Words in Context Questions

Question Stems: **"Which choice completes the text with the most logical and precise word or phrase?" and "As used in the text, what does the word '...' most nearly mean?"**

Every module of the Reading and Writing section opens the same way: with a few short texts, usually a sentence or two long, most of them with a single word or phrase missing and four choices to fill the gap. These are Words in Context questions, and they come in two versions:

- Which choice completes the text with the **most logical and precise word or phrase**? The text has a blank, and you choose what fills it. This is the usual version: 111 of the 119 medium and hard questions in the Question Bank.
- As used in the text, what does the word (or phrase) "..." **most nearly mean**? There is no blank. The question names a word that is underlined in the text, and you choose its meaning there. Only 8 of the 119 take this form, and all 8 come from novels or stories, most of them written long ago.

The College Board files these questions under Craft and Structure. Its Question Bank holds 119 at the medium and hard levels, almost evenly split (58 medium, 61 hard). On the official practice tests, they are the first several questions of every module, usually four to six in a row. That makes them your warm-up, and a good place to bank time: each one is a single short text, and with a method you can answer most of them in under a minute and save your minutes for the longer questions ahead.

Many students treat these as vocabulary questions, and vocabulary does help. Most right answers are academic words (74 of the 119), words like *mitigate*, *corroborate*, and *tenuous*, rather than everyday ones like *reduced* or *created* (37). Truly rare words are rare: only 8 of the 119 right answers are words like *sanguine* or *paucity*, and all 8 are in hard questions. But these are reading questions first. Every text contains a **clue**, words that tell you what the blank must mean, and in nearly every question you could fill the blank with a plain word of your own before you ever see the choices.

What makes the hard ones hard is rarely the word itself. It is where the clue hides and how it works. In 71 of the 119 questions, the clue that decides the answer comes after the blank, and in hard questions it is more often a whole sentence later (14 of 61, against 6 of 58 medium ones). In 24, the blank sits inside a negative, such as *not*, *hardly*, or *by no means*, so the clue has to be flipped. And most questions (84 of 119) have a wrong answer that reads perfectly well around the blank and simply ignores the clue. This chapter shows you how to find the clue, turn it into a prediction, and match the prediction to the right choice.

The 3-Step Strategy for Words in Context Questions

Three steps work for both versions of the question: **find the clue, predict, and match**. After them come eight worked examples. The first seven are fill-in-the-blank questions, each built on a different kind of clue or a different way the clue works, and the last is a most-nearly-mean question from a novel.

Step 1. Read around the blank: find the clue that explains it.

Don't look at the choices yet. Read the whole text, not just the sentence with the blank, and ask one question: **What in the text tells me what this blank must mean?** The answer is the clue. It may be a word, a phrase, or a whole sentence, and it usually comes after the blank (71 of 119), so read to the last word before you decide anything. Names, dates, and numbers are decoration unless they are the clue itself. Ignore the decorations. Find the clue.

Small words and punctuation point to the clue. The colon is the most common pointer: 28 of the 119 texts have one, and in 17 of them, what follows the colon says what the blank means in other words. The other pointers are words like *but*, *however*, *while*, *because*, *since*, and *for example*. Each one tells you how the clue connects to the blank, and the connection tells you what to do with the clue:

Restatement — Another part of the text says the same thing as the blank in other words: after a colon or a dash, in a phrase set off by commas, or in the next sentence. The most common clue by far (46 of 119). The blank means what the clue means.

Contrast — The blank is set against the clue: *although*, *though*, *but*, *while*, *however*, *yet*, *rather than*, *unlike*. 23 of 119. Usually the blank means the opposite of the clue. But check what the contrast word actually sets against what. In Example 7, *but* sets the rejection of a suggestion against the reason the suggestion was made, so the blank, the suggestion itself, is not reversed: it agrees with that reason.

Cause and effect — The blank is a cause or a result of the clue: *because*, *since*, *so*, *thus*, *as a result*, *for this reason*, or a verb like *enable* or *lead to*. 23 of 119. The blank is the cause, the result, or the link between them: whatever makes the chain work.

Example — The text gives examples or evidence of the blank, often after a colon or *for example*. 15 of 119. The blank names what the examples have in common.

Evaluation — The blank judges a claim, a finding, or an achievement: how certain it is, how complete, how new. The clue is the evidence, or the lack of it: *rests on a single sample*, *remains unclear*, *never before*. Only 5 of 119, but 4 of the 5 are hard. The blank is as strong as the evidence.

Continuation — *and*, *also*, *indeed*, *in fact*: the blank agrees with an idea nearby and carries it a step further. Rare (3 of 119). The blank goes the same way as the idea.

The other 4 of the 119, all most-nearly-mean questions, are decided by the scene itself, which comes up at the end of the strategy.

Most texts have a second clue as well: 80 of the 119 do. A colon may point to a restatement that also contains an example, or a contrast may be followed by a result. When the two clues agree, you can be sure of your reading. When only one is obvious, look for a second one before you predict, because the hardest wrong answers fit one clue and break the other.

Before you move on, check one more thing: **Is the blank inside a negative?** *Not*, *no*, *never*, *hardly*, *by no means*, *far from*, *lack of*, *fail to*, *unlikely to*. In 24 of the 119 questions it is, and in those questions the most tempting wrong answer is often the opposite of the right one (11 of the 24): students find the clue, forget the negative, and pick a word that means the clue itself. The fix comes in Step 2.

Step 2. Predict: say the blank in your own words before you look at the choices.

