

CHAPTER 4

Words in Context

You'll see numerous questions on the SAT about the meaning and use of words and phrases. These questions will always refer to multiparagraph passages, and the words and phrases focused on will be ones that are important to readings in many subject areas. Having questions about words and phrases embedded in extended passages means that there'll be context clues to draw on as you determine meaning, analyze rhetorical impact, and make choices about which word or phrase to use in a particular writing situation. It also means that the meaning and use of these words and phrases will be shaped, often in complex or subtle ways, by context. Moreover, the test's emphasis on words and phrases used fairly frequently means that you'll be able to devote your attention to acquiring vocabulary knowledge that's likely to be of use to you throughout college, career, and life instead of focusing on words and phrases that you're unlikely to encounter again after taking the test.

Let's consider the kinds of words and phrases that are tested on the SAT and then briefly examine the sorts of Words in Context questions you'll find on the test.

High-Utility Academic Words and Phrases

The SAT focuses on “high-utility academic words and phrases,” the type of vocabulary that you can find in challenging readings across a wide range of subjects. You may, for example, come across the word “restrain”—one of these high-utility academic words—in a number of different types of texts. You could find it in a novel in which the main character is trying to restrain, or hold in check, his emotions; you could also find it in a social studies text discussing how embargoes can be used to restrain, or limit, trade among nations. Note, too, how the precise meaning of “restrain” varies to some extent based on the context in which the word appears.



REMEMBER

The SAT won't test you on the meaning of obscure, seldom-used words and phrases presented with little context. Rather, you'll be tested on words and phrases that often appear in college courses and beyond and that are grounded in rich contexts.



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Since the SAT focuses on academic words and phrases commonly encountered in challenging texts, a good way to prepare is to read texts across a range of subjects and types. As you encounter unfamiliar words or phrases (or familiar words and phrases used in unfamiliar ways), practice using context clues to determine their meaning. When there's not enough context, try a different approach, such as checking a dictionary.



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We do *not* recommend practicing by poring over long lists of obscure, esoteric vocabulary.

As the above example suggests, high-utility academic words and phrases are different from other kinds of vocabulary you know and will encounter in school, work, and life. High-utility academic words and phrases aren't generally part of conversational language, so if you know the common meanings of a word such as "restrain," it's probably because you either learned it by reading a lot or from vocabulary lessons in school. High-utility academic words and phrases aren't technical terms, either. "Atomic mass," "ductile," and "isotope" may sound like they'd fit into the category of high-utility academic words and phrases, but what makes them different is that they're generally only used in particular types of texts and conversations—in this case, readings about and discussions of science. This doesn't mean that these terms aren't worth knowing—far from it—but it does mean that, in some sense, their value is more limited than that of words and phrases that you might encounter in many different sorts of texts and discussions. Since the SAT can't (and shouldn't) try to test everything, the College Board has chosen to focus on high-utility academic words and phrases because of their great power in unlocking the meaning of the complex texts that you're likely to encounter in high school, postsecondary courses, and life.

Words in Context Questions

Questions in the Words in Context category ask you to consider both the meaning and role of words and phrases as they're used in particular passages. You'll also be asked to think about how to make language use more effective. These questions focus on the following skills:

- Interpreting words and phrases in context (Reading Test)
- Analyzing word choice rhetorically (Reading Test)
- Making effective use of language (Writing and Language Test)

Ten Reading Test questions—generally two per passage; a mix of questions about word/phrase meanings and rhetorical word choice—contribute to the Words in Context subscore. Eight Writing and Language Test questions—again, generally two per passage—also contribute to the subscore; these eight questions will cover a range of skills, from making text more precise or concise to maintaining style and tone to combining sentences or parts of sentences in order to improve expression or to accomplish a specified rhetorical goal.

Let's consider each of these three main types more fully.

Interpreting Words and Phrases in Context (Reading Test)

A number of questions on the Reading Test will require you to figure out the precise meaning of a given word or phrase based on how it's used in a particular passage. "Precise" is an important qualifier here, as you'll generally be asked to pick the most appropriate meaning of a word or phrase with more than one dictionary definition. The extended context—up to and including an entire passage—gives you more clues to meaning, but you'll have to make good use of those clues to decide on which of the offered meanings makes the most sense in a given passage.

Here's an example: Think about the word "intense," which is a pretty good representative of high-utility academic words and phrases. Maybe you associate this word with emotion or attitude, as in "He's an intense person," or perhaps with determination, as in "She put forth intense effort in order to do well on the quiz." However, neither of these quite matches how "intense" is used in the following excerpt from a longer passage.

