



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Sentence Completion from SparkNotes

If you took the SAT cold, you'd still get some Sentence Completions right. But you probably wouldn't get those points in the most efficient way possible. Plus, there are many items you might skip, items you'll find a lot more approachable with just a little coaching and some simple strategies.

Here are two methods you can use to solve Sentence Completions. The first is the "forward" method. This is an explicit discipline you should follow *every time* you attempt a Sentence Completion. The second is the "backward" method. You'll use this method when you can't successfully use the forward method.

Here are the five steps to the forward method:

Step 1: Cover up answer choices.

Step 2: Read stem and determine stem type.

Step 3: Supply your own words or phrases to complete the sentence.

Step 4: Compare your choice to the answers and eliminate all that do not match.

Step 5: Plug selected answer back into sentence and select the best fit.

You'll need to get your hands on a 3x5 index card and use it to cover up the answer choices from now on. Why? Because four of them are distractors. These exist to seduce you away from the correct answer. Covering up the answer choices decreases the "noise" of distractors and gives you a chance to figure out what kind of "signal" you're looking for.

In step 2, you'll determine whether the sentence is Continuation, Contrast, Amplification, or some other less common subtype. As you'll see, this choice will help you determine which words or phrases could complete the sentence. Armed with this signal, you're ready to consider the answer choices. Eliminate all that do not match your prediction. That will leave you with only one answer, but make sure to plug that choice's word or words into the sentence before you move on. If not, plug all remaining choices back into the stem and choose the one that fits best.

Consider the following item:

Some ethical philosophers argue that when the term "genocide" is used too liberally, the concept becomes -----, losing its power to mobilize international support for those ethnicities whose existence is truly endangered by mass murder.

Step 1: Cover up answer choices. The correct answer is always present in a multiple choice question. The distractors hide this word among four other words.

Step 2: Read stem and determine stem type. Is this a contrast sentence, a comparison sentence, or some other type? Well, we don't see any contrast clue words (e.g., *although*, *despite*, etc.), so it looks like we have a straightforward cause-and-effect Continuation sentence. You can translate the stem into "headline-speak" to clarify cause and effect: "Overuse of the term *genocide* leads to something that means a loss of the term's power."

This Sentence Completion also has a typical feature: the concluding phrase limits what words could reasonably fill in the blank. In some cases, the blank is actually *defined* by the final phrase, which is set off by a comma. Since the test-makers are testing your ability to use context to determine meaning, they "plant" context clues in Sentence Completions, even if they come off as slightly artificial. You, the test-taker, need to take advantage of this fact.

Step 3: Supply your own words or phrases to complete the sentence. Now that we understand the sentence's logic, we can supply our own word to fill in the blank. What word means a loss of an entity's power? You don't need to get fancy—remember, you're under strict time constraints. How about *weak*? That would fit. Let's go with that for now. Using *weak* as your "search image" will certainly help us separate the wheat from the chaff when we look at the answer choices.

Step 4: Compare your choice to the answers and eliminate all that do not match. Now, examine the following possible answers.

- a. conservative
- b. militaristic
- c. domestic
- d. scarce
- e. diluted

Which of the choices match *weak*? The only choices that have a shot are **D** and **E**. But let's take a look at the distractors so you can see the advantage of approaching the answer choices with a "search image." **A**, *conservative*, is a typically tricky choice, since in the heat of battle, the test-taker will see the word *liberally* and reach for its political opposite. However, *liberally* means "generously" in this context, so **A** is incorrect. The sentence also contains the word *mobilize*, which brings to mind the movement of armed forces, which you might think is necessary to prevent genocide. Remember, though, Sentence Completions test vocabulary *in context*. If you select **B**, you're saying that the term "genocide" *itself* becomes militaristic if it's used too often. This doesn't make much sense. Choice **C**

plays a similar associative game with another word in the stem. *Domestic* is paired with *international*, which may seem attractive to a test-taker who is strapped for time. In fact, it's best to think of distractors as engaging in a lot of hand-waving, saying, "Choose me—hurry up! I'm close enough, and you're running out of time!" If you haven't figured out the type of stem you're dealing with or supplied a plausible word to fill in the blank, the distractors' power increases. Look how **D** does it—*scarce* plays off of *endangered* in the last phrase, laying a trap for careless test-takers. When you think about it, how could a term that is too liberally applied become scarce? Only **E**, *diluted*, captures the sense of a loss of the term's power. Even if you had no idea what *diluted* means, you'd still get this item right if you had stuck to your guns and eliminated those choices that do not match *weak*.

