WHAT ARE SENTENCE COMPLETION QUESTIONS?

Sentence completion questions test your vocabulary skills as well as your reading ability. These problems contain a single sentence expressing a complete idea that can be understood without any additional information. This is quite unlike the reading comprehension questions, which require you to read long passages. Each sentence contains one, two or three blanks, which need to be filled up appropriately. These questions typically contain four options to fill in the blanks in the sentence. From these choices, you need to select the words or phrases that fit into the blanks to best complete the sentence.

This question type tests the student's ability to understand the main idea of the sentence and the logical structure of the sentence. It also tests the ability of the student to anticipate what idea conveyed by a particular word will most aptly fit into the blank provided. Besides, your vocabulary is also tested because there is not much you can do if you are unaware of the word/s contained in the question or in the options. Your knowledge of roots, prefixes and suffixes will come in handy.

In order to successfully solve the sentence completion section, the student should have a strong understanding of the relationships within the sentence. These relationships might include the use of equivalents, analogies, parallel sets, contrasts and word clusters. Solving the sentence completion section will draw on your adeptness and facility with antonyms and synonyms, your understanding of parallel sets, and the breadth and depth of your general vocabulary.

The Cream of the Piece

Needless to say, having a good vocabulary helps in doing better at this question type. The student is hence advised to work on his/her vocabulary simultaneously in order to improve his/her ability at this type of question. However, even if you are caught short in your vocabulary by a particular question, you can still try to solve it by following a few rules which are enumerated below.

REACTIVE SOLVING *VERSUS* PROACTIVE SOLVING

In our observation, a critical mistake that students end up committing while solving questions of sentence completion is trying to solve these questions by going through the options and trying to fit the options in the sentence.

We call this reactive solving and this process leads to students committing avoidable errors. Instead, the student should consciously follow proactive solving, which is explained below.

Proactive Solving

As a conscious strategy, the student is advised to use his/her anticipation by following the following three-step process while solving sentence completion exercises:

Step 1. Understand the Message and the Tone of the Author In simple language this implies understanding what he is trying to say (message) and how he is trying to say it (tone).

(a) Understanding the Message While doing this, the student should focus on identifying the principal subject/idea of the sentence—about what or whom the sentence is trying to talk. Note here that many a time, there might be more than one idea in the sentence. In such cases, the key is to understand how the two ideas are connected to each other.

While doing this, one should also try to identify the key words which the author has used to convey his message.

Briefly, key words include words such as therefore, because, similarly, although, in contrast, etc.

(b) Identify the Logical Structure of the Sentence

While doing this, look for whether the sentence has one or more parts, i.e., whether it is a simple sentence or it is a complex sentence having more than one part/s, which are connected to each other through a sentence connector.

(c) Understanding the Tone

Ask yourself questions like whether the author is talking about the subject in a positive, neutral or negative way. Also, try to identify the degree to which the author is positive or negative about the subject.

Step 2. Anticipating Words

This implies anticipating the meaning of the word/s that will fill in the blanks appropriately and in particular, that it should be in sync with what the author's message and tone are.

Step 3. Scanning

Scan the choices to see if the word/s you have thought of figure(s) in these choices. If not, look for a synonym/s of the word/s. However, do look through all the choices before you actually select one. Try each answer choice in the blank to see which one suits the best.

Step 4. The Final Answer

Reread the sentence with your answer choice and make your assessments about the smoothness of the flow of the idea. If you find that everything matches, then you have got the correct answer to the question.

Let's look at an example of how to apply this process to reach the correct answer.

Because scientific research and the consequential assessments of whether or not global warming is occurring have been _____, it has been difficult to convince the public that this phenomenon is a critical problem that needs to be addressed.

Step 1) *What are the ideas in this sentence?*

The *first idea* in the sentence describes the "research and the consequential assessments of the occurrence of global warming."

From this part of the sentence, we are getting no clue about the nature of these assessments. Hence, we get no clue about the nature of the word to be used in the blank in the sentence (i.e., whether it is a positive word, a negative word or a neutral word.)

The *second part* of the sentence talks about the difficulty in convincing the public about the importance of global warming. How are these two parts of the sentence connected? Essentially, both the parts of the sentence are dealing with the issue of global warming. The kind of connecting/ key words used in the sentence will help us further determine the nature of the connection between the ideas contained in the two parts of the sentence.

