

• Reading Comprehension 5 Level 12

Directions: Read the passage. Then answer the questions below.

It is not uncommon for close synonyms to be understood to share the same meaning. The difference between words like "hard" and "difficult", for example, goes tragically unnoticed. One may employ one or the other with complete indifference, postulating no discrepancy between them. In general this is well and good; most people lack the **scrupulous pedanticness** to quibble over such trifles. Nevertheless, for those of us with ample compulsiveness (and time), it is of significant value to comprehend such nuances.

Take for example the following sentences: 1) The test was hard. 2) The test was difficult. Is the difference between these synonyms readily apparent? Is there a noticeable difference between them at all? Indeed, these questions are valid and warrant answer. For, what would be the point to having multiple words with the exact same meaning? No, that would be **superfluous**; the English language being far too economical. While many close synonyms share similar, if not the same, dictionary definitions, the feeling, or *mood*, they convey is utterly singular. Although a dictionary can provide information about word meanings, pronunciations, etymologies, inflected forms, derived forms, et cetera, it cannot communicate how it *feels* to use a word.

So, if there is indeed a difference between words like "hard" and "difficult", what is it? To begin, "hard" is pragmatic and realistic, firmly grounded in reality. It is a **utilitarian** word that gets the job done and doesn't apologize for its brusque, uncouth nature. On the other hand, "difficult" is eloquent and refined. It is civilized, willing to expend the effort necessary to appear urbane. Why, the mere difference in sonic quality between them is striking enough. "Hard" makes a quick, unassuming sound, having but a single syllable (voiced under certain inflections, it can even come across as harsh), while "difficult" is more lengthy and melodic, its number of syllables totaling three times that of its counterpart. Furthermore, "hard" is more likely to be used in casual, informal circumstances, or to communicate an idea "on the go" or simply to "get it out" as the sayings go. It is used without pretense, and does not maintain a feeling of being overly concerned. In terms of daily usage, "hard" may be employed by an exhausted brick mason when posed with the question, "How was your day?" Conversely, "difficult" may be used by a military general upon explaining to his or her superior the progression of a particularly taxing campaign.

Similar to "hard" and "difficult", the words "weird" and "strange" too are close synonyms, and may seemingly be used interchangeably. Take for instance the following sentences: 1) Sea monkeys are weird. 2) Sea monkeys are strange. Contrary to popular belief, these sentences are not **tautologous**. So how do they differ? Their dictionary definitions are nearly identical, so the difference does not lie there. Rather, the difference involves the feeling, or *mood*, that these words convey. Notice that while "weird" and "strange" both have but one syllable, the latter has a remarkably distinguished feel. Similar to "hard", "weird" conveys a more basic, a more *crude*, sentiment. Something "weird" is crass or gross, and is typically undesirable. No one wants to be associated with something "weird". If trying to impress someone, one probably doesn't want to be categorized among the "weird". On the other hand, if something is labeled as "strange", it is not necessarily bad. Rather, something "strange" is simply abnormal, or unusual—a deviation from what is expected. This distinction between "weird" and "strange" is so pronounced that the latter can be used as a **euphemism** for the former in certain situations. For example, notice how a simple substitution is able to make the following sentence less offensive: "Your mother's cookies taste weird" compared to "Your mother's cookies taste strange". In the former sentence, the speaker sounds as though he or she is insulting your mother's cookies, stating

that they taste bad. In the latter sentence, however, the speaker sounds as though the cookies simply taste different, or unusual, compared to what he or she is used to—the difference owing to the innocuous addition of too much flour, perhaps.

Finally, let's look at the synonyms, "happy" and "glad". As in the aforementioned cases, these words seem to have little or no discernible difference between them. Take for example the following sentences: 1) Tommy is happy because he got a new bike. 2) Tommy is glad because he got a new bike.

Most understand these sentences to have the same meaning. And again, upon consulting a dictionary, one will find highly similar, if not the same, definitions. But these definitions lack the feeling, the unique emotional charge that these words convey. The word "happy" conveys a sense of levity, or a carefree attitude. The thought of someone who is "happy" conjures the image of a bright-eyed, ruddy, smiling face. One is "happy" on the morning of his birthday, discovering a new puppy bounding into his bedroom. On the other hand, the word "glad" conveys a sense of relief or contentment. The thought of someone who is "glad" conjures the image of a man standing crossed-armed, nodding gently, a stoic grin crossing his face. One is "glad" when he sees that the child's lost puppy has been found, and was merely frolicking too far from home.

