ and their traps deploy sheer drops, smooth surfaces that cannot be scaled, or blockades of bristles that prevent prey from escaping.

Ⓐ	colors that lure insects,
Ⓑ	colors that lure insects),
Ⓒ	colors that lure insects—
Ⓓ	colors that lure insects;

3. Timothy O'Hara, deputy head of marine sciences at Australia's Museum Victoria, is leading an effort to develop a database of marine biodiversity worldwide. Because tackling every ocean species in existence is such a monumental task, O'Hara and his team are focusing on the brittle _____ and collecting historical records from 1,614 oceanic expeditions spanning the last century.

Ⓐ	star, (a spindlier, more delicate cousin of the famous sea star),
Ⓑ	star (a spindlier, more delicate cousin of the more famous sea star)
Ⓒ	star (a spindlier, more delicate cousin of the more famous sea star),
Ⓓ	star, (a spindlier, more delicate cousin of the more famous sea star)

4. The poet W.H. Auden's contradictions made him a difficult person to fathom. Although he appeared to lead a chaotic existence, he was also obsessively punctual and adhered to a strict work schedule. His poems, which on the surface appear to be simple, straightforward _____ defy easy understanding as well.

Ⓐ compositions—often

Ⓑ compositions often

Ⓒ compositions often,

Ⓓ compositions, often

5. On the streets of London, pink hollyhocks creep over high brick walls, and ivy climbs over courtyards. Offices and museums set aside valuable real estate for patches of green with fruit trees and flowers. With more than 300 gardens—some public, others private, many _____ is one of Europe's greenest capitals.

Ⓐ secret, the city

Ⓑ secret the city

Ⓒ secret—the city

Ⓓ secret: the city

Essential Clauses with and without "That"

Clauses beginning with *that* are always essential to the meaning of a sentence and should not be set off by commas (or any other form of punctuation, for that matter). **In other words, the use of a comma before or after *that* is virtually always incorrect.** If you see either of these constructions in an answer choice, you should start by assuming that the option is incorrect.

Incorrect: Parrots are one of the most difficult **pets, that** a person can have because they are intelligent, demanding, and live for up to 50 years.

Incorrect: Parrots are one of the most difficult pets **that, a** person can have because they are intelligent, demanding, and live for up to 50 years.

Correct: Parrots are one of the most difficult pets **that a** person can have because they are intelligent, demanding, and live for up to 50 years.

In the above sentence, *that* is optional. The sentence can be correctly written either with or without it.

If the word *that* is deleted, however, no comma should ever be used in its place.

Incorrect: Parrots are one of the most difficult **pets, a** person can have because they are intelligent, demanding, and live for up to 50 years.

Note that on very rare occasions, non-essential information may be placed after the word *that*. In such cases, it is acceptable for a comma to be placed after *that*.

Correct: Hundreds of seismic sensors have been placed around the Pacific Northwest in order to detect "p" waves, the harmless, fast-moving signals that**, as a general rule,** precede the "s" waves responsible for violent shaking during earthquakes.

Commas with Names and Titles

When a name or title appears in the middle of a sentence—that is, not as the first or last words—there are generally only two correct options:

1) No commas (essential)

2) Two commas (non-essential): one before and one after the name or title

Occasionally, a single comma may be required after the name or title, for reasons discussed later in this chapter, but that should not be a major cause for concern.

In terms of SAT Writing, the most important thing to know is that questions are primarily concerned with testing the unnecessary use of commas. As a result, correct answers tend to include no punctuation around the name or title.

For example, consider the following question.

Born Elaine Potter Richardson in Antigua, Caribbean-American _____ began her career as a journalist, only later turning to fiction. In 1985, she published the novel *Annie John*, a semi-autobiographical story of a young girl growing up in Antigua.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	author, Jamaica Kincaid
Ⓑ	author Jamaica Kincaid
Ⓒ	author, Jamaica Kincaid,
Ⓓ	author Jamaica Kincaid,

Even though there are four answer choices, there are really one two possibilities: (B) with no commas, and (C) with two commas. It is safe to start by assuming that the other options are incorrect.

The simplest way to answer this question is to test out the commas by treating the name like any other piece of non-essential information and reading the sentence without it. If the sentence makes sense, the commas are necessary (name is non-essential). If the sentence does not make sense, no commas should be used (name is essential).

