Vocabulary in context: precision among near-synonyms

GRE vocabulary questions punish approximate knowledge

Lesson grev.vocab.V3

The idea

GRE vocabulary questions punish approximate knowledge. Here every option is a NEAR-synonym of the answer; only one matches the exact nuance the sentence builds.

What exact shade of meaning does the sentence build—deliberate or accidental, willful or impersonal, a state or an action, praising or faulting?

Predict the precise nuance in your own words before reading the options. Then, because all five are near-synonyms, eliminate by nuance, sense, register, and direction rather than by rough meaning.

Watch every step

A single unproven rumor was enough to ___ a reputation she had spent decades building.

As used in the sentence, the best choice most nearly means

- **A.** sully
- **B.** disfigure ✗ *wrong-sense word*
- **C.** impair ✗ *near-synonym, imprecise nuance*
- **D.** contaminate ✗ *near-synonym, imprecise nuance*
- **E.** burnish ✗ *antonym/contradicts context*

Why **A** — “sully.” Select the one word whose nuance matches the prediction exactly.

Now a harder one

Reinforcements arrived in time to ___ the uprising before it could spread beyond the capital.

As used in the sentence, the best choice most nearly means

- **A.** quell
- **B.** vanquish ✗ *near-synonym, imprecise nuance*
- **C.** subjugate ✗ *near-synonym, imprecise nuance*
- **D.** subordinate ✗ *wrong-sense word*
- **E.** incite ✗ *antonym/contradicts context*

Why **A** — "quell." Select the one word whose nuance matches the prediction exactly.

The method, in one line

Vocabulary in context: precision among near-synonyms

Predict the precise nuance in your own words before reading the options. Then, because all five are near-synonyms, eliminate by nuance, sense, register, and direction rather than by rough meaning.

Would a second option 'sort of' work? If so, name what in the sentence rules it out. The GRE answer is the one you can defend against its nearest rival.

Watch out: two traps to dodge

⚠ near-synonym, imprecise nuance

Selects a true synonym whose nuance (willfulness, scope, or emphasis) misfits the context.

⚠ wrong-sense word

Selects a word whose alternate sense (a state vs. an action, literal vs. figurative) does not match what the context requires.

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