**Grammar and Usage Tips for the PSAT**

**Commas**

1. Use a comma and a FANBOYS conjunction between two independent clauses to create a compound sentence.

Example: The boys wanted to get an ice cream cone, so they walked to Braums.

2. Use a comma after an introductory element if the element is more than two or three words or if the comma gives the sentence clarity.

Example: When I’m feeling bored, I like to go to the library to find a new book.

3. Use commas to separate items in a series.

Example: You’ll need to bring sunscreen, a hat, and money.

4. Use commas between two or more adjectives if you could substitute the word “and” between the adjectives.

Example: The beautiful, expensive painting was part of the museum’s permanent collection.

5. Use commas around nonessential elements. Do not use commas around essential elements. Tip: always use commas if the element begins with “which.” Don’t use commas if the element begins with “that.”

Essential element example: William Faulkner's novel ***Light in August*** is my favorite book.

Nonrestrictive element example: When I do yoga, I wear my favorite shirt, **which is really old.**

**Colon**

A colon is used in certain conventional situations.

Examples: 8:15 a.m.

Genesis 1:1

*Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams

A colon can also be used after an independent clause to introduce a list or information that will expand on the independent clause. Remember, the words before the colon must be a complete sentence (independent clause).

Example: You should have the following items on the first day of school: pencil, paper, folders, binders, and a calculator.

**Semicolon**

A semicolon can be used to join two independent clauses.

Example: The class is almost over; after the post test, students will know if they have improved.

A semicolon can also be used to join items in a list if there are already commas in the list.

Example: I bought shiny, ripe apples; small, sweet, juicy grapes; and firm pears.

**Apostrophe**

Use an apostrophe to signal possession or to create a contraction.

Common mistakes: Their/They’re/There, It’s/Its

**Dash (or the super comma)**

Dashes can be used to set off extra information or to demonstrate an abrupt break in thought. Dashes usually indicate a stronger pause than a comma.

**Subject Verb agreement**

Verbs must agree with subjects in number and in tense. In other words, subject/verb agreement simply means they both need to be singular or both need to be plural.

Common mistakes: If a pronoun ends in -thing, -body, or -one, that pronoun is singular. Either and neither are both singular. All or none can be either singular or plural depending on what the words are referencing. In a compound subject joined by “or” or “nor,” the part of the subject that must agree with the verb is the subject closest to the verb.

**Parallel Structure**

Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance.

Examples:

Faulty parallelism (incorrect): Mary likes **hiking, swimming, and to bicycle.**

Parallel: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and bicycling.

**Dangling and misplaced modifiers**

The modifier should be as close to the word it is modifying as possible.

Examples:

Incorrect: The dealer sold the Cadillac to the buyer **with leather seats. (misplaced)**

Correct: The dealer sold the Cadillac with leather seats to the buyer.

Incorrect: **Having finished the assignment,** the TV was turned on. (dangling)

Correct: Having finished the assignment, Jill turned on the TV.

**Verb Tense Consistency**

There are three main verb forms for showing time or tense: *Simple*, *Perfect*, and *Progressive*.

In General…

Do not switch from one tense to another *unless the timing of an action demands that you do.*

Keep verb tense consistent in sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

**Pronoun and Antecedent Agreement**

A pronoun usually refers to something earlier in the text (its antecedent) and must agree in number — singular/plural — and gender with the thing to which it refers.

In General…

1. The indefinite pronouns anyone, anybody, everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, no one, and nobody are always singular. The same is true of either and neither, which are always singular even though they seem to be referring to two things.
2. The need for pronoun-antecedent agreement can create gender problems. Use his or her or pluralize to avoid the problem.

Examples:

Incorrect: Everyone in the class has **their** book. (The antecedent of the possessive pronoun “their” is “everyone.” “Everyone” is singular while “their” is plural.)

Incorrect: Everyone in the class has **his** book. (Unless “his” refers to a class full of young men, this pronoun is considered, by most modern writers and grammarians, to be sexist.)

Correct: Everyone in the class has his or her book.

1. The number (singular or plural) of the pronoun (and its accompanying verbs) is determined by what the pronoun refers to; it can refer to a singular person or a group of people.