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Fill-in-the-Blank Mastery: Analyze the Answer Choices

This is a sample from
The PowerScore GRE Verbal Reasoning Bible.

It comes from Chapter 5, which discusses
answer choice traps in Text Completion
and Sentence Equivalence questions.

Double Definition Answers

Many words have more than one definition. Some of these words, called homographs, sound the same for both meanings. The word *bark* is a homograph that can be used to refer to a dog's cry or a tree's covering. Other words, called heteronyms, may be pronounced differently for each meaning. Take the word *tear*: as a noun, a *tear* [teer] may be a drop of saline from your eye, but as a verb, to *tear* [tair] means to rip.

Most words with double definitions have two common meanings, like the examples above. Using the context of a sentence, students are easily able to differentiate between the two meanings when these words are used as answer choices. Test takers may get in trouble, however, when an answer choice has one common definition and another lesser-known meaning.

Double Definitions with Different Parts of Speech

Several times now we have mentioned that all of the answer choices are the same part of speech. We want you to remember this because you may come upon a question in which one of the words does not seem to fit; understanding the format of the question can help you choose the right answer:

Although the commencement speaker had lived an interesting life, her speech was _____, boring the audience and graduates alike.

- | |
|------------------|
| (A) compelling |
| (B) joyous |
| (C) disagreeable |
| (D) pleasant |
| (E) pedestrian |

The first four answer choices are clearly adjectives, descriptive words that modify the word *speech*. But answer choice (E), *pedestrian*, appears to be a noun. After all, a pedestrian is a person who is walking. But how can that be? The *PowerScore GRE Verbal Reasoning Bible* harped again and again that all five answer choices must be the same part of speech!

Most students would prephrase *boring* or *dull*, but still choose (C), *disagreeable*, even though it does not match their prephrase or fit the meaning of the sentence.

Students who have read this book, however, would know that *pedestrian* has to be an adjective. ETS did not make a mistake and use a noun in a list of adjectives! In fact, students who really study this book would know that when a common word is used in an uncommon way, it is likely the correct answer.

CAUTION: GRE TRAP!

When an answer choice appears to be a different part of speech than the other answers, beware of a trap. All answer choices for a particular blank are the same part of speech!

TIPS and TRICKS

When a word commonly associated with one part of speech is used as another part of speech, it is likely the correct answer choice.

The word *pedestrian*, in this case, is an adjective. It means *dull* or *commonplace*.

Note that not all homographs and heteronyms are the right answers; some words have two very common meanings, like both *bark* and *tear*. Only use this tip when the word does not look like it belongs with the other answer choices, as this indicates that the word is being used in an unusual way.

Consider a list of words with both common and uncommon usages:

Word	Common Usage	Uncommon Usage
appropriate	(<i>adj.</i>) suitable	(<i>vb.</i>) to take
champion	(<i>n.</i>) winner	(<i>vb.</i>) to support or defend
compromised	(<i>vb.</i>) to settle by yielding	(<i>adj.</i>) vulnerable; endangered
concert	(<i>n.</i>) a musical show	(<i>vb.</i>) to plan together
consummate	(<i>vb.</i>) to complete	(<i>adj.</i>) perfect
converse	(<i>vb.</i>) to talk	(<i>n.</i>) the opposite
defile	(<i>vb.</i>) to make unclean	(<i>n.</i>) a narrow passage
discriminate	(<i>vb.</i>) to favor based on traits	(<i>adj.</i>) choosy or picky
dispatch	(<i>vb.</i>) to send	(<i>n.</i>) speed
evening	(<i>n.</i>) period before night	(<i>vb.</i>) to make smooth
exact	(<i>adj.</i>) strictly accurate	(<i>vb.</i>) to demand
fawn	(<i>n.</i>) young deer	(<i>vb.</i>) to seek favor by flattery
grave	(<i>n.</i>) burial place	(<i>adj.</i>) serious
incense	(<i>n.</i>) product burnt for odor	(<i>vb.</i>) to make angry
invalid	(<i>adj.</i>) not valid	(<i>n.</i>) a sickly person
lobby	(<i>n.</i>) entryway	(<i>vb.</i>) to influence
lower	(<i>adj.</i>) descended further	(<i>n.</i>) a threatening frown
minute	(<i>n.</i>) 60 seconds	(<i>adj.</i>) very small
pedestrian	(<i>n.</i>) a walking person	(<i>adj.</i>) dull or commonplace
preposition	(<i>n.</i>) part of speech	(<i>vb.</i>) to position before
refuse	(<i>vb.</i>) to decline or deny	(<i>n.</i>) garbage
row	(<i>vb.</i>) to propel a boat	(<i>n.</i>) an argument
supply	(<i>vb.</i>) to provide	(<i>adv.</i>) in a supple way; easily

