

Words in context

What are "words in context" questions?

On the Reading and Writing section of your SAT, some questions will ask you to select the most logical and precise word or phrase in a given context.

Words in context questions will look like this:

In recommending Bao Phi's collection *Sông I Sing*, a librarian noted that pieces by the spoken-word poet don't lose their _____ nature when printed: the language has the same pleasant musical quality on the page as it does when performed by Phi.

Which choice completes the text with the most logical and precise word or phrase?

- A. jarring
- B. scholarly
- C. melodic
- D. personal

To help us identify the best word in context, we should focus on two things: **Context** and **Connotation**.

Context refers to the specific scenario we're attempting to match a word or phrase to. To understand the context, we must read the provided text carefully.

Because we need to know the meaning of the word we're looking for, that meaning will be provided a second time within the text. This results in many prompts for words in context questions following a similar pattern of Statement - Restatement. Keep an eye on Transitions, as they will give you a hint of what to look for. The trick then is to match the word we're looking for with the equivalent idea in the other statement.

Continue	Cause-Effect	Contrast	
<i>Adding:</i> Also/ And/ As well/ Likewise <i>Supporting:</i> Indeed/ In fact/ For example When/ Where/ Which/ Who Participle phrase Appositive phrase ; / :- *these explicitly indicate that the omitted word supports or continues a thought developed elsewhere in the sentence/passage. Look for a synonym or near-synonym for the key word or phrase in the sentence	Because/ Given/ As/ Since Accordingly / Consequently/ Hence/ Therefore/ Thus If...then So...that When...then *these explicitly indicate that one thing causes another or logically determines another.	<i>Explicit:</i> But/ Yet Although/ Despite However / Instead of/ Still *these explicitly indicate a contrast between one idea and another. Look for an antonym or near-antonym for the key word or phrase in the sentence.	<i>Implicit:</i> Anomalous/ Ironic/ Surprising/ Unexpected *these content words inherently indicate a contrast. They indicate that something unexpected has occurred.

Connotations are the associations that we have with different words. One common example of connotation is whether a word feels positive or negative. Words can have similar meanings but vastly different connotations. For example, the words "promising" and "ominous" both mean that something is predictive of the future. However, while "promising" has a strongly positive connotation, "ominous" has a strongly negative connotation. Therefore, these words can't logically applied to the same context.

If you're stuck on a words in context question, try focusing on these connotations. Is the sentence positive? Then the word we choose should be positive too!

Let's apply "**Context** and **Connotation**" rule:

Example 1:

The two teams reached an agreement that was _____: they promised to exchange players of comparable talent.

Which choice completes the text with the most logical and precise word or phrase?

- ☒ (A) equitable
- (B) variable
- (C) hypocritical
- (D) inconvenient

The sentence has an **incomplete statement** "*The two teams reached an agreement that was ____*" and a **complete restatement** "*they promised to exchange players of comparable talent.*"

A colon and the explanation/ restatement following that makes us think of *Continue-Support* type of transition.

Third, "*they promised to exchange players of comparable talent*" is a positive idea, so apply "Connotation rule" to eliminate all negative answer choices, such as *hypocritical* and *inconvenient*.

Now, with a narrow choice of 2 words, choose one that is a synonym for "*comparable*". **Equitable is the right choice.**

Example 2:

[Jay Gatsby] was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American—that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This _____ was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness.

Which choice completes the text with the most logical and precise word or phrase?

- A. Characteristic
- B. Standard
- C. Prestige
- D. Accomplishment

The context is positive as is every answer choice in the list, so "Connotation rule" will not apply here.

"This" before the blank is phrased in a way that refers back to something in the previous sentence. In particular, it seems to link to "that resourcefulness of movement...", which the previous sentence works hard to describe. That whole phrase, in turn, is being used to characterize the way he is behaving.

So, "quality" is being used to describe an "attribute" of how Gatsby is behaving, and "**Characteristic**" matches this use.

How to approach "Words in context" questions?

To solve a words in context question, follow these three steps:

Step 1: Summarize the text in your own words

Don't just skim the text. Read it closely, and try to summarize the main idea in your own words. This can be tricky, since an important word is likely missing. If you're struggling to understand the text, try and translate each idea into a simple bullet point.

Remember, words in context prompts tend to follow a similar pattern. They will make a claim, and then they will expand upon or restate that claim in different words.

Step 2: Identify the key word, phrase, or idea

The text provides all the information you need to know. Whatever point the text is making, the correct answer will reinforce that idea. Often, there will be one word or phrase in the text that has nearly the same meaning as the correct answer. Find the right context clues, and the next part should be easy.

Step 3: Select the word that matches

If a choice changes the meaning of the text, or introduces a new idea or perspective, then it's not the most precise word in context. Only one of the choices will match and emphasize the idea being expressed in the text. You can select that choice with confidence!

Tips

Charge it (+/-)

Sometimes connotation alone is enough to answer a words in context question. Is the text expressing something positive? If so, we can eliminate any choices that are too negative or neutral.

Avoid unknowns

On test day, you may encounter some words that you don't know. Many test-takers make the mistake of selecting words that they don't know in the choices instead of ones they know better and "feel right". These students think the words they know better must be "traps", because they might "seem too easy". This strategy can often backfire.

To raise your chances of getting words in context questions correct, try this instead:

- a) Eliminate what you can from the words you do know
- b) Select an option from what remains.

Note: The only time you should select a word you don't know is if you can confidently eliminate all of the other choices.