Magoosh's Complete Guide to GRE Vocabulary

Assorted words and definitions from a GRE expert compiled for your entertainment and edification

Updated 1/15/13

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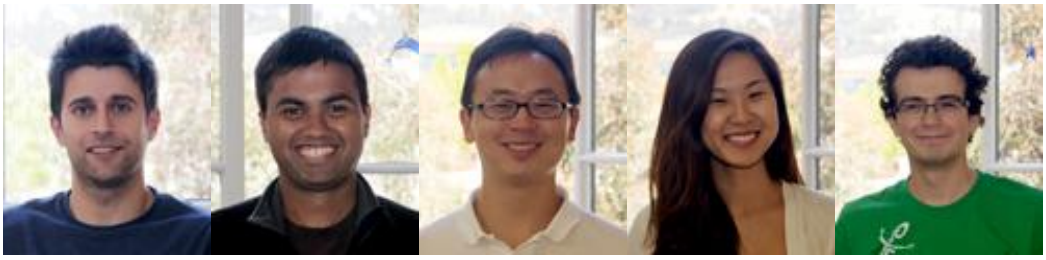
Introduction

This eBook is a compilation of the most popular Revised GRE vocabulary word list posts from the Magoosh GRE blog. We've found that students learn vocabulary best when the words are presented in a fun, creative, and intelligent way: we've done our best to assemble interesting lists to help you absorb the words in a way that will stick with you so that you're as prepared as possible on the day of your exam.

You'll see that these lists definitely don't look like your typical, dry GRE word lists, and it's because we want you to learn vocabulary words in context—the new GRE's Sentence Equivalence questions, Text Completions, and even the Reading Comprehension passages are testing knowledge of words in context and proper usage, so rote memorization of words and definitions won't be of much help!

If you're new to the Revised GRE and want to know more about the exam in general, check out "A Complete Guide to the Revised GRE": http://magoosh.com/gre/gre-ebook for more information.

We have some general tips and strategies about how to best use the lists in this eBook (as well as some warnings about types of studying methods to avoid!) so be sure to read our "How to Use GRE Vocabulary Lists" and "Making Words Stick: Memorizing GRE Vocabulary" sections before you begin. At the end, we also have some recommendations for other great reading material that will help you pick up vocabulary words in a fun way to have productive "study breaks".



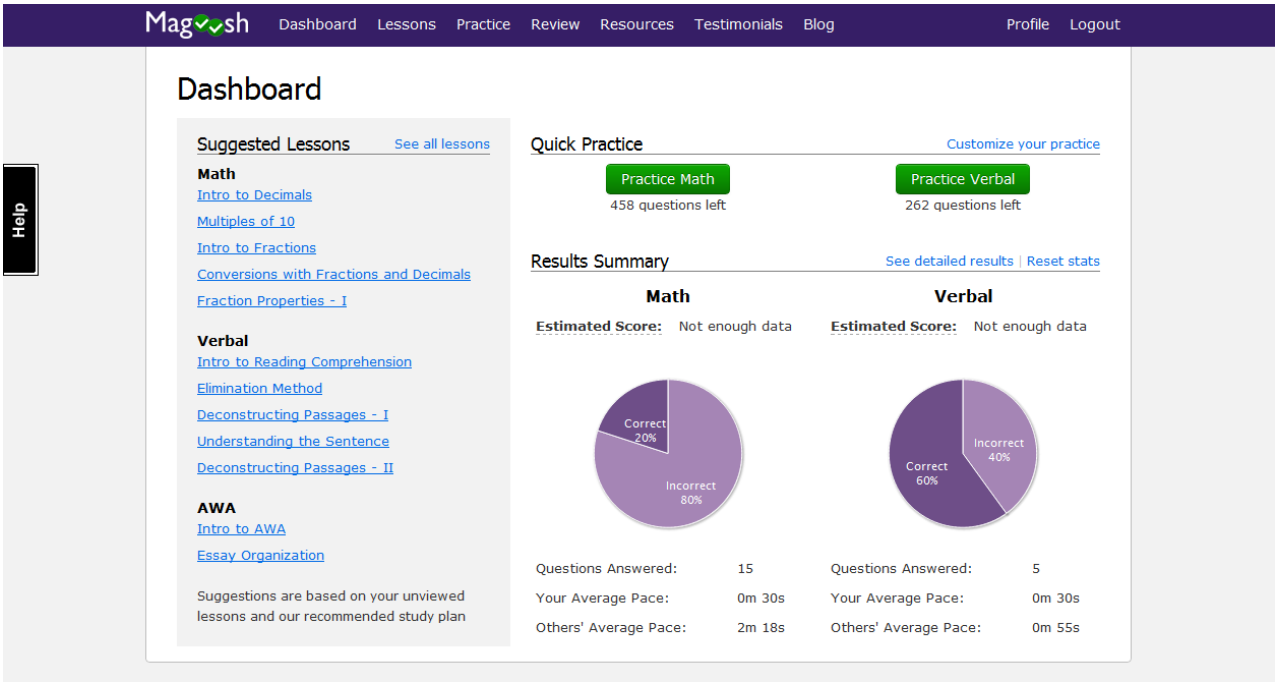
We hope you find the material helpful! If you have any questions, comments or suggestions, leave us a comment at http://magoosh.com/gre/2012/gre-vocabulary-ebook!

About Us

What is Magoosh?

Magoosh is online GRE Prep that offers:

- Over 200 Math, Verbal, and AWA lesson videos, that's over 20 hours of video!
- Over 900 Math and Verbal practice questions, with video explanations after every question
- Material created by expert tutors who have in-depth knowledge of the GRE
- E-mail support from our expert tutors
- Customizable practice sessions and mock tests
- Personalized statistics based on performance
- Access anytime, anywhere from an internet-connected device



Featured in

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. San Francisco Chronicle The Boston Globe

The Telegraph calcutta, india KTVU FOX Xconomy

Why Our Students Love Us

These are survey responses sent to us by students after they took the GRE. All of these students and thousands more have used the [Magoosh GRE prep course] to improve their scores:

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	311
What was your math score?	156
What was your verbal score?	155
How did our product help you? *	It was really great, the questions (a few of them - math) were the same as the once i solved in Magoosh practice problems. I plan to write a testimonial, will do it once i'm good and ready. Right now i need a break... but not before i thank you guys, So a huge "THANK YOU" to all you guys at Magoosh and specially Chris, coz' he was the one i pestered the most, with an interminable flow of asinine questions and he answered everyone of them. Thank you!!!

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	307
What was your math score?	150
What was your verbal score?	157
How did our product help you? *	It helped familiarize me with the types of questions that were going to be present on the GRE. I'm an audiovisual learner, so the lessons were particularly helpful for my needs.

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	306
What was your math score?	144
What was your verbal score?	162
If you took the GRE before, what was your previous math score?	500
If you took the GRE before, what was your previous verbal score?	580

How did our product help you? *

This product allowed for timed practice which I found essential. I was very slow with the previous GRE and ran out of time on everything. When I took the test in february I found that practice paid off with me having nearly 10minutes to spare at the end of each verbal section. For the math, I still wasnt computing the answers fast enough, but I gained a sense of timing from your software and was able to finish quickly and go back to answer more time consuming questions.

The short lessons were immensely helpful and the swift feedback that I received when I placed a query was unbelievable. It was really nice to be able to get a quick and simple refresher on content long forgotten or muddled by time.

This software, most importantly, gave me confidence. I went through each section very calmly. Even if I wasn't doing particularly well. My reasoning was - it was highly unlikely that I had completed hundreds of timed practice questions and watched all those lessons with no improvement as the result. By sheer repetition and exposure, my knowledge base had to have increased. (and it did. undoubtedly)

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	328
What was your math score?	161
What was your verbal score?	167
How did our product help you? *	Before anything else I want to extend a sincere "thank-you" to everyone at Magoosh. I used the site to both organize my study plan and work with the material itself. I watched every instructional video for the math content available at the time. The instructional videos are brilliant, I really appreciated having the flexibility to pause a video, absorb the information and re-play it if I needed to. The video explanations for each problem were also an excellent tool. I used the adaptive exam software to simulate timed GRE sections and target weak areas in math. I also read the blog for exam tips and strategies. When I began to study for the GRE my scores hovered in the low-mid 600s on the old scale; the score I ultimately got represents a 100-150 point difference in each category. The Magoosh staff was awesome; I peppered them with questions and requests and they always responded thoroughly and quickly.

