Vocabulary in context: connotation and register

Knowing what a word denotes is not enough on the GRE; you must also hear. . .



Lesson `grev.vocab.V2`

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The idea

Knowing what a word denotes is not enough on the GRE; you must also hear its charge and its register. Charge is the word's built-in attitude — whether it praises, condemns, or stays neutral — and many hard words carry an evaluation that a bare definition hides.

Is the word, as used here, positive, negative, neutral, or mixed in charge — and is its register formal, plain, technical, or colloquial?

Read the surrounding details as a verdict that sets the charge; then fix the strength and the level of diction the writer intends.

Watch every step

The child's winsome grin disarmed even the sternest strangers, drawing smiles from a bus full of tired commuters.

As used in the sentence, 'winsome' conveys which of the following?

A. faint approval that the grin was mildly pleasant and unremarkable ✗ *intensity-or-balance-misjudged*

B. a negative note of manipulative, calculated charm ✗ *charge-flip*

C. a neutral statement that the child smiled ✗ *charge-neutralized*

D. a positive judgment: charming and engagingly appealing

E. a stiff, clinical term with no warmth ✗ *register-misjudged*

Why D — "a positive judgment: charming and engagingly appealing." Choose the option whose charge, intensity, and register all match the sentence.

Now a harder one

The old diplomat's sagacious counsel had steered three governments clear of war, each warning proved right by the events that followed.

As used in the sentence, 'sagacious' conveys which of the following?

A. faint praise that his advice was mildly sensible ✗ *intensity-or-balance-misjudged*

B. a positive, somewhat formal word meaning deeply wise and discerning in judgment

C. a negative note of cunning, manipulative scheming ✗ *charge-flip*

D. a neutral statement that he gave advice ✗ *charge-neutralized*

E. a casual, slangy word for being 'smart' ✗ *register-misjudged*

Why B — "a positive, somewhat formal word meaning deeply wise and. . . ." Choose the option whose charge, intensity, and register all match the sentence.

The method, in one line

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Read the surrounding details as a verdict that sets the charge;
then fix the strength and the level of diction the writer intends.

Did I keep the charge on the right side, resist neutralizing a loaded word, judge the register correctly, and preserve a mixed charge rather than flattening it?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

charge-flip
Reads the word as carrying the opposite charge — positive for negative, or negative for positive.

charge-neutralized
Treats a clearly evaluative word as neutral or purely descriptive, draining its built-in attitude.

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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