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How a 99th Percentile GMAT Instructor Approaches Sentence Correction Questions

🕒 March 19, 2015 (<https://www.veritasprep.com/blog/2015/03/how-a-99th-percentile-gmat-instructor-approaches-sentence-correction-questions/>)



(<https://www.veritasprep.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/99.jpg>) The other night, in class, I had a student come up to me and ask how I *really* approached Sentence Correction. We'd done our Sentence Correction lesson a few weeks before, so the implication was that there was a little more to it than the framework we'd covered. The mundane truth is that there isn't. Not really.

When I'm evaluating an SC problem, and nothing jumps out at me immediately, I really do run through the mental checklist we discuss in the lesson: *is the meaning logical? Are the modifiers placed appropriately? Is there an issue with parallel construction? Etc.* But I saw what this student was saying. In class, we move systematically from one kind of error to another, so they're much easier to classify than when you're taking a test and the sentence's errors either aren't terribly conspicuous or encompass multiple categories.



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As much as I like to preach that it's best to attack these questions systematically, no test-taker is an algorithm, so I thought it would be worthwhile to go through a few official examples and discuss how my approach, while always rooted in the framework I teach in class, leaves some room for instinctive adjustments. Put another way, the GMAT is a test of pattern recognition. If the pattern is immediately apparent, I think about a question one way, and if it isn't obvious, my strategy shifts accordingly.

Here's one example from the Official Guide where the pattern is pretty conspicuous.

Published in Harlem, the owner and editor of *The Messenger* were two young journalists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, who would later make his reputation as a labor leader.

(A) Published in Harlem, the owner and editor of *The Messenger* were two young journalists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, who would later make his reputation as a labor leader.

(B) Published in Harlem, two young journalists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, who would later make his reputation as a labor leader, were the owner and editor of *The Messenger*.

(C) Published in Harlem, *The Messenger* was owned and edited by two young journalists, A. Philip Randolph, who would later make his reputation as a labor leader, and Chandler Owen.

(D) *The Messenger* was owned and edited by two young journalists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, who would later make his reputation as a labor leader, and published in Harlem.

(E) The owner and editor being two young journalists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, who would later make his reputation as a labor leader, *The Messenger* was published in Harlem.

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In this case, the ol' lizard brain jumps immediately into action. Anytime a sentence begins with an –ing or –ed verb, I'm immediately thinking about participial modifiers. This sentence begins with a the participial "published" so I know right away that I want who or what is published to immediately follow the phrase. Well, it makes most sense to say that *The Messenger* was published, so I want *The Messenger* to come right after that initial participial phrase. The answer is C. In this case, after you've done dozens and dozens of examples that involve misplaced participles, the issue is glaring. For many test-takers, there's no need to systematically go through that internal checklist. You'll still want to read your answer choice with the original sentence and make sure the meaning is logical, etc. but you don't have to process this problem with the kind of comprehensive rigor you'll need for more challenging problems.

Now consider this Official Guide problem, which, to me, isn't categorized nearly as easily as the previous example:

Over 75 percent of the energy produced in France derives from nuclear power, while in Germany it is just over 33 percent.

- (A) while in Germany it is just over 33 percent
- (B) compared to Germany, which uses just over 33 percent
- (C) whereas nuclear power accounts for just over 33 percent of the energy produced
in Germany
- (D) whereas just over 33 percent of the energy comes from nuclear power in Germany
- (E) compared with the energy from nuclear power in Germany, where it is just over 33 percent

The original sentence doesn't feel right to me, but it's not as immediately evident what the problem is. So now I have to be a bit more systematic. Okay, maybe the answer choices will offer some clues. Still not obvious, but I do notice that B and E have the word "compared," which means one potential issue is an inappropriate comparison. I also notice that the word "it" appears in A and E, so maybe there's a pronoun issue. With these notions in mind, I'll start going through my mental checklist. First, is the meaning logical, and if not, is a faulty comparison or inappropriate pronoun to blame?

The first thing I ask myself is "what does the *"it"* refer to?" Is the original sentence really saying, "Over 75 percent of the energy produced in France derives from nuclear power, while in Germany the *energy produced in France* is just over 33 percent?" That doesn't make sense. So A is out because of illogical meaning/inappropriate pronoun.

Now in B, we see "compared." Read literally, the sentence seems to be comparing the percent of energy produced in France to Germany, the country. That's no good. We'd like to compare energy to energy and country to country. B is out.

C jumps out at me because we've eliminated both "compared" and "it." "Whereas" signals a new clause entirely. So I have the first clause: *Over 75 percent of the energy produced in France derives from nuclear power.* And then I get a second clause: *nuclear power accounts for just over 33 percent of the energy produced in Germany.* The meaning is clear. Additionally, there seems to be a nice parallel construction, both clauses containing a variation of: X% of energy produced in Y. Not something I noticed initially, but a promising development. Hold onto C.

D also eliminates "compared" and "it," so I need to focus on meaning here. If I read this literally, it seems to say 33% of the energy in France comes from nuclear power in Germany. Well, that would be an awfully generous gesture by Germany, but I can't imagine this is the intended meaning of the sentence. D is out.

E We see "compared" again. Here, we seem to be comparing the *percent* of energy produced in France to the *energy* in Germany. So that's not really logical. We'd want to compare the percent of energy produced in France to the percent of energy produced in Germany. And then that last phrase, "where it is just over 33 percent" is a bit mystifying. 33% of *what*? Is "it" referring to Germany or to energy? E is out.

And we're left with C.

Notice that on a superficial level, I'm using the same general principles for both of these questions, but my thought process looks a lot different when the problem is obvious than when the underlying issue is a bit more obscure. So our goal as test-takers is first, to do enough practice problems that we become adept at recognizing conspicuous patterns like the one we saw in the first example. And second, we want to have a systematic approach to address more complicated questions when they arise. A single approach or mindset just won't work for every single question – the GMAT isn't that kind of test.

*Official Guide questions courtesy of the Graduate Management Admissions Council.

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