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	319
What was your math score?	156
What was your verbal score?	163
How did our product help you? *	I had started some light studying last year and didn't really know where to start. I was using with a couple of GRE prep books, but I felt a little lost - especially when I discovered that one of the books was rife with errors. I found Magoosh via Christopher's prep-book reviews (brilliant marketing, by the way) and signed up after using the demo for a few days. The information is clear and the strategies work well and, if you have questions, the team responds to your fairly quickly (I sent two emails and received responses within a day).

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	313
What was your math score?	163
What was your verbal score?	150
How did our product help you? *	The help provided by the magoosh platform was superb. What I believe most valuable is the fact that most math problems are somewhat harder, so when you're actually taking the test, everything seems a little bit easier.

What was your overall score on the actual exam? *	315
What was your math score?	159
What was your verbal score?	156
How did our product help you? *	Your product was excellent. I'm going back to school after 20 years in business and had to re-learn all of the math. The videos were outstanding at teaching me the lessons. Also, the ability to develop mock tests were crucial to my success. The difficulty of your questions made the GRE a bit easier on the math side than I expected. The study plan kept me on track so that I could study in the 4 weeks I had between semesters.

How to Use Vocabulary Lists

Here, I'm going to answer the question, "What's the best way to use a vocabulary word list for the Revised GRE?". Wait a second, you're probably thinking. Don't you just read the list? Actually, reading through a vocabulary list is the last thing you want to do. In fact, I tell this to my GRE students with a menacing, authoritarian tone, because I know how easy it is to fall into the temptation of going up and down a list, covering the definition with your hand, and then coughing up the definition. Again (my brow is knitted)- do not do this.

So, what does this injunction mean then? Burn your vocab lists? Use telepathy, or worse pay $200 dollars for that vocabulary software that promises instant recall after one listen? Actually, no. A vocab list can be useful, if used wisely.

To illustrate let's take two of my former students (I'll obviously change the names) in a GRE class I taught. One was a vocab juggernaut, the other struggled and struggled…and then finally got it. Why? Because he changed the way he learned vocabulary.

Timmy's Vocabulary Lists

"I'm bad at learning words." This was Timmy's common refrain. I would talk to him about the power of mnemonics and word grouping. He would look hopeful for a moment but then horrifically bomb the following vocab test. "I'm bad at learning words" inevitably following each 2/25 score (the class had to study 25 words a day and the daily quizzes were cumulative).

I pulled Timmy aside after a week of his abysmal performance and asked him the simple question, "How are you studying vocabulary?" He shrugged his shoulders and gave the not very helpful response, "I just kind of study." I prodded him further, "Well, I read the list and cover it up." He went on to tell me he usually did this about fifteen minutes before class. "It's always worked for me before, I usually pass classes memorizing stuff like this."

But my boot camp wasn't just memorizing stuff – it was a grueling vocab experience that required students to retain thousands of words for when they take the actual exam – not for when they take a short in-class quiz. So, I worked with Timmy to help him become more like Shirley.

Shirley's Vocabulary Lists

Shirley aced every quiz, and could spout out a trio of synonyms for almost any word, sometimes throwing in a clever mnemonic. We probably all had a Shirley in our classes and assumed she (or he) is naturally gifted. While that may be the case, more often than not, it is the method, not the person.

Shirley would review words shortly after class. She said she would usually learn about five words at a time, consulting the list only so she could remember those words. Then, she would go about her day,

intermittently, thinking back to those five words. Sometimes, she would totally draw a blank on a definition and would have to go back to list, "Oh yes, of course, 'desultory' means rambling."

In this fashion she would work through the 25 daily words, moving on to another five words every few hours. When possible she would try to use these words to describe something in her everyday life. Basically, the words were always floating around in her head. Just as importantly, she would make sure to revisit the first half of the list throughout the day instead of simply trying to reach the 25th word.

Unlike Timmy, she didn't hover over the list, covering up the definition. Timmy's method never allowed him to turn a short-term memory into a long-term memory, much the way we can memorize a phone number only long enough to call that number. As soon as we've done so, the memory vanishes.

Finally, Shirley would turn to flashcards when she had to study for the 1,000-word vocabulary final (I told you my bootcamp was grueling!). Because the words were already in her long-term memory, the flashcards helped her maintain those neural connections. She wasn't using the flashcards for the initial step of taking a short-term memory and changing it into a long-term memory. She worked with a few words at a time getting them into long-term memory before moving on to new words.

Remember that the Revised GRE is a test that requires a cumulative knowledge, not a crammer's last-minute effort.

Timmy's Triumph

For Timmy it wasn't easy going at first. He wanted to revert back to his old method, but through hard work, on both our parts, he soon became more like Shirley. By the end of the bootcamp he was scoring close to 25 out of 25.

So next time you are tempted to cover up a list, remember Timmy (and my menacing brow).

Takeway

Learning words from a laundry list of vocabulary by covering up the answer and "testing yourself" turns off your brain.

To move words from short-term memory to long-term memory, bite off a little at a time, and do your learning away from the list-- meaning, think back on the words and definitions. Then if you forget them, consult the list. For the collection of lists in this eBook, be sure to learn from Timmy's mistakes and apply Shirley's method from the start!

Making Words Stick: Memorizing GRE Vocabulary

Come up with Clever (and Wacky) Associations

Another way of saying this: use mnemonics. A mnemonic is a creative way of remembering a word.

Let's take the words gregarious and amiable. Gregarious means sociable. Say I have a friend named Greg, and, indeed, he is outgoing. Now I have a way of remembering this word. As luck would have it, I also have a friend named Amy who, believe it or not, is friendly. So now, when I see amiable I think Amy-able and for gregarious I think Greg-arious.

"Wait a second", you may be thinking. "I don't know anybody who has those names!" But here's the beauty of mnemonics-- they only need to make sense to you.

Granted, the words above didn't have very interesting mnemonics. And, if you notice in the caption, I mentioned the word wacky. The wackier and sillier a mnemonic, the more likely you are to remember it. And the mnemonics that make the most sense to you are usually the ones that you come up with your own.

So, give it a try with the following words:

Esoteric – known only to those with specialized knowledge

Dilatory – slow; delaying

Polemic – a written or verbal attack against someone

Use It or Lose It

Let's say you don't know the definitions of any of the words above. So, you look them up in a dictionary. Being the good word detective you are, you write down the definitions, as well as an example sentence on a flashcard.

However, tomorrow, your friend asks you what you learned on Magoosh. You tell them that you learned how to use mnemonics for three words. You remember the words, but you can't remember the definitions. Now, let's say that you decided after reading my posts to read an article from *The New Yorker*. While reading the article you think to yourself, "Hey this is some pretty….oh, oh…what's that word…esoteric stuff".

Now, what's happened? Well, you've recalled a word and used it in a relevant context. Calling forth a word in this fashion will embed it deeper into your memory. That way, when it comes time for the test, you will spend very little brainpower processing the word.

So, whether you are walking down the street, or even watching a television show, see if you can apply the words you learnt that day (or even the previous days). If you think that GRE prep ends as soon as you put down your vocabulary books, then you will have a tougher time learning words. Use words (even if discreetly to yourself) whenever you can. Your verbal score will thank you.

Do Not Bite Off More Than You Can Chew

Learning hundreds of words while only having a tenuous grasp of them is not efficacious. There is basically a word for this method: cramming.

Instead, learn words, but at a rate where they are not falling out of your head. For some, this rate is five words a day. For others, it's twenty-five. My experience is that students fare best when they start with a few words per day, but then increase the number. Oftentimes, your brain simply needs to adapt to something it is not used to doing, i.e. learning vocabulary.

Read to Be Surprised

In the sections following the word lists, I'll discuss, ad nauseam, the importance of reading. I'll also reference magazines such as *The New Yorker*, which is filled with vocabulary words used in a stylistically advanced context. Beyond context, there is another reason why we should read in conjunction with learning vocabulary.

Imagine that you pick up the copy of *The Economist* (we'll give *The New Yorker* a rest for now). In there, you see the word dilatory. Look familiar? Well, your brain should have a sudden jolt of recognition: we just saw the word in the mnemonics exercise above. Now that you've encountered a word you learnt as part of your word list, but weren't necessarily expecting to see in *The Economist*, your brain is suddenly more likely to retain it.

As you continue to learn words, and as you continue to read, you will have more of these moments of epiphany. Sometimes, you won't remember the word immediately, but you can always look the word up to reinforce the definition.

Takeaways

- Use words and use them often
- Find creative and wacky ways to remember words
- Read, read, and read some more

Keep these key points in mind as you go through the lists below. Enjoy!