Granted, the notion that close synonyms can be used interchangeably is prevalent among English speakers. And alas, the dictionary—the text purported to be responsible for clarifying such issues—is of little assistance. In the end, it is left to us, the speakers of the language, those actively responsible for maintaining its sustenance and generation, to understand how these words make us feel and what mood we are inclined to attach to them. Using the examples and insights described above, one may come to recognize these subtle, yet crucial, differences.

Questions

- 1) What is the thesis statement in this passage?
 - A. It is not uncommon for close synonyms to be believed to share the same meaning. (paragraph 1)
 - B. However, for those of us with ample compulsiveness (and time), it is of significant value to comprehend such nuances. (paragraph 1)
 - C. While many close synonyms share similar, if not the same, dictionary definitions, the feeling, or *mood*, they convey is utterly singular. (paragraph 2)
 - D. Although a dictionary can provide information about word meanings, pronunciations, etymologies, inflected forms, derived forms, et cetera, it cannot communicate the energy of a word. (paragraph 2)
 - E. In the end, it is left to us, the speakers of the language, those actively responsible for maintaining its sustenance and generation, to understand how these words make us feel and what mood we are inclined to attach to them. (paragraph 6)

- 2) As used in paragraph 1, what is most likely meant by "scrupulous pedanticalness"?
 - A. mild curiosity
 - B. wry skepticism of
 - C. passionate indignation
 - D. stubborn reluctance
 - E. excessive concern

- 3) As used in paragraph 2, which of the following best describes something that is **superfluous**?
 - A. Yoko expects to have six dinner guests, so she sets the table with six places. On the side, however, she keeps another two places just in case her guests bring friends.
 - B. The instructions say to fill the tires with 35-38 pounds per square inch of air, but Michele fills them with 40 pounds per square inch because they are old and tend to leak.
 - C. Manufacture of Model 24A had been scheduled to begin on May 8. However, creditors failed to forward much needed monetary advancements, delaying the start of production until May 10.
 - D. The passing of singer-songwriter Jonathan Orion Davis left thousands, if not millions, in mourning. This was reflected by the astounding number of roses placed on his open coffin: a veritable mountain that had to be relocated because those paying their respects could no longer view the deceased.
 - E. Lavished with critical acclaim, the publication was slated to generate tremendous revenue in sales. Unfortunately, demand had been overestimated, and as a result, ten thousand copies never left store shelves.

- 4) In paragraph 3, the author writes: "To begin, 'hard' is pragmatic and realistic, firmly grounded in reality. It is a utilitarian word that gets the job done and doesn't apologize for its brusque, uncouth nature. On the other hand, 'difficult' is eloquent and refined. It is civilized, willing to expend the effort necessary to appear urbane." Which of the following literary devices is used in this quotation?
- A. onomatopoeia
 - B. hyperbole
 - C. metaphor
 - D. personification
 - E. oxymoron
- 5) Using information in paragraph 3 as a guide, which of the following describes someone who is **utilitarian**?
- A. Without fail, Edgar rises at daybreak, eats two eggs for breakfast, drinks a glass of orange juice, laces up his boots and heads out into the field.
 - B. In hopes of impressing their classmates, most students wear their new winter jackets to the play. Alyosha, however, knows it will be warm in the theater and therefore leaves his jacket at home.
 - C. Nikkos parks his car so that other cars cannot get out. Upon returning to his car, a woman is waiting there on him to move. She looks upset. He tells her it's not his problem, gets in his car and drives off.
 - D. Amy takes time to look nice in the morning. She brushes her hair, puts on light makeup, and picks out the clothes she will wear for the day.
 - E. Jeremy disdains anything artistic. He feels that the appreciation of art is a waste of time, and cannot understand how people spend their days lost in such a fruitless endeavor.
- 6) Using the information in paragraph 4, it can be inferred that which of the following statements contains a **tautology**?
- A. Paige received a free gift for her birthday.
 - B. Science tells us that humans evolved to use their thumbs.
 - C. Computers represent a significant technological advancement.
 - D. Hexagons have six sides.
 - E. Drugs are bad.
- 7) It can be inferred that the author believes there to exist a relationship between the vulgarity of a word and the
- I. number of syllables it has
 - II. way it sounds
 - III. way it is commonly used
- A. I only
 - B. II only
 - C. I and II only
 - D. II and III only
 - E. I, II, and III

