

SKILL 10: USE CONTEXT TO DETERMINE MEANINGS OF DIFFICULT WORDS

On both the paper TOEFL test and the computer TOEFL test, you may be asked to determine the meaning of a difficult word in a reading passage, a word that you are not expected to know. In this case, the passage will probably give you a clear indication of what the word means. Look at a multiple-choice example from the paper TOEFL test where the context helps you to understand the meaning of an unknown word.

Example from the Paper TOEFL Test

The passage:

In a government election, the **incumbent** generally has a strong advantage over a newcomer. A person who is already in office and thus has a certain degree of prominence has a better chance of being elected than does someone who is unknown to the electorate. History has shown a strong proclivity in elections at all levels of government to return the incumbent to office.

Line (5)

The question:

An “**incumbent**” in line 1 is most likely

- (A) a special type of election
- (B) a political party
- (C) a beneficial comment
- (D) a current office-holder

This question asks about the meaning of the word *incumbent*. In this question, you are not expected to know the meaning of the word *incumbent*. Instead, you should understand from the context *a person who is already in office* that an *incumbent* is *a current office-holder*. Answer (D) is therefore the best answer to this question.

Now look at a multiple-choice example from the computer TOEFL test where the context helps you to understand the meaning of an unknown word.

Example from the Computer TOEFL Test

Reading


In a government election, the incumbent generally has a strong advantage over a newcomer. A person who is already in office and thus has a certain degree of prominence has a better chance of being elected than does someone who is unknown to the electorate. History has shown a strong proclivity in elections at all levels of government to return the incumbent to office.

Look at the word prominence in the passage. This word is closest in meaning to which of the following?

- Fame
- Timeliness
- Youthfulness
- Novelty

This question asks about the meaning of the word *prominence*. In this question, you are not expected to know the meaning of the word *prominence*. Instead, you should look at the context, which contrasts *a person who...has a certain degree of prominence* with *someone who is unknown*. From this context, you can determine that *prominence* is closest in meaning to *fame*. You should click on the first answer to this question.





Next, look at a click-on example from the computer TOEFL test where the context helps you to understand the meaning of an unknown word.

Example from the Computer TOEFL Test 

Reading






In a government election, the incumbent generally has a strong advantage over a newcomer. A person who is already in office and thus has a certain degree of prominence has a better chance of being elected than does someone who is unknown to the electorate. History has shown a strong **proclivity** in elections at all levels of government to return the incumbent to office.

Click on the word in the passage that is closest in meaning to “**tendency**.”

In this question, you must find a word that is close in meaning to *tendency*. You should try the word *tendency* in place of each of the words in the passage until you find a place where it fits. Since it is meaningful to state that *history has shown a strong tendency...*, you can determine that *proclivity* must be close in meaning to *tendency* even if you do not understand the meaning of *proclivity*. You should click on *proclivity* to answer this question.

The following chart outlines the key information that you should remember about vocabulary questions containing difficult words:

VOCABULARY QUESTIONS CONTAINING DIFFICULT WORDS  		
HOW TO IDENTIFY THE QUESTION	on both paper and computer tests  	What is the meaning of “X” in line Y? The word “X” in line Y is closest in meaning to...
	on computer test only 	Look at the word X in paragraph Y. Click on another word that is close in meaning to X . Click on the word in paragraph Y that is closest in meaning to X .
WHERE TO FIND THE ANSWER	Information to help you understand the meaning of an unknown word can often be found in the context surrounding the unknown word.	
HOW TO ANSWER THE QUESTION	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Find the word in the passage. 2. Read the sentence that contains the word carefully. 3. Look for context clues to help you understand the meaning. 4. Choose the answer that the context indicates. 	

TOEFL EXERCISE 10: Study each of the passages and choose the best answers to the questions that follow.

PASSAGE ONE (Questions 1–4)

The black widow is the most dangerous spider living in the United States. It is most common in the southern parts of the country, but it can be found throughout the country. The black widow got its name because the female has been known to kill the male after mating and, as a result, becomes a widow.

(5) The black widow is rather distinctive in appearance; it has a shiny globular body, the size and shape of a pea, and is marked on its underbelly with a red or yellow spot. The female is considerably more ample than the male, roughly four times larger on the average.

(10) If a human is bitten by a black widow, the spider's poison can cause severe illness and pain. Black widow bites have occasionally proved **deadly**, but it is certainly not the norm for black widow bites to be mortal.

1. In line 3, the word “widow” means
 - (A) a type of poison
 - (B) the dead male spider
 - (C) the human victim of the spider
 - (D) a female whose mate has died
2. Click on the word in paragraph 2 that is closest in meaning to “spherical.”
3. The word “ample” in line 7 indicates that the spider is
 - (A) feminine
 - (B) large
 - (C) dotted with colors
 - (D) normal
4. Look at the word **deadly** in paragraph 3. Click on another word in paragraph 3 that is close in meaning to **deadly**.

PASSAGE TWO (Questions 5–8)

Tornadoes occur throughout the world, but for reasons that scientists are not fully able to discern, the great majority occur in the United States. Approximately 700 tornadoes a year occur within the United States, and this comprises three-quarters of the worldwide total. Most of the U.S. tornadoes take place in the Midwest and in the southern states that border the Gulf of Mexico.

(5) In general, a tornado cuts a path of a few hundred yards and lasts less than an hour; an average tornado might propel itself at a speed of 15 or 20 miles per hour and therefore cover a distance of 20 or so miles. Tornadoes, however, can be much worse than average. The most devastating tornado on record occurred on March 18, 1925, in the states of Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. The path of this tornado was more than 200 miles long and a mile wide. Traveling at an average speed of 60 miles per hour, the winds at the center of the storm swirled around at considerably more than 200 miles per hour. A total of 689 people died, and countless more were injured, at the hands of this killer storm.

5. Click on the word in paragraph 1 that is closest in meaning to “understand.”
6. The word “propel” in line 7 could best be replaced by
 - (A) move
 - (B) develop
 - (C) destroy
 - (D) inhibit

7. Which of the following is closest in meaning to the word “devastating” in line 9?

- (A) Described
- (B) Delicate
- (C) Destructive
- (D) Determined

8. Look at the word **swirled** in paragraph 2. This word is closest in meaning to

- decreased
- rose
- settled
- circled

SKILL 11: USE CONTEXT TO DETERMINE MEANINGS OF SIMPLE WORDS

On both the paper TOEFL test and the computer TOEFL test, you may be asked to determine the meaning of a simple word in a reading passage, a word that you see often in everyday English. In this type of question, you should *not* give the normal, everyday meaning of the word; instead, a secondary meaning of the word is being tested, so you must determine the meaning of the word in this situation. Look at a multiple-choice example from the paper TOEFL test where a secondary meaning is the best answer to the question.

Example from the Paper TOEFL Test

The passage:

Faced with serious threats to its future, the company is taking steps to improve its outlook. The company has brought in a new crop of trainees to staff some of its empty positions.

Line In addition, the company has created a new committee to
 (5) research various proposals and has appointed a key member of its management team to chair the committee.

The question:

The word “**steps**” in line 1 could best be replaced by

- (A) stairs
- (B) walks
- (C) actions
- (D) footprints

In this question, you are asked to choose a word that could replace *steps*. You should understand that *steps* is a normal, everyday word that is not being used in its normal, everyday way. Because the primary meaning of *steps* is *stairs*, this answer is not the correct answer. To answer this type of question, you must see which answer best fits into the context in the passage. You cannot say that *a company is taking stairs*, or *walks*, or *footprints*, but you can say that *a company is taking actions*. Answer (C) is therefore the best answer to this question.