

**Syntactic Context Cues** are the words surrounding a blank that signal which part of speech belongs there. Every blank has at least one cue nearby — learn to read it **before** choosing a word. Master these 15 cues and fill-in-the-blank becomes a system, not a guess. · Identify the cue → decide the part of speech → then choose your word.

→ NOUN

**a / an / the + \_\_\_**

Article directly before a blank = noun slot.  
Adjective may come between, but the slot is still noun.

*It is a \_\_\_ that funding was cut.*  
→ fact, sign, shame

→ NOUN

**his / her / their / its + \_\_\_**

Possessive pronoun before a blank = noun slot.

*Her \_\_\_ for justice was admirable.*  
→ passion, desire, fight

→ NOUN

**of / in / for / by + \_\_\_**

Preposition before a blank signals a noun phrase is coming.

*The extent of the \_\_\_ shocked everyone.*  
→ damage, loss, crisis

→ NOUN

**this / that / these / those + \_\_\_**

Demonstrative before a blank = noun slot (or noun phrase).

*This \_\_\_ has lasted for decades.*  
→ conflict, tradition, debate

→ NOUN

**\_\_\_ of / \_\_\_ is / \_\_\_ was**

Subject position before a verb = noun slot.  
Nothing precedes it.

*\_\_\_ of the solution was unclear.*  
→ The nature, The validity

→ ADJECTIVE

**feel / seem / appear / remain / become / look / sound / taste + \_\_\_**

Linking verbs take an adjective, never an adverb.  
The blank describes the subject, not the verb.

*The evidence remained \_\_\_.*  
→ inconclusive ✓ inconclusively ✗  
SAT/formal writing: "felt bad" not "felt badly"

→ ADJECTIVE

**a / an / the + \_\_\_ + noun**

Blank between article and noun = adjective acting as modifier.

*A \_\_\_ increase in costs was reported.*  
→ dramatic, sharp, modest

→ ADJECTIVE

**\_\_\_ enough to / too \_\_\_ to**

Fixed structures *too...to* and *...enough to* sandwich an adjective, not an adverb.

*The bridge was \_\_\_ enough to support traffic.*  
→ strong, stable, wide

→ ADVERB

**verb (intransitive) + \_\_\_**

Verb with no object, followed by a blank = adverb slot modifying how the action happens.

*The senator spoke \_\_\_ about the issue.*  
→ candidly, briefly, forcefully

→ ADVERB

**\_\_\_ + adjective**

Blank directly before an adjective (not a noun) = adverb modifying that adjective.

*The results were \_\_\_ significant.*  
→ statistically, surprisingly, deeply

→ ADVERB

**\_\_\_ , subject + verb (sentence opener)**

Blank at the start of a sentence followed by a comma + full clause = adverb (conjunctive or manner).

*\_\_\_, the committee reversed its decision.*  
→ Surprisingly, Ultimately

→ VERB

**to + \_\_\_**

Infinitive marker *to* before a blank = base verb form. No -ing, no -ed.

*The goal is to \_\_\_ the deficit.*  
→ reduce, address, eliminate

→ VERB

**has / have / had + \_\_\_**

Perfect auxiliary before a blank = past participle (-ed / irregular form).

*Scientists have \_\_\_ a new compound.*  
→ discovered, identified, isolated

→ ADJECTIVE

**so \_\_\_ that**

Fixed intensifier structure: *so + adjective + that*.  
The blank is always an adjective.

*The lecture was so \_\_\_ that students leaned in.*  
→ compelling, dense, nuanced

→ PARALLEL STRUCTURE

**both \_\_\_ and \_\_\_**

The blank must match the other item's part of speech exactly. Look at what's already there — the blank mirrors it.

*The policy was both \_\_\_ and controversial.*  
→ innovative (adjective, to match controversial)

SYNTACTIC CONTEXT CUES IN PRACTICE

1 **Read around the blank**  
Find the cue word nearby

2 **Name the slot**  
"This is a noun slot"

3 **Choose your word**  
Now pick from options

4 **Verify the form**  
Does it fit the slot?

Color guide: ■ Blue = Noun ■ Green = Adjective ■ Gold = Adverb ■ Red = Verb ■ Purple = Structure

Syntactic Context Cues — reading grammatical signals around a blank to identify part-of-speech before choosing a word · Free resource by Rachel Writing Lab

More resources

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