

As someone reading this GMAT study blog, I hope that you're cringing as you read this very sentence. Why? Because that sentence contained a classic GMAT sentence correction error — the modifier to begin the sentence "As someone reading this blog" should apply to you, the reader, and not to me, the author (as you may have noticed if you read regularly, I never re-read anything I've written. One take, like Jay-Z. My editors hate that.) (*Yes, we do!* — *Ed.*)

You know that the GMAT tests Modifiers in Sentence Correction. But the unasked question that you may want to ask is: Why? Why Modifiers and not the fact that you're not supposed to end a sentence with a preposition? Why Modifiers and not something more obscure like "when assigning a possessive to someone whose name ends in 's,' what is the rule for when you just put the apostrophe right after the 's' (Russ') and when you put another 's' after the apostrophe (Russ's)?"

Ultimately, Modifiers have one massive advantage to GMAT administrators and the business schools who use GMAT scores in admissions: Modifiers are either logical or illogical. It is patently illogical to say that "like Bob Dylan, the music of Talib Kweli...". Music just won't be like Bob Dylan; one is an art or a sound, while the other is a human being. It's not a logical comparison or description. Instead, you'd have to say "Like that of Bob Dylan, the music of Talib Kweli..." or "Like Bob Dylan, Talib Kweli makes music that...". Those are logical — Dylan's music can be like Kweli's music, or Dylan can be like Kweli. They're at least in the same realm.

Which brings us to a big-picture strategy for how you study Sentence Correction. Well, two points, really:

1) Focus on the logical "why" when eliminating answer choices

How often do you use the word "unidiomatic" when you're eliminating answer choices? Almost regardless of your answer, the real answer is "too often". Consider what "unidiomatic" means, courtesy of the dictionary:

Unidiomatic: Not idiomatic.

Idiomatic: Pertaining or conforming to the mode of expression characteristic of a language

Essentially, "idiomatic" just means "that's the way you say it". And that's just not scalable for you as you prepare to take this test — plus it's not a great way for the GMAT to assess your managerial potential and higher-order thinking. Accordingly, you should note that, by far, the vast majority of GMAT Sentence Correction errors have a logical component as well as a grammatical component, and for most of us paying attention to the logical component makes the grammar much more straightforward and easy to remember and apply.

Consider a sentence like:

While the economy has recovered somewhat from its crash in 2008, many Americans were still out of work.

vs.

While the economy has recovered somewhat from its crash in 2008, many Americans are still out of work.

The first sentence has a verb tense error — but that verb tense error is as much a logical error as a grammatical error. The first part of the sentence is talking about an ongoing event — the economy has recovered, and the use of "has recovered" means that the recovery is still ongoing into the present. So to say that "while" that is going on, something has already happened (Americans "were" still out of work) is illogical. The timeline doesn't make sense.

In the corrected second version, the indicative tense "are still out of work" is "now", and therefore consistent with the first half of the sentence which brings us from 2008 to now. That's a logical meaning — while something has been going on, something else still remains a problem. The timeline makes sense that way. And please note — many pure-grammar students are annoyed by the fact that the construct in the corrected version contains different verb tenses — they

struggle somewhat to reconcile “present perfect” with “indicative”, as those are two different tenses. But grammar is quite a bit more nuanced than one could simply memorize as an if...then flowchart. These two tenses are quite logical when used together, but the first case was not. Verb Tenses, like Modifiers, lend themselves well to your use of logic — and that’s precisely why the GMAT tests them: business schools want logical decision makers, not necessarily green-underliners (like the Microsoft Word grammar check function).

That’s not to say that you shouldn’t learn grammar — but keep in mind that the GMAT tests a limited scope of grammar, and most-if-not-all of it is the type of grammar that is more rooted in logic than it is in arbitrary “the queen speaks this way, so thus it is” parlance. The GMAT is, after all, a test of how you think, process information, and make decisions, and GMAT questions are painstakingly written to reward you for employing those skills. Which brings us to point 2...

2) Study only well-written questions

As discussed above, the GMAT does a masterful job of including questions that test grammar and logic in a way to ultimately test your decision-making. If you ask in the right way, you may even get someone affiliated with the exam to admit that a handful of the questions in the *Official Guide for GMAT Review* — likely those retired long ago from the active pool of test questions — probably wouldn’t make the cut today, as the authors of those questions have become increasingly more sophisticated to test a global audience. Simply put, high-quality GMAT sentence correction problems are hard to create, and lower-quality problems often confuse students as to what is really being tested. The GMAT doesn’t make hard questions by employing more obscure knowledge (the way that “What is the capital of Uzbekistan?” is a harder question to most Westerners than “What is the capital of France”); it makes hard questions by better obscuring the logical component being tested. If you study hastily-written questions that haven’t mastered that subtlety, you’re missing a critical component of the test.

As a result, you should plan to study official questions — those from the GMAC-produced *Official Guide for GMAT Review* series, the MBA.com practice tests, and the new GMAC iPhone application, to be released next week — and those from reputable sources like Veritas Prep and other leading test prep companies with the resources and experience to better approximate GMAT-style SC subtlety. GMAT sentence correction questions have an art to them that is difficult to replicate, and often the poorer attempts to do so can lead you astray as you study. For example, many GMAT students will have learned *incorrectly* that:

Shaquille is taller than Muggsy.

is incorrect, at least when compared to:

Shaquille is taller than Muggsy is.

Comparisons, a form of “Equivalent Elements” or “Parallelism”, which is something widely tested on the GMAT, tends to tie test-takers in knots as they attempt to find a noun parallel to a noun, a verb parallel to a verb, and items as silly — I’ve seen it happen! — as a three-syllable word parallel to another three-syllable word. What’s truly important, however, is the logic. Here, in either case we’re correctly comparing Shaquille to Muggsy on the basis of height. What would be wrong, however, is a sentence like:

Shaquille’s height is nearly twice as tall as Muggsy.

Here, we’d be comparing a height to a person, and that’s not an apt comparison. Logically, we either compare height to height (a number against a number) or person to person. Correctly, we could say:

Shaquille’s height is nearly twice that of Muggsy.

Or

Shaquille's height is nearly twice Muggsy's.

Remember, well-written GMAT questions (or approximations from leading companies) will do this well, but there are plenty of rogue practice questions floating around that will make you think that you need to consider these rules on a much more technical (and therefore confusing) level. Logic is scalable — you can do it over and over again with similarly-excellent results — so let that be your guide, and use quality questions that will reward you and reinforce those positive habits while you study.

Ultimately, as you learn to think and study more logically about GMAT sentence correction, consider this logic: Why would top business schools want to use the results of a test that even the brightest thinkers and most successful businesspeople would need to study in obscurity for several months? Should business schools want to reward the kind of idleness of time that allows someone to page-by-page memorize Strunk and White's "Elements of Style"? Or would they prefer to admit a successful young professional who volunteers at low-income schools in her spare time, still pursues hobbies and fitness and networking events, and efficiently studies by recognizing patterns and employing logic?

The latter student is the one business schools want — success on the GMAT should require you to prepare and devote some time to studying, but in the end if you have several months to spend on labor-intensive memorization...you're probably not who a top business school wants to admit over someone who excels at a challenging job and lives a well-rounded life. With that in mind, it's only logical that business schools — and therefore the GMAT — will reward logic, efficiency, and sound decision making. Make the sound decision to employ more logic in the way that you study sentence correction and you'll be rewarded.