[. . .] The coming decades will likely see more intense clustering of jobs, innovation, and productivity in a smaller number of bigger cities and city-regions. Some regions could end up bloated beyond the capacity of their infrastructure, while others struggle, their promise stymied by inadequate human or other resources.

Adapted from Richard Florida, *The Great Reset*. ©2010 by Richard Florida.

In this case, "intense" is more about degree: the clustering of jobs, innovation, and productivity is, according to the author, likely to be denser, or more concentrated in fewer large cities and city-regions, in the coming decades. While prior knowledge of what "intense" often means could be useful here, you'd also have to read and interpret the context in order to determine exactly how the word is being used in this case.

Analyzing Word Choice Rhetorically (Reading Test)

Other Words in Context questions on the Reading Test may ask you to figure out how the author's choice of a particular word, phrase, or pattern of words or phrases influences the meaning, tone, or style of a passage. Sometimes these questions deal with the connotations, or associations, that certain words and phrases evoke. Consider how you (or an author) might describe someone who wasn't accompanied by other people. Saying that person was "alone" is more or less just pointing out a fact. To say instead that that person was "solitary" offers a stronger sense of isolation. To instead call that person "forlorn" or even "abandoned" goes yet a step further in casting the person's separateness in a particular, negative way. Deciding which word or



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Often, Reading Test answer choices will each contain one of several possible real-world meanings of the tested word or phrase. Make use of the context clues in the passage to hone in on the precise meaning of the word or phrase as it's used in the passage.



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A good strategy here is to use context clues in the paragraph to come up with a word that could replace "intense" while maintaining the intended meaning of the sentence.

phrase in a given context offers just the right flavor is something that good authors do all the time; recognizing the effects of word choice on the audience is something, in turn, that good readers must be able to do.



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Taking context into consideration is critical when answering questions about the effective use of language. You may, for instance, need to consider the overall tone or style of the passage or the writer's purpose when choosing your answer.

Making Effective Use of Language **(Writing and Language Test)**

While the Reading Test asks you to interpret how authors use words and phrases, the Writing and Language Test calls on you to make those kinds of decisions yourself as you revise passages. Questions about effective language use are varied. Some questions may present you with language that's wordy or redundant, and you'll have to choose a more concise way of conveying the same idea without changing the meaning. Other questions may ask you to choose the most precise way to say something or the most appropriate way to express an idea in a given context. Other questions may have you pick out the word or phrase that does the best job of maintaining the style or tone of the passage, or of continuing a particular linguistic pattern, such as repetition for emphasis or cohesion. In these cases, you may have to replace informal language with a more formal expression (or vice versa, depending on the style and tone of the overall passage) or decide which option most effectively maintains a pattern. Still other questions may require you to combine whole sentences or parts of different sentences to make choppy or repetitive sentences flow more smoothly or to accomplish some other goal (such as placing emphasis on an action rather than on the person performing the action).

It's worth noting here that these language use questions aren't directly about grammar, usage, or mechanics. Instead, these questions try to get you to think about how language should be used to accomplish particular writerly aims, such as being clearer, more precise, or more economical.

Chapter 4 Recap

The Words in Context subscore on the SAT is based on questions from both the Reading Test and the Writing and Language Test. These questions are intended to see whether you can determine word and phrase meanings in context and understand how authors use words and phrases to achieve specific purposes.

There are two types of questions on the **Reading Test** that address words in context.

1. **Interpreting words and phrases in context:** You'll be asked to decide on the precise meaning of particular words and phrases as they're used in context. This will typically involve considering various real-world meanings of words and phrases and picking the



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Since the words and phrases you'll be tested on are set within extended contexts, you'll have clues to help you determine the correct meaning. Don't be discouraged if you're unfamiliar with some of the tested words or phrases.

one that most closely matches how the word or phrase is used in the passage. These sorts of questions accompany most passages on the test.

- 2. Analyzing word choice rhetorically:** You'll be asked to think about how an author's choice of words and phrases helps shape meaning, tone, and style. These sorts of questions accompany select passages on the test.

You'll find a single main type of question (and several subtypes) on the **Writing and Language Test** that addresses words in context. In questions about effective language use, you'll be asked to revise passages to improve the precision and concision of expression; ensure that style and tone are appropriate; and combine sentences or parts of sentences to enhance flow or to achieve some other purpose (such as emphasis). These sorts of questions accompany every passage on the test.

While the specific format of Words in Context questions varies within and between the Reading Test and the Writing and Language Test, all of the questions ask you to consider the same kinds of choices about language that skilled authors routinely make. As you approach each question, you'll want to examine the nuances of word and phrase meanings as well as the impact that particular words, phrases, and language patterns are likely to have on the reader.



REMEMBER

Analyzing word choice is also an integral part of your task on the Essay.

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