Step 5: Plug selected answer back into sentence and select the best fit. As a final check, plug your selected choice into the stem: *Some ethical philosophers argue that when the term "genocide" is used too liberally, the concept becomes diluted, losing its power to mobilize international support for those ethnicities whose existence is truly endangered by mass murder.* Why bother with this step when you're in a hurry? Because accuracy is as important as speed, and choices can look very attractive until you've plugged them back into their stems. Skip this step, and you risk a 1 ¹/₄-point turnaround: you'll not only lose the point you might have gained, but you'll also be docked a quarter-point.

Try this one on your own:

Ignoring criticisms that the film was excessively ----- and biased, the director resisted efforts to cut particular scenes in order to produce a less fierce, more ----- story.

Step 1: Cover up answer choices.

We've taken care of this for you, but make sure you always cover up answer choices with an index card or whatever else is handy.

Step 2: Read stem and determine stem type.

This may look like a sentence with a "twist" until you study it a bit. The director ignored criticisms that the film was excessively *whatever it was*, specifically refusing to cut scenes that would have made the film both less than *whatever it was* and more than *the opposite of whatever it was*. Thus, *whatever it was* has remained the same.

Write down what kind of stem type this is here:

Step 3: Supply your own words or phrases to complete the sentence.

You will see there is another class of context clues in this item. The units [----- and biased] and [less fierce, more -----]. mirror each other. The first blank should match *fierce*; the second blank should match *biased*.

Write your candidates here:

First blank: _____

Second blank: _____

Step 4: Compare your choice to the answers and eliminate all that do not match.

Here are the answer choices:

- a. placid . . . prejudicial
- b. tranquil . . . neutral
- c. brutal . . . unfair
- d. violent . . . even-handed

- e. long . . . compact

Now, eliminate answer choices. If you don't know the meaning of the words in an answer choice, **don't** eliminate that answer choice. It might be the correct choice.

Your candidate for the first blank: _____

(You probably eliminated at least one choice on the basis of your candidate. Cross out those choices below: why waste precious time evaluating the second word in a choice you've already eliminated? Also: you don't necessarily have to start with the first blank; you could start with the second, if that promises to be easier or quicker.)

Your candidate for the second blank: _____

Step 5: Plug selected answer back into sentence and select the best fit.

Don't forget to do this, even if you've whittled down the choices to one.

Write your answer here:

Guided Practice Explanation

Did you come up with **D**? If so, congratulations! If not, don't worry—let's trace the thought process. Those who came up with **D** should follow along as well. The goal here is not to get this one item correct but to see how the thought processes in the step method work in action.

Step 1: Cover up answer choices.

Done.

Step 2: Read stem and determine stem type.

This sentence has neither a twist nor amplification. The units mirror each other, so this is a Continuation stem. Knowing this should help you predict what's needed to fill the blanks—you need a synonym for *fierce* and an antonym for *biased*.

Step 3: Supply your own words or phrases to complete the sentence.

Given that the units [----- and biased] and [less fierce, more -----] should mean the same thing (a common feature of Sentence Completions), we offer the following candidates:

First blank: brutal

Second blank: impartial

Note how the equivalency is complicated by the *less... more...* construction. The second blank has to be the **opposite** of *biased* to preserve the sentence's logic.

Step 4: Compare your choice to the answers and eliminate all that do not match.

Our candidate for the first blank: brutal

In one fell swoop, our candidate has disqualified **A**, **B**, and **E**.

Our candidate for the second blank: impartial

D is the only option left; **C** doesn't match our candidate.

Step 5: Plug selected answer back into sentence and select the best fit.

Ignoring criticisms that the film was excessively violent and biased, the director resisted efforts to cut particular scenes in order to produce a less fierce, more even-handed story.

Write your answer here: **D**

Whenever you practice, you should force yourself to follow this method. You don't need our help for those items you know off the top of your head. You need us at the "margins" of your knowledge, ability, and speed. That's where you'll raise the ceiling of your score, and that's where this method will help you deploy your knowledge as efficiently as possible.