Most Common GRE Words

Top 10 GRE Words of 2012

Alacrity

The GRE has a predilection for words that don't really sound like what they mean. Alacrity is no exception. Many think the word has a negative connotation. Alacrity, however, means an eager willingness to do something.

So imagine the first day at a job that you've worked really hard to get. How are you going to complete the tasks assigned to you? With alacrity, of course.

An interesting correlation: the more alacritous (adjective form) you are when you're learning GRE vocabulary, the better you will do.

Prosaic

Prosaic conjures up a beautiful mosaic for some. For others, the pro- is clearly positive. So if somebody or something is prosaic, it must surely be good.

Once again the GRE confounds expectations. Prosaic means dull and lacking imagination. It can be used to describe plans, life, language, or just about anything inanimate that has become dull (it is not used to describe people).

A good mnemonic: prose is the opposite of poetry. And where poetry, ideally, bursts force with imagination, prose (think of text-book writing), lacks imagination. Hence, prose-aic.

Veracity

Veracity sounds a lot like voracity. Whereas many know voracity means full of hunger (the adjective form voracious is more common), few know veracity. Unfortunately, many confuse the two on the test.

Veracity means truthful. The adjective form, veracious, sounds a lot like voracious. So be careful.

Paucity

Paucity is a lack of something. In honor of paucity, this entry will have a paucity of words.

Maintain

The second definition of this word – and one the new GRE favors – is to assert. One can maintain their innocence. A scientist can maintain that a recent finding support her theory. The latter context is the one you'll encounter on the GRE.

Contrite

Word roots are often misleading. This word does not mean with triteness (con- meaning with). To be contrite is to feel remorse.

Laconic

Another word that sounds different from what it means. A person is described as laconic when he/she says very few words.

I'm usually reminded of John Wayne, the quintessential cowboy, who, with a gravely intonation, muttered few words. As this allusion betrays may age more than anything else, think of Christian Bale in Batman.

Pugnacious

Much like a pug dog, which aggressively yaps at things near it, a person who is pugnacious likes to aggressively argue about everything. Verbally combative is another good way to describe pugnacious.

Disparate

If two things are fundamentally different, they are disparate. For instance, verbal skills and math skills are disparate, and as such are usually tested separately, the GRE being no exception.

Egregious

'Greg' is the Latin root for flock. At one point egregious meant standing out of the flock a positive way. This definition went out of vogue sometime in the 16th century, after which time egregious was used ironically.

Thus for the last five hundred years, 'egregious' meant standing out in a bad way. In sports, an egregious foul would be called on a player who slugged another player (not including hockey, of course).

Top 5 Basic GRE Words

Innocuous

Something innocuous is harmless and doesn't produce any ill effects. Many germs are innocuous. As are most bug bites. Even television, in small doses, is typically innocuous. Innocuous can also mean inoffensive. An innocuous question is unlikely to upset anyone.

Everyone found Nancy's banter innocuous-- except for Mike, who felt like she was intentionally picking on him.

Candid

A straightforward and honest look at something is a candid one. Many great photographers have created enduring work because they turn their respective lens on what is real. Whether these photos are from the Dust Bowl, the Vietnam War, or on the Arab Winter, they move us because they reveal how people felt at a certain moment.

A person can also be candid if they are being honest and straightforward with you.

Even with a perfect stranger, he was candid and would rarely hold anything back.

Erratic

Unpredictable, often wildly so, erratic is reserved for pretty extreme cases. An athlete who scores the winning point one game, and then botches numerous opportunities. The stock market. And your sleep, especially if your stocks aren't doing well, can become erratic.

Erratic can also mean strange and unconventional. Someone may be known for their erratic behavior. Regardless of which meaning you are employing, you should not be erratic in your GRE prep.

Bleak

If one has a very depressing take on life, we say that person has a bleak outlook. Landscapes can be bleak (Siberia in April, the Texas of *No Country for Old Men*), and writers, too (Dostoevsky, Orwell).

Profuse

If something literally pours out in abundance we say it is profuse. This pouring is usually figurative. A person who apologies ceaselessly does so profusely. Perhaps a little more vividly, certain men who fail to button up their shirts all the way, let the world – perhaps not unwittingly – know of their profuse chest hair (which, on their part, should necessitate a profuse apology).

Common Words that Students Always Get Wrong

Extant

Many think this word means extinct. Extant is actually the opposite of extinct.

Despite many bookstores closing, experts predict that some form of book dealing will still be extant generations from now.

A great mnemonic is to put the word 'is' between the 'x' and the 't' in extant. This gives you existant (don't mind the misspelling).

Contentious

This GRE word does not mean content, as you could have probably guessed. It comes from the word contend, which means to argue. If you are contentious, you like to argue.

Contentious is a very common GRE word, so unless you want me to become contentious, memorize it now!

Auspicious

This word sounds very sinister. Auspicious is actually the opposite and means favorable.

Despite an auspicious beginning, Mike's road trip became a series of mishaps, and he was soon stranded and broke next to his wrecked automobile.

The opposite, inauspicious, is also common on the GRE.

Enervate

Most people think this words means to energize. It actually means to sap the energy from.

John preferred to avoid equatorial countries; the intense sun would always leave him enervated after he'd spent the day sightseeing.

Equivocate

People tend to think that equivocate has to do with equal. It actually means to speak vaguely, usually with the intention to mislead or deceive. The related word unequivocal also can be confusing. To state something unequivocally is to state it in such a way that there is no room for doubt.

Ambivalent

Students often believe that to be ambivalent towards something is to be indifferent. The truth is almost the opposite. See, when you are ambivalent you have mixed or conflicting emotions about something.

Imagine somebody asked you how it was studying for the GRE.

You could say, "I am ambivalent about studying for the GRE because it ate up a lot of time. On the plus side, I did learn many words and improved my reading comprehension."

Sedulous

I am not quite sure why students can never seem to remember the definition for this word. Perhaps the sed- reminds them of sitting and being idle. To be sedulous, however, is to be anything but idle. If you are sedulously studying for the GRE, you are studying diligently and carefully—making flashcards, writing down important words and formulas, and, of course, checking out the Magoosh blog every day.

Tricky "Easy" GRE Words with Multiple Meanings

Stem

To stem means to hold back or limit the flow or growth of something. You can stem bleeding, you (can attempt to) stem the tide. Do not stem the flow of vocabulary coursing through your brains. Make sure to use these words whenever you can.

To stem the tide of applications, the prestigious Ivy requires that each applicant score at least 330 on the Revised GRE.

Blinkered

If you blink a lot you are likely to miss something. Indeed, your view would be very limited. Extending this meaning, we get the definition of blinkered: means to have a limited outlook or understanding.

In gambling, the addict is easily blinkered by past successes and/or past failures, forgetting that the outcome of any one game is independent of the games that preceded it.

Check

To check something is to stop its growth (similar to stem but with more of a focus on growth than flow). If something is left unchecked, then it grows freely.

Deserted for six months, the property began to look more like a jungle and less like a residence -weeds grew unchecked in the front yard.

Checkered

The meaning of checkered is completely unrelated to the meaning of check above– very tricky, so be sure to know the difference between the two. A checkered past is one that is marked by disreputable happenings.

One by one, the presidential candidates dropped out of the race, their respective checkered pasts - from embezzlement to infidelity - sabotaging their campaigns.

Raft

A raft is an inflatable boat. It can also mean a large number of something. I know – it doesn't really make much sense. But a good mnemonic – imagine a large number of rafts and you have a raft of rafts.

Despite a raft of city ordinances passed by an overzealous council, noise pollution continued unabated in the megalopolis.

Involved

We are involved in many things, from studying to socializing. For something to be involved, in terms of the GRE definition, means it is complicated, and difficult to comprehend.

The physics lecture became so involved that the undergraduate's eyes glazed over.

Retiring

Sure, many dream of the day when they can be retiring (preferably to some palatial estate with a beachfront view). The second definition does not necessarily apply to most. To be retiring is to be shy, and have the inclination to retract from company.

Nelson always was the first to leave soirees-- rather than mill about with "fashionable" folk, he was retiring, and preferred the solitude of his garret.

Expansive

Yes, expansive means expansive. It also means communicative, and prone to talking in a sociable manner.

After a few sips of cognac, the octogenarian shed his irascible demeanor and became expansive, speaking fondly of the "good old days".

Moment

A moment is a point in time. We all know that definition. If something is of moment, it is significant and important (think of the word momentous).

Despite the initial hullabaloo, the play was of no great moment in Hampton's writing career, and, within a few years, the public quickly forgot his foray into theater arts.