- 8) Which of the following sentences from the passage represents a fact, rather than an opinion?
- A. One may employ one or the other with complete indifference, postulating no discrepancy between them.
 - B. Although a dictionary can provide information about word meanings, pronunciations, etymologies, inflected forms, derived forms, et cetera, it cannot communicate how it *feels* to use a word.
 - C. No one wants to be associated with something "weird".
 - D. The thought of someone who is "happy" conjures the image of a bright-eyed, ruddy, smiling face.
 - E. Using the examples and insights described above, one may come to recognize these subtle, yet crucial, differences.
- 9) Which of the following statements best describes the main idea of this passage?
- A. Close synonyms are difficult to comprehend, and are commonly used interchangeably.
 - B. Contrary to popular belief, close synonyms do not share the same meaning.
 - C. The difference between the words "hard" and "difficult" is indiscernible to most.
 - D. Absent a dictionary definition, the difference between close synonyms is difficult to discern.
 - E. Close synonyms can be ascribed their own individual feeling or mood.
- 10) Which of the following sentences from the passage is a fragment?
- A. And in general, this is well and good; most people lack the scrupulous pedanticness to quibble over such trifles.
 - B. Is there a noticeable difference between them at all?
 - C. For, what would be the point to having multiple words with the exact same meaning?
 - D. No, that would be superfluous.
 - E. But not to worry.
- 11) Using information in paragraph 4 as a guide, it can be inferred that which of the following expressions contains a **euphemism**?
- I. The test was impossible. I scored a miserable 26%, far from a passing grade.
 - II. Dan's father passed away last spring. His funeral service was solemn yet beautiful.
 - III. The bride was pretty, I guess. Her dress struck me as a bit too informal.
- A. I only
 - B. II only
 - C. I and II only
 - D. II and III only
 - E. I, II, and III
- 12) With respect to the way in which close synonyms are commonly understood, the author's tone can best be described as
- A. belligerent
 - B. supercilious
 - C. rueful
 - D. conscientious
 - E. blasé

Answers and Explanations

1) **C**

The thesis statement tells the reader what the passage is about. In this passage, the first paragraph tells us that people often think that close synonyms mean the same thing. Paragraph 2 asks whether there are noticeable differences between close synonyms. Then the author answers this question, stating that while the dictionary definitions might be the same, the words actually convey different feelings or moods. The next three paragraphs give examples of synonyms that have the same definition yet convey different moods. Paragraph 6 concludes the passage, reiterating the idea that synonyms do not have the exact same meanings. Viewed in this manner, we see that the author devotes the majority of the passage to three examples of close synonyms that share definitions but express different moods. Also, the author begins and ends the passage with the assertion that close synonyms are not the same but instead convey different moods. We can understand from this that the passage is devoted to convincing the reader that even close synonyms are not the same but instead convey different moods or feelings. This is reflected in choice **(C)**, making it the correct answer. Choice **(A)** provides background information but does not sum up the main idea of the passage, so it is incorrect. The main idea of the passage is that even close synonyms have different meanings. The idea that some people find value in studying these differences is merely a detail, so **(B)** is incorrect. Choice **(D)** is not the best choice because it supports the thesis but is not itself the main idea. Choice **(E)** is incorrect because it is part of the conclusion.

2) **E**

scrupulous (*adjective*): detailed, careful and precise; morally principled

pedantic (*adjective*): overly concerned with book learning, particularly its trivial aspects.

