

Mo, Hairy, and Curly Context

Moe: *Quiet!*

Larry: *I'm sorry, Moe. Please forgive me.*

Curly: *I'm trying to think but nothing happens.*

When you take the ACT, nothing happens more often than it does on reruns of “Seinfeld.” This Strategy, on the other hand, gives you something to think about faster than you can say, “Hey Moe!” Generally, the questions on the Reading section fall into three Stoooge-like categories.

I. Mo

These questions ask you about the “more,” or the “Mo,” of the passage, if you will. Some prep books call these the “Big Idea” or “Main Idea” questions.

I don't know. I mean, isn't Jake's impotence more about that generation's loss of faith in love?

—Rory, “Gilmore Girls”

In her English class at Yale, Rory defends her interpretation of Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Sun Also Rises*. Another student accuses Rory of ignoring the social context of underclass exploitation. What about World War I? Proving it’s not always as easy as you think to find the bull in one of Hemingway’s stories.

Fortunately, the “main idea” questions on the ACT are a little less debatable.

See if you can find Mo in the following passage:

If you really want to know what people in the United States are thinking about, you should write a letter to the editor. If you don't have time, National Public Radio's humorist Ian Shoales will do it for you. Here is an excerpt from one such letter that will please anyone regardless of political bent.

“I realize this won't get printed in your so-called newspaper. The (Leftist, Conservative) slant is a disgrace to all (real Americans, taxpayers, our unborn children). Still I must urge everyone to (register to vote, write your Congressman, vote No on Prop 17) or we might not have (another four years, streetlights, a tomorrow).

“As a (taxpayer, lifelong Democrat, home owner) I (view with alarm, am frightened by, am angered by) our (foreign policy, domestic policy, bleeding-heart environmentalists). Are we living in (a welfare state, Nazi Germany, a fool's paradise)?”

You don't have to be in paradise to find the main idea in this passage. Shoales's willingness to write a letter for you is expressed near the beginning, the usual location for Mo. Some main ideas, however, are found later in the passage.

Tracy Ullman phones car dealers in Baltimore and comparison shops. Gary Oldman plays tapes on the freeway and ponders the uncanny congruities between Lee Harvey Oswald and Yogi Berra. Barbara Hershey tools through the Louisiana swamps and climbs ashore now and then for a chat.

All these slightly undignified enterprises are dramatic research, simply the lengths to which some actors will go to find and perfect an acceptable accent.

In this passage, Judith Shulevitz of the *New York Times* writes about the preparation process for some actors. The Mo is contained in the second paragraph following the examples discussed in the first paragraph. In the second paragraph, you learn that research to find an acceptable accent can be slightly undignified. The Mo.

2. Hairy

These questions can be trickier. The hairy part is finding the answer in the details of the passage. The hard questions are the ones where the answer is not apparent or, worse yet, hidden. You read more effectively when you read actively. Continually ask yourself: how do the supporting ideas link back to the main idea, the Mo? Sometimes that relationship is self-evident.

The young James Thurber, who later gained recognition as a cartoonist and humorist, struggled to win the approval of his editor. After the editor instructed Thurber to write short, dramatic leads, he produced the following:

Dead. That's what the man was when they found him with a knife in his back at 4:00 P.M. in front of Riley's saloon at the corner of 52nd and 12th streets.

In this passage, Riley's saloon is a detail. In fact, all of the information about the crime scene could be described as supporting details. What it takes to write a dramatic lead is the implied main idea.

When you attack the longer passages, finding the details that answer a particular question can be more challenging. A question may ask you to draw an inference from a detail provided.

In Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain, writing in 1874, observed that the lower part of the Mississippi River had been

shortened 242 miles during the past 176 years—a little more than a mile and a third each year.

From the details provided above you could infer that the Mississippi River would continue to shorten (unless measures were taken to change the course of history). If you read on, though, you discover that Twain's inferences are strikingly different from yours.

... any calm person who is not blind or idiotic can see that in the Old Oolitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upward of one million three hundred thousand miles long... And by the same token any person can see that seven hundred and forty-two years from now the Lower Mississippi will be only a mile and three-quarters long.

Be careful. Don't assume too much, too quickly. And avoid the trap of trying to remember every single detail. These kinds of detail questions often refer to a specific line or paragraph. Fortunately, you can get the needed experience in finding details by completing the Practice Passages in this book.

3. Curly Context

Words are loaded pistols.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

Existentialism aside, Vocabulary in Context questions are the ones to unload first if you are running short on time. Sometimes the definition is fairly self-evident. The correct definition curls around the word to comfort you during your moment of need. Often, though, the test makers serve up a word with multiple definitions. You are given correct definitions for the word, but only one of those def-

nitions works in context. You know the specific context because you will be given a line reference.

Warning: Don't rely on the common meaning for any word. The test makers will usually have a secondary definition among the choices. Just because an answer is true doesn't make it correct. For example, if you are asked about the word "skin," you might immediately think "epidermis." But the correct choice might be another meaning for that same word. As in, there's more than one way to skin a test maker.

Here are two examples to help you:

1. The words that curl around the term *Greek Chorus* state explicitly what you need to know.

Greek plays were written in verse, like poetry, but the verse was close to the patterns of normal speech. The lines were spoken in unison by a chorus of people. The Greek Chorus consisted of members of the local population, and participation was considered a civic duty, much as voting is today.

2. Not all of the Vocabulary in Context questions, though, are that obvious.

*In the book *Weird Wide Web*, authors Erfert Fenton and David Benton speculate on why there are so many web pages devoted to Spam. They wonder: "Is Hormel's canned meat product perhaps a metaphor for the Internet itself—made up of diverse elements, ubiquitous, and virtually indestructible?"*

In this passage, the word *ubiquitous* means

- A. divergent
- B. omnipresent

- C. carnivorous
- D. cyberspace

You can eliminate the wrong choices fairly easily. An author is unlikely to repeat synonyms in a sentence structured to list different characteristics. Therefore, you can eliminate A (divergent). It is a synonym for the word *diverse* that is already a part of the list. The choice D (cyberspace) is the wrong part of speech (and it makes no sense in that sentence). Choice C (carnivorous) is there to fool you. The passage is about Spam. The Internet, however, is hardly a meat-eating entity. At least, not yet. The correct answer is B (omnipresent). The Internet is seemingly present everywhere. Watch out.

(conk) Woo woo woo woo woo woo woo woo woo, nyuk
nyuk nyuk nyuk (bonk)

—Curly of “The Three Stooges”