Base

When the definition of this word came into existence, there were some obvious biases against the lower classes (assuming that lexicographers were not lower class). It was assumed that those from the base, or the lowest, class were without any moral principles. They were contemptible and ignoble. Hence, we have this second definition of base (the word has since dropped any connotations of lower class).

She was not so base as to begrudge the mendicant the unwanted crumbs from her dinner plate.

Imbibe

Literally, to imbibe is to drink, usually copiously. Figuratively, imbibe can refer to an intake of knowledge or information.

The professor was a fountain of erudition, and we imbibed his wisdom.

Plato imbibed Socrates' teachings to such an extent that he was able to write volumes of work that he directly attributed, sometimes word for word, to Socrates.

Inundate

Speaking of floods, inundate is a synonym for deluge. Figuratively, to be inundated means to be overwhelmed by too many people or things.

Once inundated with 5,000 vocabulary words, GRE students now have to contend with somewhat fewer words.

The newsroom was inundated with false reports that only made it more difficult for the newscasters to provide an objective account of the bank robbery.

Scintillating

If something gives off sparks, such as when photons collide, it is said to scintillate. Figuratively, scintillating describes someone who is brilliant and lively.

Richard Feynman was renowned for his scintillating lectures—the arcana of quantum physics was made lucid as he wrote animatedly on the chalkboard.

Benighted

If the sky darkens, and becomes night, it is, unsurprisingly, benighted. However, if a people are benighted (this word is usually reserved for the collective), that group falls in a state of ignorance.

Far from being a period of utter benightedness, The Medieval Ages produced some inestimable works of theological speculation.

Galvanize

Need to strengthen steel by giving it a final coat? Or, perhaps you need to motivate somebody? Well, in both cases, you would literally be galvanizing. Figuratively, to galvanize is to excite to action or spur on.

At mile 23 of his first marathon, Kyle had all but given up, until he noticed his friends and family holding a banner that read, "Go Kyle"; galvanized, he broke into a gallop, finishing the last three miles in less than 20 minutes.

Hedge

If you are really into horticulture—which is a fancy word for gardening—you'll known hedges are shrubs, or small bushes that have been neatly trimmed. If you know your finance, then you've probably heard of hedge funds (where brokers make their money betting against the market). Hedge can also be used in a verb sense. If you hedge your bets, you play safely. If you hedge a statement, you limit or qualify that statement. Finally, hedge can also mean to avoid making a direct statement, as in equivocating.

Flush

What word means to turn red (especially in the face), to send down the toilet, to be in abundance, and to drive out of hiding? Yep, it's flush, which has all four of these totally unrelated definitions.

Fell

Imagine an evil person who cuts down trees, and then falls himself. Well, that image is capturing three different definitions of fell—to cut down a tree, the past tense of fall (we all know that) and evil. Yes, I know, fell can't possibly mean evil…but the English language is a wacky one. Fell indeed means terribly evil.

Arch

You have arches in architecture, or at a well-known fast-food restaurant. You can arch your back, or a bow. Arches are even a part of your foot. But, did you know that to be arch is to be deliberately teasing, as in, "he shrugged off her insults because he knew she was only being arch"*?* Finally, arch as a root means chief or principal, as in archbishop.

Beg

Commonly, when we think of begging, we think of money, or a favor. But, one can also beg a question, and that's where things start to get complicated. To beg a question can mean to evade a question, invite an obvious question, or, and this is where it starts to get really tricky, to ask a question that in itself makes unwarranted assumptions.

For instance, let's say you are not really sure if you are going to take the GRE. If somebody asks you when you are going to take the GRE, then that person is assuming you are going to take the GRE. That is, they are begging the question. If you avoid giving a direct answer, then you are also begging the question (albeit in a different sense). Which finally begs the question, how did this whole question begging business get so complicated in the first place?

Tender

Tender is a verb, and it does not mean to behave tenderly. When you tender, something you offer it up. For instance, when you tender your resignation, you hand in a piece of paper saying that you are resigning.

Intimate

Just as tender doesn't relate to two people in love, neither does intimate, at least on the GRE. The secondary meaning for intimate is to suggest something subtly.

Wanting

Wanting means lacking. So, if your knowledge of secondary meanings is wanting, this post is a perfect place to start learning.

Becoming

Another secondary meaning that changes parts of speech, becoming an adjective. If something is becoming, it matches nicely.

Her dress was becoming and made her look even more beautiful.

Start

The secondary meaning for start is somewhat similar to the common meaning. To start is to suddenly move or dart in a particular direction.

Fleece

If you are thinking Mary Had a Little Lamb *(…fleece as white as snow)*, you have been fleeced by a secondary meaning. To fleece is to deceive.

Telling

If something is telling, it is significant and stands out.

Her unbecoming dress was very telling when it came to her sense of fashion.

Wax

Melting wax will only lead you astray. The secondary meaning for wax is to increase. The opposite of wax is to wane.

Check

To check is to limit, and is usually used to modify the growth of something.

When government abuses are not kept in check, a ruling body is likely to become autocratic.

Qualify

This is perhaps the most commonly confused secondary meaning and the one that is most important to learn for the GRE. To qualify is to limit, and is usually used in the context of a statement or an opinion.

I love San Francisco.

I love San Francisco, but it is always windy.

The first statement shows my unqualified love for San Francisco. In the second statement I qualify, or limit, my love for San Francisco.

In the context of the GRE, the concept of qualification is usually found in the Reading Comprehension passage. For example, an author usually expresses qualified approval or some qualified opinion in the passage. As you may have noticed, the authors of reading comprehension passages never feel 100% about something. They always think in a nuanced fashion. Therefore, they are unlikely to be gung-ho or downright contemptuous. That is, they qualify, or limit, their praise/approval/disapproval.

Commonly Confused Sets

Miserly vs. Frugal

This is one of the most commonly confused pairs. These words, despite popular opinion, are not the same. Frugal has a positive connotation, i.e. you spend money wisely, and miserly has a negative connotation, i.e. you pinch every penny.

Monte was no miser, pinching each penny, but was simply frugal, wisely spending the little that he earned.

Prevaricate vs. Variance

To prevaricate is to speak in an evasive way. Prevaricate does not mean to vary before; indeed, it is totally unrelated to variance, which simply means the quality of varying. A good synonym for prevaricate is equivocate. And that's no lie.

The cynic quipped, "There is not much variance in politicians; they all seem to prevaricate".

Histrionic vs. History

Histrionic is totally unrelated to history. It comes from the Latin for actor. To be histrionic is not to have a penchant for bad Pacino or Brando imitations, but to be overly theatrical.

Though she received a B- on the test, she had such a histrionic outburst that one would have thought that she'd been handed a death sentence.

Demur vs. Demure

To demur is a verb meaning to object or show reluctance.

Wallace dislike the cold, so he demurred when his friends suggested they going skiing in the Alps.

To be demure is to be modest and shy. This word refers to a woman, so don't call a man demure, as they will surely demur.

Beatific vs. Beautiful

A beatific person is one who radiates bliss. This person is so happy, they almost seem blessed and holy (think of a saint, of the Buddha). As for beautiful, well you may be beatific if you are beautiful, or you may be totally unhappy. The two words are totally unrelated.

Marred by the ravages of time, the idols were hardly beautiful, yet each seemed to emanate a beatific aura that not even 500 years could diminish.

Perfunctory vs. Preemptive vs. Peremptory

Ever done dishes before? As far as daily experiences go, this one represents the nadir for most. As a result, when we do dishes, we do them in a routine way. We are hardly inspired.

To do something in such a manner is to be perfunctory. The word also carries with it the connotation of carelessness. That is, if you do something in which you are merely going through the motions, you are probably not doing your best (as far as my perfunctory dish-cleaning goes, my wife can attest to this).

To act before someone else does is to act preemptively.

Just as Martha was about to take the only cookie left on the table, Noah preemptively swiped it.

Preemptive is often times heard in a political context. A country that strikes before another country can do so is launching a preemptive strike.

If you are peremptory you are bossy and domineering.

My sister used to peremptorily tell me to do the dishes, a chore I would do perfunctorily or avoid doing altogether.

Indigent vs. Indigenous vs. Indignant

Indigent word means poor, having very little means.

In the so-called Third World, many are indigent and only a privileged few have the wherewithal to enjoy material luxuries.

Indigenous means relating to a certain area. Plants and animals are often indigenous, as are people.

The flora and fauna indigenous to Australia are notably different from those indigenous to the U.S—one look at a duckbill platypus and you know you're not dealing with an opossum.