In paragraph 1, we learn that close synonyms are often thought to mean the same thing, even though they have subtle differences. The author writes, "And in general this is well and good; most people lack the scrupulous pedanticness to quibble over such trifles. However, for those of us with ample compulsiveness (and time), it is of significant value to comprehend such nuances." This lets us know that the author thinks that being concerned with the minute differences between close synonyms amounts to quibbling over something insignificant. The author goes on to say that, nevertheless, there is value in understanding these differences for those with who are compelled to do so. Since the author says that these people must have "scrupulous pedanticness" to be concerned about the minute differences between synonyms, we can infer that *scrupulous pedanticness* means being overly concerned with minute details. This makes **(E)** the best choice. *Mild curiosity* is a vague desire to learn something. Since the author has explained that the subtle meanings between close synonyms take a lot of effort to determine, it must take more than mild curiosity to pursue these differences. This means **(A)** is incorrect. *Wry skepticism* is slightly mocking doubt. People who doubt the differences between words don't pursue them. This rules out **(B)**. *Passionate indignation* is a strong feeling of injustice. Whether words have different meanings or not is not a question of fairness. This means **(C)** is incorrect. *Stubborn reluctance* is a firm unwillingness. One would have to be willing to seek out the subtle meanings of the close synonyms, so **(D)** is also incorrect.

3) **E**

superfluous (*adjective*): more than what is needed.

In paragraph 2, the author writes, "For, what would be the point to having multiple words with the exact same meaning? No, that would be superfluous; the English language being far too economical." This means that multiple words that mean the same thing would be superfluous because the English language is efficient. Since something that is efficient uses only what is needed, we can infer from this information that *superfluous* means more than what is needed. Since having ten thousand copies go unused is an example of having more than what is needed, **(E)** is the best choice. Since Yoko's guests might bring friends, her extra places might be indeed be needed. This rules out **(A)**. Since Michelle's tires tend to leak, Michelle needs more air. The air is not extra, so **(B)** is not the best choice. Since the creditors failed to send monetary advancements, there was less than what was needed, not more. This means **(C)** is incorrect. Although there were a lot of roses, there isn't really any particular amount of flowers needed. This means **(D)** is also incorrect.

4) **D**

The words used to describe "hard" and "difficult" in this quotation are typically used to describe people. One can easily imagine a person who is "pragmatic and realistic, firmly grounded in reality." This person "gets the job done and doesn't apologize for [his or her] brusque, uncouth nature." Also, one can easily imagine a person who "is civilized, willing to expend the effort necessary to appear urbane." *Personification* is attaching human attributes to non-human objects. Since the author has described the words as having typically human attributes, the author is using personification. This makes **(D)** correct. *Onomatopoeia* is using a word that approximates the sound of an object or action, such as *pop* or *buzz*. The author does not use words that approximate sounds in the paragraph, so **(A)** is not the best choice. *Hyperbole* is using exaggeration for effect, as when someone says, "I was so embarrassed, I could have died." **(B)** is incorrect because the author does not use exaggeration in paragraph 3. A *metaphor* is a comparison created by using one thing to represent another, as in the sentence, *His face was a neon sign*. The author does not use one thing to represent another in the paragraph, so **(C)** is also incorrect. An *Oxymoron* uses contradictory terms together, as in *jumbo shrimp*. The author doesn't use contradictory terms in the paragraph, so this rules out **(E)**.

5) **B**

utilitarian (*adjective*): practical; designed for usefulness above all other values.

In paragraph 3, the author describes the word "hard" as "a utilitarian word that gets the job done and doesn't apologize for its brusque, uncouth nature." We can infer that the word *utilitarian* describes someone who is strictly practical, someone who values only what is necessary. Since Alyosha will not need his jacket because it will be warm in the theater, he is being practical by leaving it at home. **(B)** is the best answer because Alyosha is utilitarian. Although Edgar is predictable and sticks to routine, choice **(A)** does not indicate that Edgar does only what is necessary, so it is incorrect. Nikkos' behavior is rude, not practical. This makes **(C)** incorrect. We do not know if it is necessary for Amy to look nice, so we do not know if Amy is utilitarian. This rules out **(D)**. While Jeremy hates anything artistic, this does not tell us that Jeremy behaves in a strictly practical way. This means **(E)** is also incorrect.

6) **A**

tautology (*noun*): needless repetition of an idea, especially in words other than those of the immediate context, without imparting additional force or clearness.

