

Let's try this GMATPrep (registered trademark) SC. You have 1 minute and 15 seconds and go!

**Quote:**

"The Achaemenid empire of Persia reached the Indus Valley in the fifth century B.C., bringing the Aramaic script with it, from which was derived both northern and southern Indian alphabets.

- "A) the Aramaic script with it, from which was derived both northern and
- "B) the Aramaic script with it, and from which deriving both the northern and the
- "C) with it the Aramaic script, from which derive both the northern and the
- "D) with it the Aramaic script, from which derives both northern and
- "E) with it the Aramaic script, and deriving from it both the northern and"

What did you think about the original sentence – did it seem okay or do you want to examine anything further?

On this one, perhaps the “, from which” in the original sentence sounded a little funny – after all, we don't talk that way, do we? This structure signifies a noun modifier and noun modifiers are supposed to modify the closest main noun; in this case, that means the noun before the comma. That noun is the pronoun “it.” So I guess we need to start there: what is the pronoun “it” referring to?

Something brought the script “with it” – ah, I see. “It” is referring to the empire. The empire was expanding and when it reached this certain place, it also brought this certain script with it. So the noun modifier is telling us “the empire, from which was derived <some other alphabet>”. Can an alphabet be derived from an empire? Figuratively, perhaps, but not literally – literally, that meaning is illogical. One alphabet is derived from another alphabet (in this case, the “Aramaic script”), so the sentence should convey that meaning.

Great! Because we've found an error in the original sentence, we can immediately cross off answer choice A. Whenever we can cross off any answer, our next step is always to scan the remaining answers to see whether we can eliminate others for the exact same reason. Do any of the other choices repeat the error that we just found?

Answers C and D have “script, from which,” so in both cases, the modifier is correctly referring to the script. Answers B and E change things up a bit – they introduce an “and” after the comma, so we no longer have a straight noun modifier marker.

Now, you have to make a choice: do you want to try to figure out what's happening with these new “and” markers that you've noticed in B and E? Or do you want to try to find something else? There isn't one right answer to this question; it just depends on whether you think you know what might be going on with the “and.” If so, keep going. If not, find something else instead. In this case, let's examine B and E further.

B says “it, and from which deriving...” The word “and” is a parallelism marker; it signals an “X and Y” construction. If this choice is correct, then it should have some X and Y components that can be made parallel. Right after the “and,” we have the “from which” modifier marker, so this is

the start of the Y component of the “X and Y” parallelism structure: “and from which...” What is the X? Ah, there’s the problem! We would need another noun-modifier component for the X part of the sentence... and we don’t have one. Eliminate B.

We know already that E also introduced an “and” at this point in the sentence, so you know what to do: see if you can reuse your work from B. In E, we have “script, and deriving...” The word “deriving” is the start of our Y component; what is the parallel X component? Perhaps it’s the word “bringing” from the non-underlined portion? Let’s test it out.

**Quote:**

The Empire reached the Valley, bringing with it <a script>, and deriving from it <some alphabets>.

These “comma –ing” structures are adverbial modifiers, which modify the preceding clause (subject and verb). In addition, the parallelism sets up certain expectations; for instance, when using the same pronoun in the same position in two parallel structures, the expectation is that the pronoun refers to the same noun both times.

We decided earlier that the “bringing with it” language referred to the empire. Does the second “it” refer to the same noun?

No. Once again, it doesn’t make sense to say that an alphabet was derived from an empire. The second “it” should really refer to the Aramaic script – but then we’d be using two different nouns for the same pronoun, “it,” that appears twice in a parallel structure. That’s considered ambiguous – although some ambiguity can be tolerated if all of the other choices are outright wrong. So how do we decide?

Turns out there’s an even bigger problem. Parallel structures should be able to be used independently to complete the sentence. We should be able to say: (1) The Empire reached the Valley, bringing with it a script. (2) The Empire reached the valley, deriving from it some alphabets. What does the “it” refer to in the second sentence? The valley? The empire? Neither one makes sense, and the script is no longer an option – it’s not part of the sentence any longer. Eliminate E.

So now we’ve narrowed it down to C and D, both of which use the “script, from which” construction. Now is a great time to scan the two choices vertically, comparing equivalent parts of the sentences until you find differences. There are only two: one uses the singular “derives” while the other uses the plural “derive,” and one includes “the” in front of both northern and southern while the other does not use “the” for either one.

The derives / derive split seems as though it should be straightforward – we just have to determine whether we need the verb to be singular or plural, right? So, what subject goes with this verb?

Ask yourself who or what is doing the action – what derives from what? Did the script come first and then the alphabets? Or was it the other way around? The original sentence describes the former scenario: the alphabets derive (come) from the script.

So the subject is the plural “the northern and southern alphabets” and the verb should be the plural “derive.” Eliminate D. The correct answer, by process of elimination, is C.

This last bit of analysis also shows the biggest trap in this problem: many students will think that the subject is “script” (it comes first, after all!) and that the verb should therefore be “derives.” Consequently, those students will eliminate the right answer, C, and choose a very tempting wrong answer, D. We have an inverted structure here, however, where the subject actually shows up after the verb – and the clue to this construction was the “from which” language. “Which” refers to the preceding noun, “script” – the (something) derive or *derives from the script*. If the script is part of that prepositional phrase after the verb, then it can’t be the subject.

In choice E, we saw another trap: false parallelism. Students will like the apparent parallelism between “bringing with it” and “deriving from it,” but the parallelism is only superficial. The two pronouns are not actually parallel and the second item doesn’t make sense in the context of the entire sentence.

The major take-aways here:

- (1) Re-use your analysis! Whenever you find anything wrong, make sure to check the remaining answers for the same issue.
- (2) Study modifiers and meaning! These are both very commonly tested on the GMAT.
- (3) Don’t fall for false or superficial parallelism! Test the parts and make sure that they really are parallel and separately able to complete the sentence.