Imagine you are waiting in line to order your morning coffee. Right as you are about to order a nice steaming cup, someone cuts in front of you and places an order for six people. How would you feel? Indignant.

Indignant means to feel anger over a perceived injustice. And you don't want to be indignant the day of the test, when ETS just happens to pick that one word you always end up confusing with another word.

Errant vs. Arrant vs. Errand vs. Err

To be errant is to be wandering, not sticking to a circumscribed path.

Unlike his peers, who spent their hours studying in the library, Matthew preferred errant walks through the university campus to help his brain function.

Arrant means complete and utter.

It usually modifies a noun with a negative connotation, e.g. liar, fool, etc.

An arrant fool, Lawrence surprised nobody when he lost all his money in a pyramid scheme that was every bit as transparent as it was corrupt.

An errand is a small chore.

Maria carried out her errands with dispatch, completing most before noon.

To err is (surprise!) make an error.

He erred in thinking that errant and arrant were synonyms.

Artless vs. Artful vs. Artifice

Van Gogh, Picasso, Monet…surely they relate to the second word, and definitely not the first, which would be reserved for people like me who reached their artistic apotheosis with the drawing of stick-figures.

Well, as far as the GRE is concerned, neither word relates to art (both in the lower case and upper case sense). To be artful means to be cunning and wily. To have artifice is to be artful. Perhaps you've read Dickens, and remember The Artful Dodger. The titular artful dodger did not have a penchant for watercolors, but was instead a devious, wily lad. This trait, presumably, allowed him to dodge tricky situations.

If somebody is artless, on the other hand, that person is innocent, guileless. It should come as little surprise, then, that the literary canon is absent an artless dodger, as he would be too innocent and naive to dodge much of anything.

Finally, artful and artless can refer back to the original usage of art. Therefore, Picasso is artful and I am artless. However, the GRE rarely, if ever, tests this definition.

Expurgate vs. Expunge

They both mean to remove, but in different ways. To expurgate means to remove objectionable material. If you've ever watched a rated-R film that has been adapted for prime time, you'll probably note that all those F-words—factitious, facetious, and fatuous—have been removed. That's expurgation (think of the beep).

To expunge simply means to wipe out or remove any trace off. Many people who commit petty crimes have those crimes expunged from their records, given that person doesn't decide to start running every other red-light. So, if you've been a good driver over the last 10 years, then that one incident when 85 became the new 65…well, that's probably been expunged from your record.

Censure vs. Censor

Speaking of beeping out the F-word, we have a synonym for expurgate: censor. Censure, the much more common GRE word, has nothing to do with removing objectionable words and/or material. However, if you decide to start dropping the F-bomb in public—and I don't mean facetious—then you can easily expect someone to censure you. To censure someone is to express strong disapproval of that person.

Ponderous vs. Imponderable

Ponder means to think over. So, ponderous must mean thinking. However, this is not the case. Ponderous is derived from 'pondus', which means weight (think of a pound). So, to be ponderous means to be weighed-down, and to move slowly and in a labored fashion.

Imponderable is not the opposite of ponderous. It actually relates to thinking. An imponderable is something that is impossible to estimate, fathom or figure out. Say a child was to ask, "How long would it take driving in a car to go from one end of the universe to the other?" Unless you have a really big calculator—and a very fast car—then the answer to this question would be imponderable.

Interesting (and International) Word Origins

Around the World

Kowtow

Nope, kowtow is not a giant truck for pulling bovines, but a word that comes from the imperial courts of China. When a person kowtowed to the emperor, or any eminent mandarin for that matter, he or she knelt and touched the ground with his or her forehead. Such a gesture was intended to show respect and submission.

Today, kowtow has a negative connotation and implies that a person is acting in a subservient or sycophantic manner.

He kowtowed to his boss on even the most trivial matters that the boss herself soon became nauseated by his sycophancy.

Powwow

No, it's not kowtow's cousin – in fact, this word sprung from American soil, namely the Algonquin tribe of North America. A powwow was quite a hootenanny of a time and involved a big party of dancing and dining between tribes.

Strangely, today's meaning is a lot more subdued, and far less fun. Any informal discussion or colloquy is regarded as a powwow. You and your co-worker can have a mid-afternoon powwow over coffee. A political leader can have a powwow with his cronies (I'm presuming they'd favor cigars over coffee).

Junta

Junta means to join and comes via Portugal and Spain. But this joining was in no way peaceful. Whenever a military group joined forces to usurp the existing regime, they would form a military junta. Today, junta can refer to the aggressive takeover by a group.

Imbroglio

It may sound like an exotic vegetable or a pungent pasta dish, but it's neither. Imbroglio comes to us via mid-18th century Italian and has nothing to do with the kitchen. Instead it is related to the verb 'embroil' and describes a confusing, and potentially embarrassing, situation.

The chef cook-off featured one gourmand who had the unfortunate distinction of mixing the wrong broths, creating off-putting dishes on an imbroglio that viewers will not soon forget.

Juggernaut

To many, this word was forever immortalized in X-Men 2, when one of the main characters, Juggernaut, ran through walls, pulverizing them. This power to knock over and destroy anything in its path can also be traced to the original juggernaut, a word that comes to us via Hindi. A juggernaut was a large temple vehicle—and when I mean large I mean humongous—under which followers of Krishna would supposedly throw themselves.

Today, the word juggernaut doesn't necessarily include any grisly sacrifices, but refers to any large force that cannot be stopped.

Napoleon was considered a juggernaut, until he decided to invade Russia in winter; within weeks his once seemingly indomitable army was decimated by cold and famine.

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude is one of those words that at first glance may seem gratuitous. After all, do we really need a word that literally translates from the German as harm-joy? Unfortunately, a twisted quirk of human nature is that we can sometimes take joy in the suffering of others. Luckily, German has provided us a word to use if we ever see someone cackling sardonically at the suffering of others.

From his warm apartment window, Stanley reveled in schadenfreude as he laughed at the figures below, huddled together in the arctic chill.

Amuck

To run amuck is to run about frenzied. While this word comes to us via Malay, you don't have to live on the Malaysian peninsula to witness people running amuck.

Wherever the bowl-cut teen-idol went, his legions of screaming fans ran through the streets amuck, hoping for one glance at his boyish face.

Pariah

This word means an outcast. It comes from Hindi, one of the most prominent languages spoken in India. While India is on the other side of the world (at least from where I'm sitting), it should come as no surprise that we have acquired words from Hindi. After all, the British (remember, the people who "invented" English) colonized India and greatly influenced her for more than a century. The influence went both ways, as we now have words like pundit, meaning an expert in a particular area. And any pundit on geography and linguistics can tell you that another common language spoken in India is English.

The once eminent scientist, upon being inculpated for fudging his data, has become a pariah in the research community.

Nabob

This word is fun to say. It definitely wouldn't be fun to see on the GRE, if you didn't know what it meant. So let's make sure that doesn't happen. A nabob is a wealthy, influential person. This word also comes from Hindi, and was originally used by Indians to describe a wealthy British person living in India. While it is not as common as pundit and pariah, nabob applies to many living here in the U.S., though I don't think it a good idea to call Donald Trump a nabob to his face.

Bwana

This word comes from Swahili and means master. The word was originally from Arabic, and meant father.

Zeitgeist

Okay, German is by no means a distant tongue, or for that matter, an exotic one. Zeitgeist, however, doesn't look anything like your typical English word. Translated literally from German, zeitgeist means "time-ghost". In terms of an actual definition, zeitgeist means spirit of the times.

Each decade has its own zeitgeist—the 1990's was a prosperous time in which the promise of the American Dream never seemed more palpable. The zeitgeist of the 2000's was a curious admixture of fear and frivolity; when we were not anxious over the state of the economy and the world, we escaped into reality T.V. shows, either those on popular networks or the ones we would create ourselves on YouTube.

French Words

Sangfroid

This word literally means cold-blooded. It is defined as calmness and poise, especially in trying situations.

Parvenu

This is a person who has recently acquired wealth, and has therefore risen in class.

Demur

Demur is a verb. It means to object. Demur should not be confused with demure, which as an adjective means coy. They both come from around the time of the Norman Conquest (though the Anglophiles may have demurred to use either).

Arriviste

This word is similar to parvenu (though arriviste connotes more ruthless ambition). It came into the language much more recently, circa 1900.

Melee

I learned melee early in my life, because I had the peculiar misfortune of having a surname that rhymes with it. While none of this schoolyard teasing resulted in any melees, it'll behoove you to know that it means a wild, confusing fight or struggle. Oh, and it comes from French (rhyming similarities aside, my last name is not derived from French).