In paragraph 4, the author writes, "Take for instance the following sentences: 1) Sea monkeys are weird. 2) Sea monkeys are strange. Contrary to popular belief, these sentences are not tautologous. So how do they differ?" Since the author asks how the sentences differ after telling the reader that they are not tautologous, we can infer that *tautologous* means the same, redundant, or needlessly repetitive. Since gifts are free by definition, we can understand that this statement contains a tautology. Choice **(A)** is correct. Choice **(B)** contains a factual statement that does not contain a tautology, so it is incorrect. Although it may seem as though computers are a significant technological advancement themselves, this description is not part of the definition of a computer. So, this description is not needlessly repetitive. Choice **(C)** is therefore incorrect. The While hexagons do, by definition, have 6 sides, it is not a tautology to say so, it is merely descriptive. A hexagon is not six sides, it is an object that has six sides. This rules out **(D)**. Drugs are stereotypically considered to be bad, but they can also be good, as in medicine. What is more, this statement is subjective, meaning that its truth varies from person to person. For example, a drug addict might think that drugs are actually good. Since the word *drugs* does not necessarily mean bad, there is no redundancy here. This rules out **(E)**.

7) **E**

In paragraph 3, the author writes, "'Hard' makes a quick, unassuming sound, having but a single syllable (voiced under certain inflections, it can even come across as harsh), while 'difficult' is more lengthy and melodic, its number of syllables totaling three times that of its counterpart." This sentence ties the number of syllables to the vulgarity of the word. This supports **option (I)**. The above sentence also makes a connection between the word's vulgarity and the sound of the word. This supports **option (II)**. The author goes on to write, "Furthermore, 'hard' is more likely to be used in casual, informal circumstances, or to communicate an idea 'on the go' or simply to 'get it out' as the sayings go. It is used without pretense, and does not maintain a feeling of being overly concerned. In terms of daily usage, 'hard' may be employed by an exhausted brick mason when posed with the question, 'How was your day?' Conversely, 'difficult' may be used by a military general upon explaining to his or her superior the progression of a particularly taxing campaign." In these statements, the author connects the word's vulgarity with how it is used. This supports **option (III)**. Therefore **(E)** is correct.

8) **B**

A fact is something known to exist or be true because of experience or observation. An opinion is a belief or judgment that rests on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty such as an emotion or personal bias. For example, it is a *fact* that roses are flowers, but an *opinion* that roses smell nice. Of the above choices, only **(B)** conveys information that can be said to be true because of experience or observation. Although a dictionary can provide a range of useful information concerning the facts or origins of a word, this does nothing to communicate how it *feels* to use a word. The only way one can find out how it feels to use a word is to actually use that word in conversation. This is reinforced by the notion that language is a living thing (which can give real time, real life feedback), while a dictionary is merely an artifact, used to provide facts, not feelings, about living things. Although the author states **(A)** as though it were a fact, this is merely a product of a sound, argumentative voice. However, given that this statement is unsupported by experiences or observations (none are listed in the passage), it must be taken as the author's opinion. **(C)** is incorrect because some people might actually want to be associated with something weird; again, the author makes this statement in order to support his or her argument. In **(D)**, the thought of someone who is "happy" conjures up different images for different people, not necessarily the one described by the author. Therefore this choice is incorrect. Using the examples and insights described above, may come to recognize these subtle, yet crucial, differences. But then again, one may not. There is no experience or observation available to allow us to state this as a fact. This means **(E)** is incorrect.

9) **B**

In this passage, the first two paragraphs tell us that while people often think that close synonyms mean the same thing, the words actually convey different feelings or moods. The next three paragraphs give examples of synonyms that have the same definition yet convey different moods. Paragraph 6 is the conclusion, which repeats the idea that close synonyms are not exactly the same. We can see that the author devotes the majority of the passage to three examples of close synonyms that have subtly different meanings, and also begins and ends the passage with the idea that close synonyms actually have different meanings. We can infer from this that the purpose of the passage is to convince the reader that even close synonyms are not the same, but instead convey different moods or feelings. This means **(B)** is correct. Choices **(A)** and **(C)** provide us with background information used to introduce the main idea. Since background information is not the main idea, these choices are incorrect. **(D)** is incorrect because the passage actually argues that the difference between close synonyms cannot be discerned using a dictionary definition. While the author does argue that close synonyms are different because they communicate a distinct feeling, that statement is made to back up the main argument: that close synonyms do not share exactly the same meaning. This rules out **(E)**.