The first word is "because." What does this tell us? It tells us that the information in the second part of the sentence in some way, is caused by the first part of the sentence. (As we will see later on in this chapter, this is one of the four common structures of sentence completion problems: cause-effect.)

Step 2) *Think of a word that would make sense in the blank*

Without even looking at the answer choices, use the information you have learned from the ideas and key words in the sentence, to guess at a possible choice of word to fill the blank. While doing this, just allow your instincts to run freely and simply react to the sentence—assuming you were the author of the same and try to fit in word/s with the most appropriate meanings into the blank/s.

If there are two blanks, think of a set of two words that would make sense for each one.

In our example, the presence of the word "because" tells us that the second idea is caused by the first idea. We know that some factor about the scientific research and the consequential assessments of global warming has made it difficult to convince the public that it is a problem.

What type of scientific research and assessments must these be?

They must not be convincing/believable or in some way, must be lacking in credibility, otherwise the public would know that this issue was important. Therefore, some appropriate words that might make sense in the blank would be words that describe the scientific studies as lacking in some way: unpersuasive, not credible, deficient, or unbelievable. If we again read the sentence with one of these words substituted into the blank, the sentence makes sense.

Step 3) *Scan the Choices*

Let us suppose that the options given to us were:

(A) well-designed   (C) substantial
(B) inconclusive   (D) irrefutable

We are looking for an answer choice that is similar in meaning to not credible, deficient, or unbelievable. Something that will make the public unconvinced about the gravity of the problem.

Well-designed is opposite to the idea we need; if the assessments were well-designed, it would be easy to convince the public.

Inconclusive seems to be similar to the idea we were looking for, so we can hold onto that one. The last two choices, substantial and irrefutable are again more opposite in meaning to our guess word, so we can eliminate these two.

Note

Even though inconclusive fits our idea in the first place, make it a habit to check out all the options. Very often, more than one word will have the same general meaning as your guess word, and you will need to narrow it down and then choose the best-fitting word.

It is quite common in these problem types to find words opposite in meaning to your guess word among the answer choices.

Step 4) *The Final Answers*

If you have narrowed down to a particular answer choice that reflects the idea of your guess word, reread the sentence to see if the logic follows when you substitute that word into the blank. If you have only narrowed down your choices to a few, read the sentence with each of the possible choices. For problems with two blanks, it is often the case that you will be able to eliminate some of the choices because the first word does not fit well into the blank and others because the second word doesn't fit. Together, you can eliminate more of the incorrect answer choices and narrow it down to the correct choice.

TYPES OF SENTENCE STRUCTURES AND KEY WORDS

Having seen the process applied to one particular problem, let us now look at the four common types of sentence structures and some key words, which are the basis of the basic problem types, viz: Cause & Effect, Reiteration, Similarities/Parallelisms & Contrast.

Type I. Cause and Effect

As seen in the solved example above, a common sentence structure seen in the CAT is one that contains two ideas, where one causes the other. In other words, one is the cause of the other (which then becomes the effect). Needless to say, the two ideas have to be related to the same principal topic.

Key words that may indicate cause and effect include: because, as a result, thus, resulting from, hence, therefore, consequently, causes, leading to, due to.

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The typical sentence structures of cause and effect are as follows. In the following notations, imagine two ideas related to the same principal topic. Let A be the effect of B, which is the cause of A i.e. B → A.

(i) A **Because** B,	(ii) **Because** B, **Hence** A
	(iii) A **as a result of** B,
(iv) B **thus** A,	(v) B **therefore** A,
(vi) B **causes** A,	(vii) A **due to** B,
(viii) B **consequently** A	(ix) B **leading to** A

Let's look at an example:

Because of Jim Carrey's reputation as a comic actor, suited best for playing hilarious roles, the director was _____ considering him for the more serious role of the solemn monk.

(A) discouraged from (B) encouraged to
(C) irrelevant to (D) ambivalent of

The sentence structure here is:
Because A, Hence B.

Note here that the 'hence' is silent in this sentence and its meaning is implied.

The key word 'because' should indicate to you that this is a cause and effect sentence. The first part of the sentence gives us the cause—Jim Carrey's reputation as an actor playing comic roles. What impact would this history have on the suitability of the actor to play a more serious role? It is most likely, to cause some doubts in the director's mind, and he might be unwilling or reluctant to cast him in this new role. Looking through the answer choices, the correct answer is A, **discouraged from**.