Most of these words have been used on previous ETS tests in which the uncommon usage was required for solution to a reading question. The words *champion*, *consummate*, *discriminate*, *fawn*, and *pedestrian* are repeat offenders. It would be wise to study them and the others on the list for quick recognition should they appear on your test.

Familiarize yourself with the uncommon usage of these words so they cannot trick you on test day.

Double Definitions with the Same Part of Speech

Some words have two definitions that share the same part of speech. Consider the word *bat*; it can be a noun meaning *a winged mammal* or a noun meaning *a baseball club*. When words like this are used on the GRE, they are usually less obvious than those that function as different parts of speech. Let's study an example:

Despite the queen's public disapproval of imprisonment prior to conviction, she passed a law allowing the constable to _____ any person suspected of treason.

(A) intern
(B) liberate
(C) pardon
(D) accommodate
(E) shun

The U-Turn word *Despite* indicates that even though the queen disapproved of imprisonment prior to conviction, she allowed the constable to imprison people on suspicion alone. Most students will try all five words in the blank, finding none that match the prephrase *imprison*. To *intern* means *to work as an apprentice*; *liberate* and *pardon* both have meanings similar to *free*. And to *accommodate* means *to supply for*. Many of these students will go on to choose (E), *shun*, meaning *to avoid*, since it is the only word with a negative connotation.

If you eliminate all answer choices, do not select a word that you know does not fit in the blank. The word *shun* clearly does not mean the same thing as *imprison*. Instead, go back to each word and think about possible second meanings.

Have you ever seen the word *internment*? It means *imprisonment*. The correct answer is (A), *intern*, which means *to imprison*.

Understanding that words often have other meanings can prevent you from falling into answer choice traps. Remember, the correct answer is a perfect fit, and if your answer choice does not perfectly complete the question stem, return to the answer choices and consider alternate meanings.

TIPS and TRICKS

If you eliminate all answer choices, return to each word and consider alternate meanings.

CAUTION: GRE TRAP!
Don't discount a word because it seems too scientific—it may in fact be the correct answer!

Double Definitions with Science and Medicine Words

The GRE does, on occasion, assess your knowledge of scientific terms. Take the word *buoyant*. As most of us learned in elementary school, it means capable of floating. So if a Fill in the Blank question needed a word describing a floating object, *buoyant* would fit perfectly.

More often than not, though, the GRE uses science and medicine words that have double definitions where the second definition can be applied to unscientific topics. Consider the word *buoyant* in a GRE sentence:

Despite the many hardships she faced during World War II, Julia Child remained _____, inspiring others with her cheerfulness and resilience.

- | |
|-----------------|
| (A) discouraged |
| (B) secluded |
| (C) overbearing |
| (D) buoyant |
| (E) inventive |

In this case, *buoyant* means *cheerful and resilient*, and is thus the correct answer. It is not a difficult leap from the scientific to the unscientific definition; a buoyant item and a buoyant person are both light and difficult to keep down.

When you see a scientific word as an answer choice for an unscientific question stem, be suspicious of the test makers. It is likely the correct answer. Before selecting it, though, can you think of an alternative definition or find a way to apply its scientific meaning to people or situations? Let's try one more:

TIPS and TRICKS

Be suspicious that scientific words are the correct answer when they are answer choices for unscientific sentences.