10) **E**

A sentence expresses a complete idea and contains a subject, or actor, and predicate, or action. A sentence fragment is missing one of these elements. The statement "But not to worry," contains an action, "to worry," but does not contain an actor. This statement is therefore a sentence fragment, used to express the idea that you should not be overly concerned with the information you have just heard or read because the next information you will be given will mitigate it. Since it is a fragment, **(E)** is correct. **(A)** contains 2 complete ideas separated with a semicolon, each capable of standing alone as a complete sentence. This is a complete sentence and is therefore incorrect. In **(B)**, the subject is *a difference* and the verb is *is*. This is a complete sentence and is therefore incorrect. In **(C)**, the subject is *the point* and the verb is *would be*. The phrase *to having multiple words with the exact same meaning* is a dependent clause. This is a complete sentence and is therefore incorrect. In **(D)**, the subject is *that* and the verb is *would be*. This, too, is a complete sentence and is therefore incorrect.

11) **B**

euphemism (*noun*): an inoffensive or mild word substituted for an offensive or harsh one. In the statement, *The test was impossible. I scored a miserable 26%—far from a passing grade*, there are no less offensive words used in place of more offensive

ones. This eliminates **option (I)**. In the sentence, *Dan's father passed away last spring*, the term *passed away* is used as a gentler substitution for the word *died*. This supports **option (II)**. There are no mild or inoffensive substitutions for harsh or offensive words in the sentence, *The bride was pretty, I guess. Her dress struck me as a bit too informal*. This eliminates **option (III)**. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

12) D

conscientious (*adjective*): meticulous, careful, painstaking, particular.

To answer this question correctly, it helps to look for places where the author is likely to make general statements regarding the way in which close synonyms are commonly understood. The author is most likely to do this in the introduction and conclusion of the passage. In paragraph 1 the author informs us about the problem involving the use of synonyms. The author continues to inform us that in general, the way in which people deal with this problem "is well and good; most people lack the scrupulous pedanticness to quibble over such trifles. Nevertheless, for those of us with ample compulsiveness (and time), it is of significant value to comprehend such nuances." This lets us know that the author thinks that most people have good reason not to take time to fix this problem. Moreover, the author thinks it is the responsibility of those of us with enough compulsiveness and time to fix. This shows that the author feels responsible for fixing the problem. In the conclusion to the passage, the author writes, "And alas, the dictionary—the text purported to be responsible for clarifying such issues—is of little assistance. In the end, it is left to us, the speakers of the language, those actively responsible for maintaining its sustenance and generation, to understand how these words make us feel and what mood we are inclined to attach to them." This lets us know that the author feels that the dictionary cannot be held responsible for fixing the problem either. Then the author repeats the idea that those who are capable should be actively responsible for maintaining the language. Using this information, it can be understood that with respect to the way in which close synonyms are commonly understood, the author's tone can best be described as *conscientious*. Choice **(D)** is correct. **(A)** is incorrect because the passage does not provide information to support the idea that the author is *belligerent*, or aggressive, about the way in which close synonyms are commonly understood. Although the author may seem *supercilious*, or arrogant, the passage does not provide information to support this idea. The passage does involve a problem exclusively meant for those with higher learning to solve, yet the author does not press this point, or use language to this effect. The author actually does the opposite. In paragraph 1 the author informs us that in general, the way in which people deal with this problem "is well and good; most people lack the scrupulous pedanticness to quibble over such trifles." This lets us know that **(B)** is incorrect. In paragraph 1, the author writes that "The difference between words like 'hard' and 'difficult', for example, goes tragically unnoticed." The author expresses this sentiment, not because he or she is rueful, or sorrowful, but rather because he or she want to draw attention to the importance of the matter. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. The passage does not provide information to support the idea that the author is blasé, or nonchalant, with respect to the way in which close synonyms are commonly understood. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.