TRANSLATION & CLUSTER SENTENCES

This, my friends, is the problem:

> *Wanting to pursue the life of the mind since she allowed herself to end her gymnastics career, Chimera, as a result of her childhood dream to get off the mat and read more Plato, which gave her a sense of mental acuity that she had never previously encountered and which she only rediscovered after her second Olympics when she almost missed her balance beam routine by getting so engrossed in The Republic, finally decided it was the right moment to take that next step.*

Just like the paragraph above, the LSAT is hard to read. It's poorly written. And they do this on purpose. They could write the test much more clearly; they choose not to.

Remember all those things your English teachers used to write on your essays? Stuff about awkward word combinations and how you need to get to the point? The writing on the LSAT makes you realize exactly why English teachers make those comments. The purpose of writing is one thing: conveying information to the reader skillfully enough to make it easy for them. This chapter is about sentences that do the opposite: They *try* to make the reading difficult for you. The test writers purposefully write poorly. They purposefully hide their points in difficult language. In doing so, they create monsters called **cluster sentences.**

✱ If you actually read that whole paragraph at the top, congrats! You have the heart of an ox and the spirit of a hummingbird. Most students don't read it fully.

✱ Most LSAT preparation tools don't touch sentence-level comprehension. That's because it's very difficult to fundamentally change how well someone reads in a few short months. However, I'm not going to attempt to make you a better reader in this chapter. I'm going to turn you into a detective by giving you a few tools automatically used by those who decode these sentences intuitively.

The examples in this book are... fantastical. Some might say they're weird, crazy, surreal. And that's on purpose. We're emulating the *structure* of LSAT writing, but the content is a little more likely to keep you awake. You'll see examples about koalas teaching children, pretzels eating people, and building cake towers. Weirdly enough, this is the best way to prepare you for the writing on the LSAT. You need to focus on the structure of the language at first, not worry about boring content. Once you've got the linguistic (and argumentative) structures down, we will add more layers of difficulty, including real LSAT examples. Once we build your foundation, we'll work with real LSAT stimuli exclusively.

Cluster sentences test your ability to read convoluted language. They don't put cluster sentences on the LSAT just to be sadistic. To succeed in law school, you have to be able to decode cluster sentences. But this may not come easily to you right now. That's ok. That doesn't mean you're dumb. It means you're going to have to work to build the skills the LSAT (and the legal profession) want you to have.

The first thing you have to do is stop giving up on sentences you find difficult. You must stop the vicious cycle of zoning out, getting frustrated, blaming the test for being difficult, and never looking at a confusing sentence again because it makes you upset. This cycle is what keeps students from improving their skills. By engaging with the cluster sentence (instead of pretending it doesn't exist), you have a shot at figuring out what it means. This is key. You won't get the question right if you don't know what the stimulus means. The good news: Once you translate a difficult stimulus, the rest of the question will be dramatically easier.

Don't worry. I'm not going to bore you with a ton of formal grammar. You don't need to know all that stuff to understand cluster sentences. In fact, many of those who decode intuitively have forgotten 8th grade English entirely. I skipped middle school English, so I couldn't bore you with it, even if I wanted to. We'll go over as much grammar as you need to figure these sentences out and nothing more.

What Are Sentences Really

If you remember anything from elementary school, you'll probably say a sentence is "a complete thought." This rule falls a bit on the shady side of the truth. Yes, basic sentences represent a complete thought, but, in general, a sentence represents *at least one* complete thought. Cluster sentences usually compress several thoughts into one not-so-neat package, and the reason you're having trouble with them is precisely because they are not conveying *a* complete thought. They're conveying several compressed, contorted thoughts. To understand cluster sentences, you have to break them down, recognizing the many complete thoughts in each sentence. Then, you will see the individual ideas in the sentence, instead of the jumbled mess those ideas create.