The documentary showcased the famous football player's _____ rise from the lowly equipment manager to the star quarterback in just six short weeks.

- | |
|----------------|
| (A) gradual |
| (B) spiteful |
| (C) meteoric |
| (D) youthful |
| (E) burdensome |

The science word in the answer choices is *meteoric*. A meteor is a fiery, fast-moving object that enters Earth's atmosphere. So when used to describe a person, *meteoric* means *like a meteor in brilliance or speed*. Do not dismiss a term from science or medicine because it does not seem to fit the context of the sentence; instead, suspect it is the correct answer and try to apply the common definition in an uncommon way.

Here is a list of common science and medicine words with unscientific definitions:

Again, learn the unscientific definitions of these words to prevent any stumbling on test day.

Word	Scientific Definition	Unscientific Definition
buoyant	capable of floating	cheerful and resilient
brackish	containing some salt	distasteful; unpleasant
bromide	a compound made of bromine	an overused saying
callus/callous	a hardened piece of skin	unfeeling; hardened
cerebral	of the cerebrum in the brain	involving intelligence
combustible	capable of catching fire	excitable
congeal	to go from a liquid to a solid	to make permanent
cultivate	to raise crops	to develop or improve
deciduous	shedding leaves yearly	not permanent
glacial	pertaining to a glacier	cold or hostile; very slow
gravity	force of attraction on Earth	seriousness
homogenize	to equally distribute fat in milk	to make similar
membranous	like a membrane	transparent
mercurial	of the metal mercury	lively and changeable
meteoric	pertaining to a meteor	quickly rising; brilliant
morass	a swamp	a troublesome situation
nebulous	of a nebula	hazy or confused
oscillate	to move like a pendulum	to go back and forth on beliefs
ossify	to harden like bone	to become inflexible in habits
polarize	to cause polarity to magnets	to divide into extreme groups
precipitate	to rain, snow, or sleet	to throw down headfirst or to bring about quickly
recessive	pertaining to a weaker gene	tending to go or slant back

Words that are most likely to appear on a GRE include *buoyant*, *callous*, *glacial*, *gravity*, *mercurial*, *meteoric*, *nebulous*, *oscillate*, and *precipitate*.

Double Definitions Problem Set

Each of the sentences or paragraphs below has a word or set of words that has been omitted. From the answer choices, choose the word or set of words that best completes the meaning of the sentence. Answers begin on page 125.

1. Once the disease progressed to the final stages, my mother became an _____, bound to her bed and unable to care for herself.

<input type="radio"/> (A) understudy
<input type="radio"/> (B) emissary
<input type="radio"/> (C) autocrat
<input type="radio"/> (D) insinuator
<input type="radio"/> (E) invalid

2. The restaurant manager warned his waitstaff that he would _____ money from their paychecks to pay for any broken dishes.

<input type="radio"/> (A) revert
<input type="radio"/> (B) recycle
<input type="radio"/> (C) diffuse
<input type="radio"/> (D) squander
<input type="radio"/> (E) appropriate

3. Pundits were doubtful that the two parties would be able to set aside their differences in order to (i) _____ a feasible plan to stop government overspending. Surprisingly, (ii) _____ between the groups was reached mere hours after negotiations began.

Blank (i)

<input type="radio"/> (A) belie
<input type="radio"/> (B) highlight
<input type="radio"/> (C) concert

Blank (ii)

<input type="radio"/> (D) an accord
<input type="radio"/> (E) a dissent
<input type="radio"/> (F) a dalliance

4. The safety of the soldiers and their covert mission was (i) _____ when a traitorous spy (ii) _____ their location to enemy combatants.

Blank (i)

<input type="radio"/> (A) ascertained
<input type="radio"/> (B) compromised
<input type="radio"/> (C) condemned

Blank (ii)

<input type="radio"/> (D) diverted
<input type="radio"/> (E) exposed
<input type="radio"/> (F) concealed

5. As one who was normally frivolous, Martika did not understand the _____ of her actions until she was sentenced to probation for six months.

