

Of all the question types on the GMAT, a global exam for which the pool of test takers includes more than half of its examinees from outside the United States, Sentence Correction may seem the most arbitrary to prospective examinees. Math we get: nearly all MBA graduates will have to make decisions using numbers and nearly all MBA programs require coursework in areas like finance and accounting for which some baseline math skills are important. Similarly, reading comprehension is something that any school would want to ensure its students can do effectively, and the logic behind critical reasoning makes a lot of sense, too: schools and employers want people who can think logically and make reasoned decisions.

But English grammar? Why would schools like INSEAD and ESADE, located in countries where English is not an official language and attracting students from all corners of the globe, be concerned with English grammar subtleties? Especially when, as about 1/3 of the verbal section, sentence correction counts for about 17% of someone's GMAT score. It's probably nice to know that everyone can speak the same language, but 17% of someone's entry value? Isn't that overkill?

That should be a clue to you that Sentence Correction is *not about the grammar*! Much like Critical Reasoning or Data Sufficiency, Sentence Correction exists to test your decision making abilities first and foremost, and does so by taking a common and much-shallower-than-you'd-think pool of skills and knowledge and using that as a basis to test your higher-order thinking. Knowing that is a great first step toward successful study and performance on Sentence Correction questions. These three essential strategies should take you even further:

1) Make Logic Your Primary Focus

The single-most crucial type of Sentence Correction error, Modifiers, Comparisons, and Verb Tenses all share one thing in common: you don't need to be an expert editor to recognize that this sentence is illogical! The introductory phrase in this sentence, "the single-most type..." is clearly meant to describe one item, but the rest of the sentence lists three. This does not make logical sense! Technically you'd call this a modifier error, in that the modifying phrase to begin the sentence – recognizable because it begins the sentence, is separated by a comma, and does not include its own subject and verb (note: these aren't essential characteristics of any modifier, but they are one surefire way to identify a commonly-occurring type of modifier in which SC errors often crop up) – does not logically modify the noun that follows.

If you want to get really technical, it's an appositive modifier (a noun phrase used to describe another noun), but the GMAT will never require you to describe the grammatical terminology behind it. If you can recognize that "this is wrong – logically it doesn't make sense", you can eliminate this answer choice and move on. And even if you do choose to dig deeper into grammatical technicalities, don't lose sight of your logical focus. Consider this example, often mistaken by students as incorrect:

In order to break the world record in the 100 meter dash at next summer's Olympics, Tyson Gay will need to run faster than Usain Bolt ran at the 2009 World Championships.

Many a GMAT student has looked at a sentence like this and viewed the comparison as incorrect, citing "parallelism" as their primary concern. "You cannot compare a future tense verb to a past-tense verb...they're not perfectly parallel!" they'll claim. But, again, ask yourself about the logic: is there any logical way to put these two actions in the same tense? From where we're standing today, "next summer's Olympics" must be in the future, and 2009 must be in the past. We simply cannot put them in the same verb tense. For comparisons, the two items must be logically comparable, but they need not be perfectly parallel to the umpteenth grammatical degree. This sentence is wrong:

In order to break the world record next summer, Tyson Gay's time will need to be faster than Usain Bolt at the 2009 worlds.

Here we're comparing Gay's time to Bolt, the person, and this isn't a logical comparison. Remember, logic is your primary goal on these questions, so look for clearly illogical modifiers, sequences, comparisons, etc. and you'll nearly always be able to avoid having to dig that much deeper for grammatical jargon or expertise. If the words "gerund" and

“participle” aren’t currently part of your vocabulary, you probably don’t need them to be when you take the test, either.

2) Recognize Decision Points

As stated above, the pool of required grammar knowledge for the GMAT is likely shallower than you’d think; those who memorize hundreds of idiomatic rules or read the cover off of their copy of Strunk & White’s “Elements of Style” are studying counter to the real purpose of the GMAT’s inclusion of Sentence Correction: the idea of “core competencies.” Corporate Strategy courses in b-school will spend quite a bit of time on that notion that each business needs to recognize the handful of things it does extremely well and find opportunities to leverage that. When businesses stray from their core competencies they tend to struggle mightily, wasting resources and providing diminishing returns with increased risk.