Turn the clue into a prediction: a plain word or a short phrase that would fit the blank. It doesn't have to be elegant, and it doesn't have to be one of the choices: *guess*, *shut to newcomers*, *unimportant*, *not changed by size*. A prediction does two jobs. It keeps you loyal to the text instead of to whichever choice sounds best, and it gives you something definite to hold each choice up against. How you make it depends on the clue:

Copy — for a restatement. *No signature appears on the weathervane atop the old county courthouse, so historians can only _____ about who made it: every maker proposed so far, from a local blacksmith to a Boston metalworker, is a guess rather than a finding.* The clue after the colon says it in other words: every answer is a guess. Prediction: *guess*. Match: *speculate*.

Flip — for a negative. *The town's stamp-collecting club was not _____ to newcomers: a ten-year-old who arrived with a shoebox of old envelopes was sorting stamps beside its most experienced members at her very first meeting.* First say what the clue shows: a newcomer got in at once. The *not* flips it, so the blank means the opposite: *shut* to newcomers. Match: *closed*. Then read it back to check: "not closed to newcomers" means newcomers could get in. Yes.

Double negative — when the right answer is itself a word of smallness or lack (*minor*, *negligible*, *unfounded*) inside a negative, so the two negatives make a positive. *The volunteers' part in restoring the old carousel was by no means _____: without the hundreds of hours they spent sanding and repainting its wooden horses, the work could never have been finished.* The clue is worded negatively too (*without* them, *never* finished), so first say it plainly: their part was essential. Then flip for *by no means*: the blank must mean the opposite of essential, *unimportant*. Match: *minor* or *negligible*. Read it back: "by no means negligible," two negatives that add up to *important*, just what the clue says.

Reverse — for a contrast. *Prices at the car wash on Elm Street change with the day of the week, yet they are _____ the size of the vehicle. A pickup truck costs exactly what a small sedan does. Yet* sets the blank against *change with*, and the next sentence confirms it. Prediction: *not changed by*. Match: *unaffected by* or *independent of*.

Sum up — for examples. Name the one thing all the examples share, and make sure the word fits every one of them (Example 5).

Complete the link — for cause and effect. Ask what the blank would have to do to make the result happen (Example 4).

Grade the evidence — for evaluation. Strong evidence earns a firm word, and thin or unfinished evidence a cautious one (Example 6).

Predict two more things while you are at it. First, **the charge**: is the blank positive or negative, praise or criticism, more or less? Even when no word comes to mind, a charge such as *something bad about the plan* is often enough to rule out two choices. Second, **the shape**: does the blank need to connect to the words after it? In 26 of the 119 questions, the right answer is a phrase, like *confined to* or *independent of*, and the small word at the end matters as much as the big one.

Step 3. Match: pick the choice closest to your prediction, then test it.

Now read the choices and pick the one closest to your prediction. Then put it back in the blank and reread the whole text, clue and all. The question asks for the most **logical and precise** word. *Logical* means it agrees with the clue. *Precise* means it says exactly that, at the right strength and in the right sense, and fits the words around it. A choice that is close but not exact is wrong.

Wrong answers fail in a handful of familiar ways. Learn their names, and you'll spot them faster:

Opposite — the reverse of what the clue requires: *sped up* for *slowed*, *praise* for *doubt*. The most dangerous trap: it is the most tempting wrong answer in 34 of the 119 questions, and in 11 of the 24 with a negative. If the word you're choosing means the clue itself, check whether a negative around the blank, or a contrast word, sets the blank against the clue. If so, you need the reverse; if not, a word that means the clue is exactly what you want.

Fits the blank only — a word that makes sense with the words right around the blank but ignores the clue, wherever the clue is: in another sentence, or later in the same one. The most common wrong answer by far (124 of the 357 wrong choices in the Question Bank), and the reason Step 1 says to read the whole text.

Topic word — a word that goes with the subject, or echoes a word in the text, but doesn't do what the clue asks: a word about sound in a sentence about heat, a word about money in a text that mentions merchants.

Half fit — a word that fits one clue, or part of one, and breaks the rest. Common wherever a text has two clues or a list of examples, so test every choice against all of it.

Wrong strength — the right direction with the wrong force: *hostile* for *skeptical*, *false* for *unproven*.

Imprecise usage — the right idea in a word that doesn't fit the words around it: it takes the wrong small word after it, or the wrong kind of subject or object. A price can be *high*, but only the thing you buy can be *expensive*. 56 of the 357 wrong choices.

Wrong sense — in most-nearly-mean questions, a real meaning of the word, just not the one it has here (see below).

What if you don't know one of the words in the choices? Don't let it scare you away from that choice, or tempt you toward it. Test the words you do know. If three of them are clearly wrong, the unfamiliar one is right; if one familiar word matches your prediction exactly, take it. Word parts can help too: *impenetrable* is *im-* (not) + *penetrable* (able to be entered), and the tables after the worked examples list the prefixes and roots you'll meet most. And remember that no choice is right because it sounds impressive. In 37 of the 119 questions, the right answer is an everyday word.

The Other Version: "Most Nearly Mean"

Here there is no blank. The question names a word, underlined in the text, almost always a familiar word used in a less familiar sense, and asks what it means there. The three steps still work, with one change at the start: **cover the word**. Treat it as a blank, find the clue (usually the scene itself: what is happening, and who is doing what to whom), and predict a plain word. Then match, and test the match by putting it in place of the word.

The trap to expect is the **wrong sense**: a real meaning of the word, often its most familiar one, that doesn't fit this text. In the 8 Question Bank questions of this kind, 14 of the 24 wrong answers are other meanings of the word. Take a short example: *Her answer did not satisfy the committee, but it served: she had wanted only to delay the vote, and the vote was put off for another month.* Cover *served* and predict: *did the job*, or *was good enough*. The senses of *serve* you know best, *wait on* (as in a restaurant), *hit the first ball* (as in tennis), and *spend time* (as in serving a sentence), are all real, and all wrong here. If the word were used in its usual sense, the question would be too easy to be worth asking.