<input type="checkbox"/> A severity
<input type="checkbox"/> B ambition
<input type="checkbox"/> C exhilaration
<input type="checkbox"/> D dullness
<input type="checkbox"/> E gravity
<input type="checkbox"/> F deceitfulness

6. The foreign exchange student found his host family both withdrawn and _____; they rarely spoke to him, and when they did, it was with bitter coldness.

<input type="checkbox"/> A amiable
<input type="checkbox"/> B frigid
<input type="checkbox"/> C revolting
<input type="checkbox"/> D glacial
<input type="checkbox"/> E heinous
<input type="checkbox"/> F invasive

7. As the cat fell, it demonstrated its well-known flexibility, _____ twisting in the air and successfully landing on its feet.

<input type="checkbox"/> A lithely
<input type="checkbox"/> B supply
<input type="checkbox"/> C warily
<input type="checkbox"/> D passively
<input type="checkbox"/> E feasibly
<input type="checkbox"/> F modestly

Analyze the Answer Choices Answer Key

Double Definitions Problem Set—Page 110

1. E Possible Prephrases: an extremely sick person, an invalid

While the word *invalid* is often recognized as an adjective meaning *not valid*, in this case it is a noun, as indicated by the four other answer choices that are nouns. An invalid is a sickly person, unable to care for themselves.

Vocabulary:

understudy: a performer who learns another actor's role

emissary: a person sent on a mission to represent the interests of someone else

autocrat: a person who rules with complete power and authority

insinuator: a person who gives hints or suggestions in a sly manner

2. E Possible Prephrases: take, subtract

The most common meaning of *appropriate* is *suitable*, in its adjective form. But based on the other four answer choices, it is clear that *appropriate* is being used as a verb in this sentence. As a verb, *appropriate* means *to take, often illegally or for one's own use*.

Vocabulary:

revert: to return to former conditions

diffuse: to spread

squander: to waste

3. C and D Possible Prephrases: (i) agree on, plan (ii) an agreement, a compromise

The most common definition of *concert* is the noun meaning *musical show*. But as a verb, it means *to plan together or to arrange by agreement*.

Vocabulary:

belie: to misrepresent

dissent: disagreement

accord: agreement

dalliance: the deliberate act of delaying

4. B and E Possible Prephrases: (i) jeopardized, in danger, risked (ii) gave, told, revealed

While *compromised* as a verb most often means *came to an agreement through concessions*, it can also mean *jeopardized* or *endangered*.

Vocabulary:

ascertained: made certain

condemned: to express strong disapproval of

diverted: to turn from a course

5. A and E Possible Prephrases: seriousness, consequences

Because this is a Contrast Question Stem, it helps to know the definition of *frivolous*, since the blank has the opposite meaning. *Frivolous* means *having a lack of seriousness*, so the blank means *seriousness*. While *gravity* is normally a science noun meaning *the force of attraction on Earth*, it can also be a noun meaning *seriousness*.

Vocabulary:

exhilaration: the feeling of liveliness and cheerfulness

6. B and D Possible Prephrases: cold, unfriendly, icy

The context clue *bitter coldness* indicates that the meaning of the blank is *cold*. The word *glacial* typically refers to an actual glacier, but it also means *cold or hostile*, as does *frigid*.

Vocabulary:

amiable: friendly

heinous: hateful and atrocious

revolting: disgusting; repulsive

invasive: offensive; invading personal space or body

7. A and B Possible Prephrases: flexibly, easily

Most students will see answer choice (B) as a noun or verb meaning *a quantity* or *to provide*. But *supply* is also an adverb meaning *in a flexible way*. The other four adverbs should make you realize that *supply* must also be an adverb, and is likely the answer. Choice (A) also means *in a flexible way*.

Vocabulary:

warily: in a watchful manner

feasibly: capable; likely

modestly: in a humble or unassuming way