Let's see if I can weave them all into a coherent sentence:

Despite the scornful stares from entrenched aristocrats, the parvenu walked blithely about the palace grounds, maintaining his sangfroid and demurring to enter into the melees that the snobbish were so fond of baiting arrivistes into.

Oui!

And here are two more—still French, but with a slight Cajun flavor!:

Lagniappe

This word looks like it got jumbled up while I was typing. Believe it or not, lagniappe is not the result of errant fingers on my part, but comes to us from Louisiana. In Cajun country, in the 19th Century, a lagniappe was any unexpected gift. By no means a common GRE word, if lagniappe happens to show up on the test, then consider it an unexpected gift.

Picayune

Picayune would make for a good 2,000-dollar jeopardy clue, one which would probably read something like this:

"Don't trifle with us-this word comes from Cajun country via France and refers to a 19th century coin of little value."

"What is picayune?", would be the correct answer (thanks, Alex!).

Derived from Cajun via Provencal France, picayune refers not only to a coin but also to an amount that is trifling or meager. It can also refer to a person who is petty. Therefore, if I'm being picayune, I'm fussing over some trivial point.

Eponyms

An eponym is any word that is derived from a person's name.

English is one of the most promiscuous languages, absorbing languages as unrelated as Sanskrit and Finnish into its bulging lexicon. By extension, I'd also warn against relying on Latin/Greek roots to figure out what unfamiliar words mean. Thwarting a root-based approach even more is the fact that English not only takes from any language it stumbles across, but that it blithely appropriates a person's name, trimming a few letters here and there (adding the Latin –ian, or -esque for true mongrel effect), and then begets a Franken-word that would confound the most seasoned etymologist.

Adapting a name in such a fashion results in an eponym. What makes eponyms fascinating—and even more random—is that just about anyone can bequeath the world his or her name: a fictional anti-hero who thought windmills were dragons; a jingoistic veteran of Napoleon's army; an author with a penchant for absurdity, and an aversion to bureaucracy.

Of course, for GRE purposes we do not need to know that a jeroboam is a massive wine bottle named for an ancient Israeli king (who apparently was quite the wino). So I have culled from a list of eponyms those that may actually show up test day.

Mesmerize

Franz Mesmer, an Austrian physician prominent the turn of the 19th century, was renowned for hypnotizing people. His method included kneeling near a patient, touching his/her knees and looking into the person's eyes (I'm curious if he ever proposed to one of his clients).

Today, we have the word mesmerize, which doesn't necessarily mean to hypnotize (though it could), but is used figuratively and means to hold spellbound.

The plot and the characters were so well developed that many viewers were mesmerized, unable to move their eyes from the screen for even a single second.

Gerrymander

No, this word does not pertain to a large salamander named Gerry – though I suppose it could. Gerrymander is actually far more interesting than that.

Elbridge Gerry was the vice president of James Madison, the 4th president of the United States. Elbridge had an interesting idea. To get elected a president had to win a certain number of districts. So Elbridge came up with the following plan: if he partitioned a city in a certain way he could ensure that the president would win the majority of the votes from that district.

The end result was a city that was split up into the oddest arrangement of districts. And can you guess what a map of the city, gerrymandered, looked like? Yep, a salamander.

Today the use of gerrymander hasn't changed too much, and refers to the manipulation of boundaries to favor a certain group.

Hector

If you remember reading Homer's Iliad, you may remember Hector, a muscular, daunting force (some of you may more vividly recall Eric Bana from the movie Troy). As people were intimidated around Hector, it makes sense that the word 'hector' means to bully or intimidate.

The boss's hectoring manner put off many employees, some of whom quit as soon as they found new jobs.

Pollyannaish

Like Hector, Pollyannaish comes from fiction. However, in this case we are dealing with a relatively recent work, that of Eleanor Porter who came up with a character named Pollyanna. Pollyanna was extremely optimistic and so it is no surprise that Pollyannaish means extremely optimistic.

Even in the midst of a lousy sales quarter, Debbie remained Pollyannaish, never losing her shrill voice and wide smile, even when people hung up on her.

Chauvinist

Many have heard this word, and some may even have a visceral reaction to the word. However, this word is actually misused. A chauvinist *is not a male who chugs beers, watches too much football, and demeans women*. That would be a male chauvinist. So what is a chauvinist, unadorned by any adjective?

Well, Nicolas Chauvin, a one-time recruit in Napoleon's army, used to go about town, thumping his chest about how great France was. In its modern day incantation, chauvinism can also mean *anyone who thinks that their group is better than anybody else's group*. You can have male chauvinists, political party chauvinists, and even female chauvinists.

Pyrrhic

King Pyrrhus had the unfortunate luck of going up against the Romans. Some would say that he was actually lucky in that he actually defeated the Romans in the Battle of Asculum. Pyrrhic was perhaps more ambivalent, quipping, "One more such victory will undo me."

So any win that comes at so great a cost that it is not even worth it is a pyrrhic victory.

Kafkaesque

By day, Franz Kafka filed papers at an insurance office, and by night churned out dark novels, which suggested that the quotidian world of the office was actually far more sinister. Mainly, his novels were known for the absurd predicaments of their main characters (who often went by nothing more than a single initial).

Today, we have the word Kafkaesque, that refers to the *absurdity we have to deal with living in a world of faceless bureaucracies.* So next time you are put on hold for three hours and then volleyed back in forth between a dozen monotone-voice employees, think to yourself, hey this is Kafkaesque.

Quixotic

Don Quixote is perhaps one of the most well-known characters in all of literature. I suppose there is something heartbreaking yet comical at a man past his prime who believes he is on some great mission to save the world. In fact, Don Quixote was so far off his rocker that he thought windmills were dragons.

As a word that means somebody who mistakes windmills for dragons would have a severely limited application, quixotic has taken the broader meaning of someone who is wildly idealistic. It is one thing to want to help end world hunger; it is another to think you can do so on your own. The latter would be deemed quixotic.

Maudlin

Mary Magdalene was the most important female disciple of Jesus. After Jesus had been crucified, she wept at his tomb.

From this outward outpouring of emotion, we today have the word maudlin. Whereas Mary's weeping was noble, maudlin has taken on a negative connotation. A person who is maudlin cries in public for no good reason, and is oftentimes times used to describe one who's tried to finish a jeroboam alone, and now must share with the stranger sitting next to them all of his deepest feelings.

Panglossian

Interestingly, there is another eponym for literature that has a very similar meaning: Panglossian. Derived from Dr. Pangloss from Voltaire's Candide, Panglossian carries a negative connotation, implying blind optimism.

Despite the fact that his country had been marred by a protracted civil war, Victor remained ever Panglossian, claiming that his homeland was living through a Golden Age.

Malapropism

This is definitely one of my favorite eponyms. While the provenance is nowhere nearly as interesting as those of other eponyms, the word perfectly describes a lapse that any of us is capable of making, especially those studying for the GRE.

Ms. Malaprop was a character in a play *The Rivals* by the largely forgotten George Sheridan. She was known for mixing up similar sounding words, usually to comic effect. Indeed, she would utter the words with complete aplomb that those listening were unsure if she'd even mixed up words in the first place. Her favorite Spanish dance was the flamingo (note: the dance in question is the flamenco; a flamingo is a salmon-colored bird known both for its elegance and tackiness).

GRE malapropisms aren't quite so silly as Ms. Malaprop mixing up a bird and a Spanish dance, but I'll do my best. See if you can spot the GRE malapropisms below.

The graffiti artist was indicated for defecating the church with gang signs.

Picasso was a protein artist, able to mix elements of African art with the oven guard.

Quisling

We've all heard of the Nazis. Some of you may have even heard of the Vichy government, which was a puppet regime set up by the Nazis in France during WWII. Few of us, however, know that Germany also tried to turn Norway into a puppet regime. In order for Germany to take over Norway, it needed an inside man, a Norwegian who would sell his country out for the Nazis.

This man was Viktor Quisling. For arrant perfidy, he has been awarded the eponym quisling, which means traitor.

Byzantine

Okay, I cheated a little on this one. Byzant was not a medieval philosopher (nor an industrious ant). The word 'byzantine' is not derived from a person's name, but from Byzantium, an ancient city that was part of the Byzantine Empire (the word can also refer to the empire itself). Specifically, Byzantium was known for the intricate patterns adorning its architecture. Bulbous domed turrets were emblazoned with ornate latticing (think of the towers on a Russia church).

