Reading Comprehension: vocabulary in context

A vocabulary-in-context question asks what a word means AS THE PASSAGE USES...



Lesson grev.rc.R5

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The idea

A vocabulary-in-context question asks what a word means AS THE PASSAGE USES IT, not what it most often means or what it means in isolation. Many GRE-level words carry several established senses; the context selects one.

Which of the word's several senses does THIS sentence require — what nearby words pin it down?

Predict a plain substitute from the context before reading the options, then test each option by dropping it into the sentence.

Watch every step

The marchers set out briskly, but by the twentieth mile their pace began to flag. Feet dragged, talk died away, and the bright resolve of the morning gave way to a grim, plodding effort. Even the hardiest felt their energy ebbing, and the final miles were covered on will alone, long after enthusiasm had drained from the column.

As used in the passage, "flag" most nearly means

A. to mark or single out for attention ✗ *wrong-dictionary-sense*

B. to weaken and lose vigor

C. to hail or signal by waving ✗ *related-but-wrong*

D. to grow stronger; surge ✗ *opposite-sense*

E. a cloth banner serving as an emblem ✗ *too-common-sense*

Why **B** — "to weaken and lose vigor." Choose the option whose meaning the surrounding sentence actually licenses.

Now a harder one

Stranded by the blizzard, the climbers husbanded their remaining fuel and food with great care. Each candle was lit only when strictly needed, each ration split to stretch across the days they might still be trapped. By spending their scant supplies as slowly as survival allowed, they made three days' provisions last a week, until the rescue party at last broke through.

As used in the passage, "husbanded" most nearly means

A. to till or cultivate (land) ✗ *wrong-dictionary-sense*

B. to breed and raise livestock ✗ *related-but-wrong*

C. to squander or use up recklessly ✗ *opposite-sense*

✓ **D.** to use sparingly; conserve

E. a woman's marriage partner ✗ *too-common-sense*

Why D — "to use sparingly; conserve." Choose the option whose meaning the surrounding sentence actually licenses.

The method, in one line

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Predict a plain substitute from the context before reading the options, then test each option by dropping it into the sentence.

Does my choice fit when substituted? Have I rejected the merely common sense, the opposite sense, the other-dictionary sense, and the topically related near-miss?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

wrong-dictionary-sense
A genuine, established meaning of the word that does not fit the sentence's context.

opposite-sense
A meaning opposite to the one the context requires.

Name the trap before you pick — most wrong answers are one of these two.

Try it, then watch the walk-through

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