SPECIFIERS: WHAT MAKES CLUSTER SENTENCES A CLUSTER

Specifiers are those little words that glue bigger words to explanations. This seems innocuous, right? Who doesn't like things explained to them? The clustering comes in when they've got a thing; they decide to explain it (cool so far), then they explain part of the explanation (ok, maybe fine), then they explain a part of the explanation of the explanation (aghhhhhhhhh). It is this over-explaining that makes cluster sentences difficult to read. By the time you're done reading the explanation of the explanation of the explanation, you forget what the beginning of the sentence was even about. This is called bad writing. As a reader, you are completely within your rights to call the author out for being a bad writer. As an LSAT test taker, you are called to action.

✳ Specifiers here are not referring to the real part of speech.

SPECIFIERS

by	in	on	which	until
since	in addition to	that	for	when
as	because	of	although	while
if	after	around	between	who

✳ This is not a complete list of every specifier that ever specified, but it's enough to give you an idea of the type of words we're looking for.

Let's talk through how a cluster sentence uses specifiers to compress many ideas into one sentence:

> *The box, which was red since it came up on our red-sensor that was developed by Alex and Jordan, who happened to enjoy color spectroscopy, was empty.*

Now, let's make a list of all the ideas in this sentence. To make the list, I'll stop at every comma or specifier and jot down a complete thought from what I've found so far:

First, I see "the box" and then a comma, which cuts into the middle of the complete thought about the box. So I salvage my knowledge of those first two words by jotting down the only complete thought I can get out of the words "the box":

There is a box.

Second, I pass the comma and "which was red." Then I stop at the word "since" because it's a specifier. I want to translate "which was red," so I ask myself, "What's red?" and work backwards to find "the box." Now, I have a complete thought:

The box was red.

Next, I read "since it came up on our red-sensor" and stop when I hit the "that" since I have enough for a complete thought. I have to translate a little, just to remember what the "it" is. Looking back at the sentence, I see that the "it" is the box, so I've got my complete thought:

The box came up on our red-sensor.

Now, I read through "that was developed by Alex and Jordan" and stop both because I hit the comma and because I need to remember what the "that" is. "Red sensor" is right next to "that" in the sentence, so I have the complete thought:

Our red-sensor was developed by Alex and Jordan.

Proceeding past the comma, I read "who happened to enjoy color spectroscopy" and stop at the comma. I look for a person right before the "who" and see Alex and Jordan. So, I have my complete thought:

Alex and Jordan enjoyed color spectroscopy.

Finally, I pass the comma and see "was empty." This is where things get weird. You've got this lonely verb and really no idea what it links to when you read the sentence quickly. I run through a few quick possible combinations, working from what is closest to "was empty." Is color spectroscopy empty? The red-sensor? No, it's the box from all the way back at the beginning of the sentence. How do I know it's the box? Well, it's the only noun in the whole sentence that could realistically be empty, but, beyond that, the commas after "the box" and before "was empty" pair up nicely to show me that everything in between them is optional (more information on how this works soon). If I delete everything between the commas, I end up with a nice and simple complete thought:

The box was empty.

Divorcing the sentence's main noun ("box") from its verb ("was") is a classic cluster sentence trick. In this case, "box" is really far away from "was," which makes this sentence hard to understand. It's super difficult for our brains to remember the noun we read 23 words ago when we've been given a bunch of information since then.

Just to review, let's look at one more example of a sentence with a separated main noun and verb:

> The five-cent **nickel**, which in reality is composed of approximately 75% copper, **came** into circulation in the late 19th century.

Check out that gap between "nickel" (the noun) and "came" (the verb)! The larger the gap, the easier it is to lose track of the sentence. This leads us to our greatest cluster sentence ally, the comma. The easiest way to overcome the difficulty of separated nouns and verbs is with awesome comma tricks.

✱ That's six sentences in one! No wonder this cluster sentence is hard to read. It's compressing a huge amount of information.

✱ A noun is a person, place, or thing. A verb is an action.

Nouns and verbs are the essential building blocks of every sentence.