The modern usage of byzantine refers not to architecture per se, but to anything that is extremely intricate and complex. It actually carries a negative connotation.

Getting a driver's license is not simply a matter of taking a test; the regulations and procedures are so byzantine that many have found themselves at the mercy of the DMV.

Galvanize

Like many late 18th Century scientists, Luigi Galvani was fascinated with electricity (you may recall a certain Ben Franklin who had a similar penchant). Galvani's breakthrough came a little more serendipitously than playing with metal in lightning storms—he noticed that an electric current passing through a dead frog's legs made those legs twitch. This observation sparked—pardon the pun—a series of connections: could it be that electric shock could cause muscles to twitch?

Today, galvanize can mean to shock but in a different sense than through raw electricity. To galvanize is to shock or urge somebody/something into action.

The colonel's speech galvanized the troops, who had all but given up.

Words with Strange Origins

Supercilious

Cilia are small, thick hairs. One area on our bodies that contain cilia is our eyebrows. Supercilious is derived from the rising of these brows. Of course a word that means raising one's eyebrows would probably have limited use. It's what the raising of eyebrows connotes. Apparently, to be supercilious is to be haughty and disdainful. That is, when we look down at someone in a demeaning way, we might be tempted to lift our brows.

Protean

Nope, I have not spelled protein incorrectly (don't worry—carbohydrates will not show up next on the list!). Protean is an eponym derived from the Greek god Proteus, he who could change into shape or forms at will. To be protean, however, does not mean you wow party guests by shifting into various kinds of lawn furniture. The consummate adaptability implied by the word is used to describe a person's ability. So an actor, musician, or writer who is very versatile is protean.

Peter Sellers was truly a protean actor—in Doctor Strangelove he played three very different roles: a jingoist general, a sedate President and a deranged scientist.

Sartorial

The Sartorius muscle is found on your legs and crosses from the back, near the hamstring, all the way to the base of the quadriceps, at the front of the leg. The name Sartorius was derived from the Latin for tailor. You may ask what a leg muscle has to do with a person who stitches clothes? Well, whenever a tailor was at work, he/she would cross his or her legs. In order to do so, a tailor must employ a special leg muscle, the Sartorius. Today, sartorial does not relate directly to the muscle or tailor, but rather to the way we dress (makes sense considering tailors work with clothes).

Monte was astute at navigating the world of finance, however sartorially he was found wanting—typically a beige tie attempted to complement a gray suit and white pants.

Saturnine

The etymology of this curious word can be traced to two sources: alchemy and astrology. For alchemists, Saturn was related to the chemical lead. When a person has severe lead poisoning, he or she takes on a very gloomy and morose disposition. Astrologists, on the other hand, believed that the planet Saturn was gloomy and morose. Usually, we would be loath to attribute human characteristics to large floating rocks, but remember, these were astrologists. Either way you look at it, to be saturnine is to be morose.

Mercurial

From the element mercury, which has no fixed form and constantly changes, we have the word mercurial. Mercurial refers to personality; anyone who easily changes his or her mood easily is known as mercurial. This is a very common GRE word, so make sure you learn it.

Themed Lists

Vocab from Within

Jaundice

Jaundice is a condition of the liver that has the side effect of turning the skin yellow. The second definition—and the one you have to know for the GRE—may seem completely unrelated: to be biased against as a result of envy or prejudice. In the 17th Century, being yellow, apparently, was associated with having prejudice. Hence, we have the second definition of the word jaundice. It is important to note that yellow now, at least colloquially, means to be cowardly. This definition does not relate to jaundice.

Jejune

Many people like this word for the simple reason that it's fun to say. After all, how often do we get to see the summery month of June in a word? All this niftiness aside, the definition of jejune (sadly) is a letdown. To be jejune is to be dull, insipid and lacking flavor. No, it can't be, you think. But yes, jejune, our delightful word—means something that is actually…meh.

But it gets even worse for poor jejune—it is derived from the first part of the large intestine, the jejunum, where food is digested. Now jejune does not only mean boring, it also conjures up images we'd rather leave in the dark.

Finally, jejune has a second definition. Jejune, though, is yet again a victim of bad PR. To be jejune (secondary definition) can also mean to be childish and immature.

Now that I'm done lamenting jejune's debased status, I'm going to have a jejune fit.

Bilious

Speaking of nasty stuff in the body, bilious comes from bile—you know, that yellow stuff in your liver that every once in a while makes a very unwelcome gustatory appearance.

To be filled with bile, however, doesn't mean to have a bad taste in your mouth.

According to Hippocrates, he of the bodily humors, if we are filled with too much bile, we are angry. Therefore, to be bilious is to be constantly irritable and ready to bite somebody's head off.

Choleric

Hippocrates, along with the Roman physician Galen, believed that the body was filled with humors, or fluids. The balance of these humors led to certain moods. If a person had too much black bile he (usually not she) would be said to be choleric, or highly irascible (choleric was more Galen's nomenclature, as Hippocrates stuck to bilious, a synonym for choleric).

Sanguine

But not all is bad in the world of bodily humors. Meet sanguine, from the Latin *sanguineus,* which comes from blood. Not that most of us would consider blood a humor, but according to Galen, blood, along with bile/choler, was one of the four bodily humors. And while this bloody association doesn't bode well for the definition of sanguine, surprisingly, sanguine means to be cheerful, optimistic.

How did this ever come to be? Well, when we are happy the blood rushes to our cheeks turning them red (yes, this seems to me about as valid as yellow meaning prejudice—not that green with envy makes any sense).

While sanguine has a positive definition, the word sanguinary—note the *sang-* root—means a carnage or bloodbath. Yes, I know English can be a confusing language. But, if you learn these high-frequency GRE words, you will have something to be sanguine about!

People You Wouldn't Want To Meet

Martinet

Not to be confused with a doll dangled on strings (that's a marionette) a martinet is a person who is a strict disciplinarian. Think of a drill sergeant who barks an order and a platoon of cadets jump to attention – the slightest misstep and its toilet duty. If anything, the martinet is the one holding the strings.

This military example is no coincidence – martinet is an eponym, meaning a word derived from a person's name. The guilty party in this case is the 17th Century French drillmaster Jean Martinet.

Curmudgeon

Probably one of my favorite GRE words – it's great for describing certain folk and it's fun to say. A curmudgeon is a grouchy, surly person, one who is always sulking as they grumble about something or another.

Misanthrope

You thought a curmudgeon was bad? A misanthrope – or hater of mankind – walks down the street spewing vitriol at all those who walk by. College campuses are famous for misanthropes, those disheveled types who haunt coffee shops, muttering balefully as students pass by. Some say they are homeless – others that they didn't get tenure. Regardless, steer clear of the misanthrope.

Reprobate

This word comes from reprove, a popular GRE word, which means (nope, not to prove again) to express disapproval of. A reprobate is a noun and is the recipient of the disapproval.

Reprobate is a mildly humorous word, meaning that you would use it to describe some no good soul, but one you have a fondness for.

Those old reprobates drinking all day down by the river -they are not going to amount to much.

Virago

This word has a real cool origin – the *vir-* comes from the Latin man. Virago, however, was coined during the medieval period to describe heroic female warriors. Today virago does not have such a noble connotation – it describes an ill-tempered and sometimes violent woman. If you've ever had an old lady scream at you for no good reason, then you've had an encounter with a virago.

Religious Words

Cardinal

When it comes time to elect the pope who gets together? The cardinals, of course. And when you're watching baseball in St. Louis, and the players all of red birds on their uniforms, which team are you seeing? The Cardinals, of course. And when you are on the GRE and you see the word cardinal? Well it has nothing to do with birds, baseball or popes.

Cardinal means of primary importance, fundamental. That makes sense when you think of the cardinals in the church – after all they do elect the pope. The bird happens to be the same color as the cardinals' robes and St. Louis…I have no clue.

As if you needed any more associations – the expression, "cardinal sin", retains the GRE definition of the word, and means primary. It does not refer to naughty churchmen.

Syncretic

This is a difficult word, and not one that would go on any top 1000 words you have to know for the GRE. But for those with a robust vocabulary, pay heed: if a I concoct a new religion and decide to take bits and pieces from other religions (I don a cardinal's robe, shave my head a la Buddha, and disseminate glossy pamphlets about the coming apocalypse) then I have created a syncretic religion: one that combines elements of different religions.

You can probably see where this is going with the GRE definition – which tends to offer a little more latitude. Syncretic – more generally speaking – can refer to any amalgam of different schools of thought.