> *Born Elaine Potter Richardson in Antigua,* ***Caribbean-American author... began*** *her career as a journalist.*

No, that does not sound right—the construction is completely ungrammatical. The name is essential, which means that no commas are needed. The answer is therefore (B).

To reiterate, this is the **standard pattern** for questions testing commas around names and titles. As long as you remember to check the commas by reading sentences like the one above without the name or title, you should generally be able to answer these questions by ear.

It is not impossible, however, that you will encounter questions testing commas around names/titles in slightly different or more challenging ways. For example, what if two names were involved? Consider the question below.

To determine how long ago Easter Island formed, _____ added a large plateau to reconstructions of volcanic activity that is known to have occurred beneath the island. Their findings suggest that a shift in tectonic plates far beneath the Earth's surface could have resulted in the island's creation 165 million years ago.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	researchers, Yamirka Rojas-Agramonte and Douwe van Hinsbergen,
Ⓑ	researchers Yamirka Rojas-Agramonte and Douwe van Hinsbergen
Ⓒ	researchers Yamirka Rojas-Agramonte, and Douwe van Hinsbergen
Ⓓ	researchers Yamirka Rojas-Agramonte and Douwe van Hinsbergen,

Again, we're going to start by assuming that the single-comma options, (C) and (D), are both incorrect, and focus our attention on (A) and (B).

Next, to test out whether the commas are necessary, we're going to read the sentence without the names:

> *To determine how long ago Easter Island formed,* ***researchers... added*** *a large plateau to reconstructions of volcanic activity that is known to have occurred beneath the island.*

But now we have a problem. Unlike the previous example, in which the crossed-out name created an obviously wrong construction, the sentence above still makes sense grammatically.

So are the commas right?

Or are both (A) and (B) acceptable?

In both cases, the answer is no. Even though the sentence works when the names are eliminated, the question is identical to the one on the previous page—the second name does not actually change anything.

Here's the technical reason: Although the word *researchers* is normally a noun, in this case it acts as an **adjective** modifying the two names. (In the question on the previous page, the word *author* works the same way.) Because a comma should not be placed between an adjective and the noun or nouns it modifies, no comma should be used.

If that seems like too much to wrap your head around, you can also think of it in terms of meaning. The sentence is not talking about researchers in general but rather about two **specific** researchers: Yamirka Rojas-Agramonte and Douwe van Hinsbergen. Placing commas around the names would imply that they were optional when in fact their presence is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

You could also potentially encounter a question in which the rule is tested the other way around—that is, a situation in which two commas would be correct.

For example, look at the following question.

Annie John, a semi-autobiographical story of a young girl growing up in Antigua, was published to great critical acclaim in 1985. The novel's _____ had only recently turned to fiction, having spent the early years of her career as a journalist.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	author, Jamaica Kincaid,
Ⓑ	author Jamaica Kincaid
Ⓒ	author, Jamaica Kincaid
Ⓓ	author Jamaica Kincaid,

As always, we're going to start by eliminating the name:

> *The novel's **author...had** only recently turned to fiction, having spent the early years of her career as a journalist.*

Yes, this makes sense. The name adds specific information about the author, but it is not essential to the basic grammatical structure of the sentence.

In addition, you should **know the following rule**:

- **Commas around a name or title indicate that it is the only person or thing.**
- **No commas around a name or title indicate that it is one of multiple people or things.**

The passage implies that Jamaica Kincaid was the **only** author of the novel, and two commas serve to indicate that there is only one of someone or something. (A) is thus correct.

Now let's look at an example of a question involving a title.

Jamaica Kincaid (born May 25, 1949) is a novelist, essayist, and gardener. Born Elaine Potter Richardson in Antigua, she came to the United States at the age of 17 and eventually won a scholarship to Franconia College in New Hampshire. In 1985, she published _____ a semi-autobiographical story of a young girl growing up in Antigua that won acclaim for the honesty of its depiction of familial relationships.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	the novel, *Annie John,*
Ⓑ	the novel *Annie John,*
Ⓒ	the novel *Annie John*
Ⓓ	the novel: *Annie John,*

To test commas with titles, treat them exactly like names and read the sentence without them:

In 1985, she published ***the novel... a semiautobiographical story*** *of a young girl growing up in Antigua.*

No, this does not work because the sentence focuses on a specific novel, and so omitting the name would fundamentally change the meaning. In addition, placing commas around the title would imply that *Annie John* was the only novel published in 1985, which does not make sense. The title is therefore essential.

