Vocabulary in context: probity vs. venality

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



Lesson `grev.vocab.V19`

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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

Behind the firm's polished image lay a sordid history of kickbacks, cover-ups, and betrayed employees.

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

A. clean and honorable ✗ *opposite-meaning*

B. morally squalid; base

C. merely disorganized ✗ *near-synonym-wrong-nuance*

D. physically dirty and grimy ✗ *wrong-dictionary-sense*

E. sad and mournful ✗ *sound-alike-or-association*

Why B — "morally squalid; base." Choose the option closest to your predicted paraphrase.

Now a harder one

The venal clerk would alter any record for the right sum, and word spread that no document in his office was truly safe.

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

A. beyond the reach of bribes ✗ *opposite-meaning*

B. simply money-hungry ✗ *near-synonym-wrong-nuance*

C. open to bribery; corruptible

D. easily pardoned or minor ✗ *wrong-dictionary-sense*

E. relating to the veins ✗ *sound-alike-or-association*

Why C — "open to bribery; corruptible." Choose the option closest to your predicted paraphrase.

The method, in one line

Vocabulary in context: probity vs. venality

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

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