

## Chapter 7

# Words in Context

### Relevant Words in Context

You may have already seen references in other parts of this guide to the concept of relevant words and phrases in context. This concept reflects a big shift for the SAT. In the past, the SAT typically tested vocabulary by using questions that offered very little context (often just a sentence or two) and sometimes assessed the meaning of words and phrases that are somewhat obscure and unlikely to be encountered by students in their reading or classroom discussions. In the redesigned SAT, you'll still see a number of questions about the meaning and use of words and phrases, but these questions will all be embedded in multiparagraph passages, and the words and phrases focused on will be ones that are important to readings in many subject areas.

These changes have important implications for how you prepare for the redesigned SAT. Having questions about words and phrases embedded in extended passages means that there'll be more context clues to draw on to determine meaning and to guide you in making 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 depend more heavily than before on how a given context shapes word choice. The emphasis of the redesigned SAT's vocabulary questions on words and phrases used fairly frequently in challenging readings in a variety of subjects means that you'll be able to devote your attention to acquiring knowledge of words and phrases that are likely to be of use to you throughout your academic career instead of focusing on vocabulary 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 redesigned SAT and then briefly examine the sorts of Words in Context questions you'll find on the test.



#### REMEMBER

The redesigned 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 contextually based words and phrases that often appear in college courses and beyond.

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Since the redesigned 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, practice using context clues to determine their meaning.

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

## High-Utility Academic Words and Phrases

The redesigned SAT focuses on what might be called “high-utility academic words and phrases.” This type of vocabulary is the kind that you can find in a wide range of challenging readings across a 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.)

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 and life. High-utility academic words and phrases aren’t necessarily used frequently in casual conversations, so if you already 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 are also not the same thing as technical terms. Words and phrases such as “atomic mass,” “ductile,” and “isotope” may sound like they’d fit into the category of high-utility academic words and phrases. What makes these latter terms 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, they are less useful to know than words and phrases that can be found in many different types of readings and thoughtful conversations. 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 complex texts that you’re likely to encounter in high school and postsecondary courses.

## Words in Context Questions

Questions in the Words in Context category ask you to consider both the meanings and roles of words and phrases as they are 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 — 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, 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 into a smoother, more effective single sentence.

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 out the most appropriate meaning for a word or phrase with more than one dictionary definition. Remember, we noted earlier that context was more important in vocabulary questions on the redesigned SAT than was previously the case. 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 did some intense studying 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,

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Often, Reading Test answer choices will each contain one of several possible 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 the context clues in the paragraph to come up with a word that could replace "intense" while maintaining the intended meaning of the sentence.

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 particular choice of a word, phrase, or pattern of words or phrases influences the meaning, tone, and 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 phrase in a given context offers just the right flavor is something that good authors do all the time; understanding the effects of such word choice on the audience — how it creates mood or tone or shapes meaning — is something that the Reading Test is likely to require you to do.

### **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 (similar to the Reading Test's questions about analyzing word choice). Still 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 repeating the same words for emphasis. In these cases, you might 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 continues a pattern already established in the passage (such as the way several sentences in this paragraph began with the idea of "questions"). Yet other questions may require you to combine whole sentences or parts of two or more 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).

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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.

It's worth noting here that these language use questions aren't directly about grammar, usage, or mechanics. (Those issues are addressed in other questions on the test.) 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 7 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 determine whether you can figure out word and phrase meanings in context and 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. They are:

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 meanings of words and phrases and picking out the 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 the style and/or tone of the passage 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 good authors routinely make. As you approach each question, you'll want to examine the nuances of word and phrase meanings and connotations as well as the impact that a particular word, phrase, or linguistic pattern is likely to have on the reader.

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



### REMEMBER

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