In most cases, essential = no commas, but here there's a twist! This is the rare **exception** to the "two commas or no commas" rule. A comma is required after the title, in order to separate the independent first clause (*In 1985, she published the novel* Annie John) from the dependent second clause (*a semi-autobiographical story of a young girl growing up in Antigua*). Without the comma, we just get a big jumble. So in this case, the answer is (B).

Another, less grammatically justified **exception** involves omitting commas around a name or title referring to one person/thing for stylistic reasons. This construction is not uncommon in everyday writing, and **it has appeared in a correct answer** on an official College Board practice test (Test 2, Question #28).

Born Elaine Potter Richardson in Antigua, author Jamaica Kincaid came to the United States at the age of 17 and earned a scholarship to Franconia College in New Hampshire. Her _____ is a semi-autobiographical story that won acclaim for the honesty of its depiction of familial relationships.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	1985 novel, *Annie John*
Ⓑ	1985 novel *Annie John,*
Ⓒ	1985 novel *Annie John*
Ⓓ	1985 novel: *Annie John,*

In reality, *Annie John* was the only novel that Jamaica Kincaid published in 1985, and commas should technically be used to indicate that fact:

> *Her **1985 novel,** **Annie John,** is a semi-autobiographical story that won acclaim for the honesty of its depiction of familial relationships.*

However, the sentence reads more cleanly without them, and so in this case they are treated as optional.

If you encounter a question targeting this construction, you should simply know that **you will not be asked to choose between two commas and no commas** when both options are considered legitimate. Rather, only one of the options will be provided, and you may need to choose the "best" answer as opposed to one that is strictly correct.

Non-Essential vs. Essential Clauses: The Case of "Who"

Clauses beginning with *who* can also be either non-essential (two commas) or essential (no commas). Both versions are grammatically acceptable, but they have somewhat different meanings.

Version 1: People**, who attend large open-air events such as sporting matches and music festivals,** often turn to camping as a cheap form of accommodation.

The commas in the above sentence imply that the clause between them is not central to the meaning of the sentence. The focus of the sentence is on **people in general**. The fact that they attend large open-air events such as sporting matches and music festivals is secondary.

Version 2: People **who attend large open-air events such as sporting matches and music festivals** often turn to camping as a cheap form of accommodation.

The lack of commas in the second version indicates that the sentence is not discussing people in general but rather **a specific group of people**: those who attend large open-air events such as sporting matches and music festivals. While the first version of the sentence is grammatically correct, the second version makes more sense. Clearly, not all people *turn to camping as a cheap form of accommodation*.

Grammatically, a sentence with a "who clause" can be written either way; the focus of the sentence merely shifts. In terms of meaning, however, you will have to think about whether the information is essential. For example, consider the following question.

The advantages of growing up in a bilingual home can start as early as six months of age. A study conducted by York University's Institute of Health found that _____ show better attentional control than infants being raised in monolingual environments. The findings suggest that early exposure to multiple languages could set the stage for lifelong cognitive benefits.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ	infants, who are regularly exposed to more than one language,
Ⓑ	infants who are regularly exposed to more than one language,
Ⓒ	infants, who are regularly exposed to more than one language
Ⓓ	infants who are regularly exposed to more than one language

(B) and (C) can be eliminated pretty quickly because our options are two commas or no commas.

To figure out whether the commas are necessary, we're going to start by treating the clause as non-essential and reading the sentence without it: *A study conducted by York University's Institute of Health found that infants…show better attentional control than infants being raised in monolingual environments.*

Although the sentence still works grammatically, it no longer makes sense. The passage is focusing on a specific group: infants who are regularly exposed to more than one language. Because that information is used to define them, it is essential, and no commas should be used. (D) is thus correct.

Exercise: All Non-Essential and Essential Clauses (answers p. 210)

The following questions test all the concepts regarding commas and essential/non-essential clauses discussed in this chapter. If you are uncertain whether a clause is essential or non-essential, follow these steps:

1) Cross out the word or phrase.

2) Determine whether the sentence makes sense in context without it.

3) Determine whether commas are necessary.