Many a times, the effect is a chronological follow up of the cause, i.e., the effect comes later in time to the cause. Here's an example:

The mass *release* of green house gases causes a detrimental effect on the environment of the whole world.

Today, advanced computer technology can _____ information from a number of sources, then automatically _____ the data and draw conclusions from the same.

    (A) collate...analyse

    (B) extrapolate...assemble

    (C) adjudicate...assemble

    (D) research...expand

The first part of the sentence deals with something that computer technology can do; the second part deals with the next part of a two-part process. First, guess at a word that would fill the first blank and look through the answer choices.

One possible guess would be that computers "collect" or "compare" information. Choice A, collate, means to compare or examine, so this is a reasonable choice. Choice B—extrapolate—means to use existing data to make predictions. Although this does not fit with our guess word, this seems a reasonable thing to do with information, so let's keep this choice for now. Choice C—adjudicate—means to settle a dispute; this can be eliminated since it does not make sense in this situation. Choice D—research—can also be eliminated since computers are tools of research and cannot do research themselves.

Now move on to the second blank. Remember, the first part of the sentence describes something that must be done before what is done in the second part of the sentence (we know this because of the 'then'). Can we select between choices A and B now? Choice A makes sense: information is collated and then analysed to draw conclusions. Choice B does not make sense in terms of cause and effect. Extrapolation is done from existing information, and an assembly would not be a consequence. Hence, choice A is the correct answer.

Type II. Reiteration or Restatement/ Parallelisms

Sentences of this type again, will usually have two ideas, one of which clarifies or further supports the other. The ideas will have the same general meaning, but will be restated in a slightly more explanatory way. Sometimes, such sentences will also have the reiteration in the form of an explanatory example.

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Key words to identify reiteration type sentences are: in fact, in other words, surely, to be sure, and, namely, that is, furthermore and likewise.

The typical sentence structure is (A and B are ideas):

    (i) A **in fact** B,   (ii) A **in other words** B,

    (iii) A **and** B,   (iv) A **likewise** B,

    (v) A **that is** B,   (vi) A **namely** B,

    (vii) A **surely** B

Here is an example:

He was the most _____ person he had ever met; in fact, his magnanimity knew no limits.

    (A) charitable   (B) miserly

    (C) reclusive   (D) prolific

Looking for the key words in the sentence, we notice the **in fact** connecting the two ideas contained in the two parts of the sentence. Hence, you should be able to identify the sentence as one wherein the two ideas are reiterations of one another. Hence, the second idea reiterates or supports the first idea. In this case, the second idea is complete in itself, describing the magnanimity of the person. The first part of the sentence has to be parallel to this part. Hence, the blank has to be filled in with a synonym for magnanimity. When we read the answer choices, we can see that the best match to our requirement is Option A.

Let's look at another example:

The Age of Enlightenment, acknowledged as one of the greatest periods of history for intellectual activity, exhibited a proclivity for literalism and_____ argumentation.

    (A) credible   (B) specious

    (C) pensive   (D) congruous

The key word here is **and,** which shows that this sentence has a reiteration element in it. The two ideas should be parallel to each other and hence, should be reiterations of each other. The first part of the sentence describes that the kind of intellectual activity that occurred during the age of Enlightenment showed a proclivity for literalism. Now, if you don't know what literalism means, you will have difficulty in determining which of the choices is synonymous with it and will successfully complete the sentence. **Literalism describes an argument that sounds plausible, but is actually misleading or fallacious.** Since this is a negative comment, the second part of the sentence must also be negative. Option A and D are basically positive and can be eliminated. Choice B is negative; this turns out to be the correct answer as specious argumentation is synonymous with literalism. Choice C can be eliminated as it has no relevance in the current sentence (we are looking for an adjective to describe argumentation and there is nothing called pensive argumentation).

Type III. Similarity or Support

Sentences of this type compare distinct but similar ideas. When choosing a word to fill the blank, you must look for a word that allows the two ideas of the sentence to be similar in meaning.

— T*h*e Cr*e*am o*f* t*h*e P*i*ece —

Key words for similarity sentence completions are: likewise, in the same way, for instance, similarly, furthermore, as, same, just as, specifically, such as, as an example, resembles, like and also.

