Vocabulary in context: buoyancy versus despondency

A vocabulary-in-context question is answered by the sentence, not by a memorized...



The idea

A vocabulary-in-context question is answered by the sentence, not by a memorized gloss. The sentence almost always plants a clue — a defining phrase, an example, a contrast, or a consequence — that pins down which meaning the writer intends.

What clue in the sentence fixes the intended meaning of the word, and what plain paraphrase does that clue predict?

Predict a paraphrase from the clue before reading the options. Then match, discarding opposites, wrong-nuance near-synonyms, wrong dictionary senses, and sound-alikes.

Watch every step

The comedian's timing set off waves of mirth, the whole hall shaking with helpless laughter.

As used in the sentence, 'mirth' most nearly means

A. grim solemnity ✗ *opposite-meaning*

B. merry laughter

C. mild amusement ✗ *near-synonym-wrong-nuance*

D. quiet contentment ✗ *wrong-dictionary-sense*

E. the warmth of a fireside ✗ *sound-alike-or-association*

Why **B** — "merry laughter." Choose the option closest to your predicted paraphrase.

Now a harder one

The dour headmaster met every joke with a stony frown, and his forbidding severity silenced the room.

As used in the sentence, 'dour' most nearly means

- **A.** stern and gloomy
- **B.** warm and jovial ✗ *opposite-meaning*
- **C.** quietly shy ✗ *near-synonym-wrong-nuance*
- **D.** hard, unyielding, or barren ✗ *wrong-dictionary-sense*
- **E.** sour in taste ✗ *sound-alike-or-association*

Why **A** — "stern and gloomy." Choose the option closest to your predicted paraphrase.

The method, in one line

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Predict a paraphrase from the clue before reading the options. Then match, discarding opposites, wrong-nuance near-synonyms, wrong dictionary senses, and sound-alikes.

Could my choice replace the word and preserve the sentence's logic? Have I resisted the opposite, the almost-right synonym, and the alternate sense the context rules out?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

⚠ opposite-meaning
Selects a meaning roughly opposite to the one the clue requires.

⚠ near-synonym-wrong-nuance
Selects a meaning in the right general family but with the wrong precise nuance for this sentence.

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

Try it, then watch the walk-through

Explore this live

Watch the walk-through