1. In the popular imagination, ants are often depicted as brave soldiers or dutiful factory workers. _____ argues, however, that this portrayal is a human fiction.

Ⓐ	Entomologist Deborah Gordon
Ⓑ	Entomologist, Deborah Gordon
Ⓒ	Entomologist Deborah Gordon,
Ⓓ	Entomologist, Deborah Gordon,

2. In 1924, _____ became the inaugural director of the Morgan Library, where she spent the next four decades working to transform J. Pierpont Morgan's private collection of books and artworks into one of the premier public collections in the United States.

Ⓐ	librarian, Belle da Costa Green
Ⓑ	librarian Belle da Costa Green,
Ⓒ	librarian Belle da Costa Green
Ⓓ	librarian: Belle da Costa Green

3. Lisa See has always been intrigued by stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up. See, author of the _____ traveled to a remote area of China to research the book. While there, she was able to investigate a secret type of writing that women had kept hidden for over a thousand years.

Ⓐ	best-selling novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,*
Ⓑ	best-selling novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*
Ⓒ	best-selling novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*
Ⓓ	best-selling novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan,*

4. Developed by a pair of chemists at the University of California, Berkeley, a new type of porous material—known as a covalent organic framework (COF)—can capture carbon dioxide from the surrounding air. The material's _____ report that it is highly effective and that the presence of water and other contaminants does not cause its performance to degrade.

Ⓐ	creators, Omar Yaghi and Zihui Zhou
Ⓑ	creators, Omar Yaghi and Zihui Zhou,
Ⓒ	creators—Omar Yaghi and Zihui Zhou
Ⓓ	creators Omar Yaghi and Zihui Zhou,

5. Grant Wood never achieved the kind of critical acclaim earned by other twentieth-century artists in the United States. However, his best-known _____ is one of the few images to reach the status of universally recognized cultural icon.

Ⓐ	painting, (the endlessly satirized *American Gothic*),
Ⓑ	painting, (the endlessly satirized *American Gothic*)
Ⓒ	painting (the endlessly satirized *American Gothic*),
Ⓓ	painting (the endlessly satirized *American Gothic*)

6. The discovery of x-rays occurred entirely by chance. In November 1895, the German _____ accidentally discovered an image created by rays emanating from a vacuum tube. Further investigation showed that the rays were capable of passing through many kinds of matter.

Ⓐ	physicist, Wilhelm Roentgen,
Ⓑ	physicist Wilhelm Roentgen
Ⓒ	physicist, Wilhelm Roentgen
Ⓓ	physicist Wilhelm Roentgen,

7. Pterosaurs, the first flying _____ended in over-elongated fingers. These reptiles filled the skies between 66 and 220 million years ago, their bodies ranging in size from less than a foot to the length of a small airplane.

Ⓐ	vertebrates, had wings made of a membrane, that
Ⓑ	vertebrates, had wings made of a membrane that
Ⓒ	vertebrates had wings made of a membrane that,
Ⓓ	vertebrates—had wings made of a membrane that

8. First recorded in 1835, polio became the most serious public health problem of the mid-twentieth century, and scientists searched frantically for a cure. During the 1940s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the world's most recognized polio victim, having founded the _____ to spur the development of new treatments.

Ⓐ	organization, March of Dimes
Ⓑ	organization March of Dimes
Ⓒ	organization, March of Dimes,
Ⓓ	organization March of Dimes,

9. Wallace Fowlie, one of Stendhal's most sympathetic critics, claimed that the writer's genius was due in part to the way he blurred the line between his own interior life and those of his characters. Stendhal was, _____ "literally inhabited by his creations," discovering himself as he discovered them.

Ⓐ	Fowlie argues,
Ⓑ	Fowlie argues
Ⓒ	Fowlie argues—
Ⓓ	Fowlie, argues

10. The first recorded mention of the Agojie—the all-female military regiment in the kingdom of Dahomey—dates to 1729. However, it is possible that the unit was formed even earlier, toward the beginning of Dahomey's _____ was created.

Ⓐ	existence, when a troupe consisting of women, who were already experienced elephant-hunters,
Ⓑ	existence when a troupe consisting of women, who were already experienced elephant-hunters,
Ⓒ	existence, when a troupe consisting of women who were already experienced elephant-hunters
Ⓓ	existence when a troupe consisting of women who were already experienced elephant-hunters,