Examples of sentence structures used for similarities are (A and B are ideas):

   (i) A **likewise** B,   (ii) **Just as** A, **similarly** B,

  (iii) A **like** B

Just as television surpassed radio as the major source of entertainment and information for the world, it seems destined that the Internet will eventually _____ television.

  (A) invigorate   (B) alter

  (C) eliminate   (D) supplant

The key words here are 'just as,' and they suggest that this is a sentence based on the similarity of the argument. Hence, we should look for a word that will allow the two ideas of the sentence to be similar. The defining word in the first idea is surpassed. Since we need a word that will convey the same meaning as the first idea, we are looking for a word similar to **surpass**. If we work through the options, we can eliminate all but C and D. Both might make sense in the context of the sentence, but D, supplant, is more similar to the original idea of surpassing, rather than eliminating, which is too drastic in the context of the question.

It is characteristic of old age to sap a man's ebullience and rob him of his natural_____.

  (A) senility   (B) vigor

  (C) maturity   (D) insensibility

The key connector here is 'and' which hints at the similarity of the ideas. The first part of the sentence describes a negative fact about old age, namely, that a man starts to lose his ebullience. Since the two parts of the sentence are joined by 'and', the second idea contained in the sentence must also state something negative related to aging. Just as a man's ebullience is lost with

old age, we are looking for a positive attribute that is lost with aging. Option A and D can be directly eliminated in this context since senility and insensibility are both negative attributes (in fact, senility generally arrives with old age and not the other way round.) Option C, maturity can also be eliminated since it is a positive that arrives with old age and does not go away. That leaves us with option B, vigor, which is a positive attribute that goes away with old age. As a further insurance of the answer, always make it a habit to reread the complete sentence with the selected option. Here, it makes complete sense.

Type IV. Contrast

Contrast sentences contain ideas that are opposite to one another or are dissimilar to each other.

— T*h*e Cr*e*am o*f* t*h*e P*i*ece —

Key words indicating a contrast in the ideas of the sentence include:

Although, but, despite, inspite of, however, as against, as opposed to, whereas, on the contrary, yet, on the other hand, On the one hand.... On the other, surprisingly, unlike, in contrast, rather, and Even though.

Examples of sentence structures used for contrast (A and B are ideas).

   (i) A **although** B,   (ii) A **yet** B,

  (iii) A **on the contrary** B,   (iv) **On the one hand** A,

  (v) **On the other** B   (vi) A **unlike** B

  (vii) A **in contrast to** B

In a large group of people consisting of strangers, Aishwarya often seemed _____ and aloof, although among her friends and family she was quite _____.

  (A) reticent...convivial

  (B) gregarious...outgoing

  (C) detrimental...multifarious

  (D) unattainable.... taciturn

The "although" tells us that this is a sentence that contains a contrast in its ideas, so the two parts of the sentence should contain opposite ideas. Since both the parts describe Aishwarya's behavior, the two words should logically describe opposite behaviors. Hence, the description of Aishwarya's behavior in a large group of people should be different from her behavior when she is with her friends and family. (If we look through our answer choices, choices B and D can be removed immediately since they contain synonyms, not antonyms.)

What else do we know about the words that will best fit the blanks? Notice the use of the conjunction 'and' used to connect the word in the first blank and aloof. The use of and between two descriptive adjectives describing behaviors can only mean that the two should be similar to each other and should mean the same thing. Of our answer choices, which of the first words in the pair is most similar to aloof? Both reticent and unattainable are reasonable choices. Gregarious and detrimental don't seem to make a lot of sense, so we can exclude those. Once you have narrowed down your options as much as possible on the basis of the first word, look at the second word, which has to be opposite in meaning to the first word. Between A and D, option A is the best choice.

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Summary of basic strategy for sentence completion problems

Read the sentence and determine the principal idea/s to which the sentence is related. Learn the four main types of sentence completion problems and look for these problems in the exam.

Look for key words. Again, knowing the key words for each of the four major types of sentence completion problems will enable you to recognize the type of sentence and quickly know what kind of word you need to complete the logic of the sentence.

Think of a word that would make sense in the blank. Do this before even looking at the answer choices.

Look at the option choices that give you the closest fit to your guess word. Re-read the sentence with the filled in option to see the coherence of the sentence with the word before marking the answer.