

one question decides it: can each side of the blank stand alone?

What this question actually looks like

- a short passage of roughly 25 to 150 words sits above the question and belongs to **that question alone**, so there is nothing long to hold in your head
- the passage carries a blank, and the stem is always the same words: which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English
- the four options are the **same words in the same order**, differing only in the punctuation dropped between them
- because only the punctuation moves, the passage's meaning barely matters here. You are reading **structure**, not argument
- that is why this is one of the fastest question types on the whole section. Time saved here is what pays for the slow evidence questions later



four cells in a row, one punctuation mark in each with its single job printed above it; the semicolon cell is highlighted because it is the mark students under-use most

The only test you have to run

- an **independent clause** has a subject and its own finite verb, and could be printed as a sentence on its own with nothing added
- a **dependent clause** opens with because, although, when, since, while, which or that, and cannot be printed alone however long it runs
- read the words to the LEFT of the blank, then the words to the RIGHT, and label each side whole or not whole
- length tells you nothing. A fourteen word phrase can still be a fragment, and a three word clause can be complete: she agreed
- that one pair of labels eliminates three of the four options without your ever deciding what the passage is about

Is each side of the blank a complete sentence on its own?

both sides complete,
no joining word
offered

**Period or
semicolon**

only one of the two
will appear in the
options

both sides complete,
a joining word is in
the option

**Comma, then
and, but, so**

the comma sits
before the joining
word, never after

one side is not a
complete sentence

**Comma, or no
mark at all**

a semicolon here is
wrong every single
time

run this fork before you look at the options, not after, or the wrong option starts sounding right

Openers that make a clause dependent *

Because, since

give a reason, so the clause needs a main clause beside it to lean on

Although, while

concede something, and can never close a sentence by themselves

When, after, before

fix a time, and are the ones most often mistaken for complete sentences

Which, who

attach a description to a noun already named, never start a new sentence in these options

That, whether

open a clause that works as an object, so it is part of a larger sentence

spot one of these at the head of a side and that side is not complete, whatever its length