



## Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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### Sentence Completion The Backward Model from SparkNotes

We said last week that half of conquering Sentence Completions was recognizing and practicing an explicit method based on the multiple-choice nature of the item. But what do you do when you can't figure out the logic of a complex sentence? Or when you can't come up with a word to fill the blank quickly? Do you just give up? No, you go to the backward method, which represents the other half of conquering Sentence Completions. The method covers three common scenarios:

- **Scenario 1.** You can determine the stem type, but you can't come up with words to fill the blanks.
- **Scenario 2.** You've determined the stem type and have supplied words to fill the blanks, but you don't recognize any of the vocabulary in the answer choices.
- **Scenario 3.** You can't determine the stem type or supply words to fill the blanks.

In all the lists that follow, it's assumed that you've already covered up the answer choices and have read the stem.

#### The Backward Method: Scenario in Slow Motion

You can determine the stem type, but you can't come up with words to fill the blanks.

**Step 1: Use positive or negative signs to determine what type of word you'll need.**

**Step 2: Go to the answer choices and assign positive or negative signs to each word.**

**Step 3: Eliminate the choices that don't fit, then select from the rest.**

**Step 4: Plug your choice back into the stem as a check.**

If you can't supply a specific word, you don't need to give up. Knowing whether you need a "positive" or "negative" word provides a less precise but still useful "search image." Look at the following item, which you encountered in a previous section:

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.

Let's say you couldn't come up with a word to fill the blank. Would you need a "positive" or "negative" word here? The concept clearly *loses* power when used too much, so you need a negative word of some kind. Now, look how this helps you when you consider the answer choices:

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

Which of these is negative, in the sense of "lessening?" Judging whether **A** is positive or negative depends on the person doing the judging, so *conservative* isn't a particularly negative word in this context. It's probably not the right answer, so eliminate it. *Militaristic* suffers a bit from **A**'s difficulties, but it's probably negative enough for our purposes. Keep **B**. *Domestic* is certainly not negative. It doesn't seem very positive, either—and words with neutral connotations can be used as a third category in the backward method. But we need a clearly negative word to complete this item. **D** and **E** work. At this point, you've eliminated two options, so you're ahead of the game. You have a 1-in-3 shot at getting a point and a 2-in-3 shot of losing a quarter-point. Those are good odds over several items, so plug each choice into the sentence to see which "sounds" better, and choose that one.

#### Your Ear

A note on using your ear. Your "ear" is the way you use common sense to decipher language. Your ear's reliability depends on how much exposure to Standard Written English you've had. Nevertheless, we've all had *some* exposure and we know that slang is off limits on the SAT. So you can use your ear to hedge your bets.

In fact, "bet-hedging" is what the backward method is all about. Without this method, you have only a small chance (20 percent, actually) of getting a point when you're stuck. The wrong-answer penalty is designed to neutralize *random* guessing only. With the backward method, you raise your chances of getting a point by eliminating answer choices and guessing from what remains. Remember, you should guess whenever you can eliminate even one answer choice with a reasonable degree of confidence.