For example, McDonald’s has a set of core competencies that allow it to run extremely efficient fast-food operations in high-traffic areas. It’s natural, then, to acquire Chipotle and replicate the same processes with a different type of fast food; if McDonald’s were to try to distribute its products through the frozen foods aisles at grocery stores, however, it might find that it’s ill-equipped to compete with that different set of core competencies. Businesses specialize, and as a potential Master of Business you should specialize, too. Don’t try to memorize everything there is to know about grammar; learn to recognize the common GMAT decision points and you can efficiently make the decisions that you’ve trained yourself to make effectively.

Verbs make fantastic decision points, as they’re involved in subject-verb agreement errors, verb tense errors, and comparison errors (are we comparing an action to an action?). Pronouns also lend themselves well to decisions, as they can disagree in number or they can fail to refer to anything specific. When you look at the answer choices of a sentence and see the same verb in different forms or a choice between singular and plural pronouns, you should immediately identify those as classic decision points and look to make your choices there. Similarly, as comparisons are often tested on the GMAT, the presence of pronouns like “that of” or “those of” should indicate that you need to decide whether the comparison requires such a possessive:

The question of whether to allocate a portion of their salaries to retirement plans is particularly troublesome for recent college graduates, whose salaries are typically lower than senior members of companies; with the rising cost of living, younger employees often struggle with having to pay bills while trying to save for the long run.

- A) than
- B) than those of
- C) than is so of
- D) compared to
- E) compared to those of

Here, the presence of “those of” in B and E should tip you off – we need to determine whether we are comparing X with Y or something that belongs to X with “those of” Y. Going back to the sentence, we see that we’re comparing “salaries” belonging to recent graduates to... “senior members of companies”. Which is illogical— we can’t compare salaries to people; it has to be salaries to “those of” the other people. So we must have either B or E. E is redundant — “lower” already tells us that we’re comparing, so adding “compared to” just adds unnecessary words, and so B is the correct answer.

Knowing that “those of” triggers an important decision point, you can avoid reading most of this sentence – you know what you’re looking for and you can quickly dive into that decision, saving valuable time for later problems on the test.

3) Lighten Your Load

Sentence Correction questions can include up to 54 words, making for incredibly long sentences and time consuming reading. But similar to point 2, knowing what is likely to be a testable section of a sentence and what is not, you can break apart the sentence into the parts that matter to you as a test-taker. Proper nouns, correctly-applied modifiers,

adjectives and adverbs can all be streamlined to make for shorter sentences. For example, in the sentence:

Originally called BackRub, Google was founded by two Stanford PhD students, Larry Page, whose father, Dr. Carl Victor Page, was a computer science professor at Michigan State University, and Sergey Brin.

The proper nouns and excessive adjectives can be eliminated or condensed, bringing you down to:

Originally called BackRub, Google was founded by two students, Larry, whose father, Carl, was a professor, and Sergey.

Now it's easier to check the modifiers to make sure they're aptly describing each portion of the sentence. "Originally called BackRub" can logically modify Google, so we can break off that part of the sentence... There's nothing else that can be wrong with that option.

Google was founded by two students, Larry, whose father, Carl, was a professor, and Sergey.

"whose father" logically modifies "Larry;" "Carl" logically modifies "father," and "Larry and Sergey" logically modifies "students," so we can confirm that this sentence is correct. More importantly, as there are four other answer choices that are similarly structured, we can more quickly ascertain the decision points by looking at a shorter sentence, making our work significantly easier and quicker. Again, this relates to a business skill – if you can identify which items are superfluous and which are the most important opportunities to add value, you can be a much more efficient manager and a more valuable asset.

Sentence Correction may seem a bit out-of-place on a graduate management exam, but that should be a clue to you. Assuming that the GMAT is a well-written test (and with so many top business schools and employers using it to make decisions about candidates that's likely a safe assumption), the inclusion of Sentence Correction must be to test something other than the type of grammar that you can easily fix with a right-click of the green underline in your word processor. Sentence Correction tests your ability to efficiently assess a more-complicated-than-necessary situation, identify your core competencies, and efficiently make decisions that play to your strengths. Use that knowledge and these above strategies and you can demonstrate those abilities to business schools and employers alike.