Jerry the shrink takes a syncretic approach to psychotherapy – he mixes the Gestalt school with some Jung and a healthy (or unhealthy) dose of Freud.

Ecclesiastical

This one is easy. It means of or relating to the church. Out of all the words in the list, ecclesiastical is the only one that hasn't taken on a more broad – or completely unexpected – definition. Speaking of unexpected, look at the word below…

Parochial

This word comes from parish, a small ecclesiastical district, usually located in the country. The word still has this meaning, i.e. relating to a church parish, but we are far more concerned with the negative connotation that has emerged from the rather sedate original version.

To be parochial is to be narrow-minded in one's view. The idea is if you are hanging out in the country, you tend to be a little cut off from things. The pejorative form– at least to my knowledge – is not a knock at religion.

Catholic

We have many associations with Catholicism – from cardinals to mass, to nuns wielding crucifixes at frothing demons. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that a second definition of catholic – the GRE definition – is universal.

Or not, considering that Catholicism has a universal reach and, more importantly, the Catholic Church conducts mass in Latin. Catholic comes from the Late Latin *catholicus*, which means, as you can probably guess, universal.

Anathema

A few hundred years ago, many ran afoul of the church, and excommunications (and worse) were typical reprisals. If such was the case, the Pope actually uttered a formal curse against a person. This curse was called the anathema.

Today this word, in addition to a broader scope, has taken a twist. If something is anathema (n.), he, she, or it is the source of somebody's hate.

The verb form of the word, anathematize, still carries the old meaning of to curse.

Anathema through the ages*: Galileo was anathema to the church; Rush Limbaugh is anathema to those on the Left.*

Desecrate

If a person willfully violates or destroys any sacred place, he (or she) is said to desecrate it. Tombs, graves, churches, shrines and the like can all be victims of desecrations. One, however, cannot desecrate a person, regardless of how holy that person may be.

The felon had desecrated the holy site, and was on the church's Top 10 Anathema List.

Apostasy

Some believers turn against their faith and renounce it. We call this act apostasy, and those who commit it, apostates. Today the word carries a slightly broader connotation in that it can apply to politics as well.

An apostate of the Republican Party, Sheldon has yet to become affiliated with any part but dubs himself a "literal independent."

Sanctimonious

This is a tricky word, and thus you can bet it's one of GRE's favorite. Sanctimonious does not mean filled with sanctity or holiness. Instead it refers to that quality that can overcome someone who feels that they are holier (read: morally superior) to everybody else.

Colloquially, we hear the term holier-than-thou. That is a very apt way to describe the attitude of a sanctimonious person.

Even during the quiet sanctity of evening prayer, she held her chin high, a sanctimonious sneer forming on her face.

Iconoclast

This is an interesting word. The definition that relates to the church is clearly negative, i.e. an iconoclast is one who destroys religious images. Basically, this definition applies to the deranged drunk who goes around desecrating icons of the Virgin Mary.

The applicability of this definition to GRE is clearly suspect. The second definition however happens to be one of the GRE's top 100 words. An iconoclast—more broadly speaking—is somebody who attacks cherished beliefs or institutions. This use of the word is not necessarily negative:

According to some scholars, art during the 19th century had stagnated into works aimed to please fusty Art Academies - it took the iconoclasm of Vincent Van Gogh to inject fresh life into the effete world of painting.

Words from Political Scandals

Malfeasance

Malfeasance is wrongdoing, usually by a public official. Oftentimes, you hear the term corporate malfeasance—this type of wrongdoing occurs when somebody in the business world is up to no good. Typically, though, malfeasance is used in the context of politics. And, not to sound too cynical, but one usually doesn't have to look much further than one's local news to find example of malfeasance—political or corporate.

Lascivious

Lascivious, like lecherous, prurient, and libidinous, all refer to perversion. In terms of linking these words to the world of politics…well, given the events of the last few months, I don't think I need to elaborate. Just make sure to lock your hotel room doors.

Embroiled

To become caught up in a scandal is to become embroiled in it. In the last couple of months, a few well-known politicians (again, not naming any names) have become embroiled in scandals. From the verb embroiled, we get the noun imbroglio, which is an embarrassing, confusing situation.

These days we are never short of a D.C. imbroglio - a welcome phenomenon for those who, having barely finished feasting on the sordid details of one scandal, can sink their teeth into a fresh one.

Venality

If you've ever heard of a government taking bribes, well, that is an example of venality. To be venal is to be corrupt. Of late, charges of venality tend to be few, though such charges simply don't make the same headlines as scandals of the lecherous kind.

Prevaricate

If you've ever seen a politician caught in a lie (never!), and that person is trying to wiggle their way out of a pointed question, he (or she) is prevaricating. Not that a U.S. president would ever prevaricate by talking about the household pet when confronted with charges of venality.

Turpitude

Sometimes lechery and its synonymous friends are just too soft when describing certain acts of malfeasance. At the far ends of the political spectrum, where outrage is felt most keenly, people feel

the need to invoke far harsher vocabulary when condemning naughty behavior. One such word is turpitude, which gained prominence in the late 90's (Google will fill in the blanks). A synonym for depravity, turpitude is only reserved for those acts deemed to be downright wicked and immoral. If you need further explication, imagine the final days of the Roman Empire.

Money Matters: How Much Can You Spend?

Thrifty

If you are thrifty you spend money wisely. Be careful not to confuse 'thrifty' with 'spendthrift', which is below.

He was economical, spending his money thriftily and on items considered essential.

Spendthrift

The opposite of thrifty. If you are spendthrift, you buy as though consumerism were going out of style. This one is perhaps easy to remember; it does, after all, have the word 'spend' in it.

Weekly trips to Vegas, 5-star restaurants on Tuesday evenings, Megan was a spendthrift whose prodigality would inevitably catch up with her.

Parsimonious

A synonym with miserly and stingy. Parsimonious is GRE-speak for extremely frugal. Like miserly, this word has a negative connotation.

Even with millions in his bank account, Fred had followed a diet consisting of nothing more than bread and canned soup.

Sybarite

This is a person who indulges in luxury. And though the word doesn't directly relate to wealth, most of the times a sybarite has to be wealthy (though even the relatively penurious* amongst us can live the life of a sybarite, if he or she isn't loath to run up several credit cards.)

Impecunious

The word pecuniary means of or relating to money. Impecunious means not having any money. Pecunious, now mainly obsolete, means—as you can probably guess—wealthy.

In extremely trying times, even the moderately wealthy, after a few turns of ill-fortune, can become impecunious.

Penurious

This is a synonym for impecunious. Penurious also can be a synonym for miserly, so this word can be a little tricky. Whenever you have a word with two meanings, even if those meanings are closely related, make sure to come up with example sentences for both, so you don't forget one of the definitions. (I've done so below).

Truly penurious, Mary had nothing more than a jar full of pennies.

Sarah chose to be penurious and drive a beat-up VW, though with her wealth she could have easily afforded an Italian sports car.

Insolvent

If you are insolvent you can't pay your bills. Oftentimes people use the term "bankrupt". If you are solvent, on the other hand, you have paid off all your debts.

With credit card bills skyrocketing, surprisingly few are truly solvent.

Affluent

To be affluent is to be wealthy. This word usually describes countries, neighborhoods, or groups of people.

The center of the city had sadly become a pit of penury, while, only five miles away, multi-million dollar homes spoke of affluence.

Money Matters: Can't Spend it Fast Enough

Profligate

This word means spending recklessly almost to the point of immorality. This word often pops up in politics, when some charge that government is spending wastefully.

Prodigal

The provenance of this word—like many GRE words—is the Bible. One of Jesus' most famous parables, the story is of a young man who squanders his father's wealth and returns home destitute. His father forgives him, but to posterity he will forever be remembered as the prodigal son. Therefore to be prodigal is to squander or waste wealth (it doesn't necessarily have to be familial wealth.)

Avarice

One of the seven deadly sins, avarice means greed. Of note, this word doesn't necessarily mean greed for money but usually pertains to possessions and not food.

Cupidity

This word is similar to avarice in that it means greedy. But the word is even more relevant to this post in that it means greed for money. Surprising, right? We think of Cupid the flying cherub, firing his arrow away and making Romeos and Juliets out of us. To avoid any confusion, instead imagine Cupid flying around shooting arrows into people's wallets/purses and then swooping in and taking the loot. Oh what cupidity!

Money Matters: A Helping (or Thieving!) Hand

Defray

Is to help pay the cost of, either in part of full. Often times when students go off to college, they hope that tuition (which is always becoming steeper these days) will be defrayed by any of a number of means: scholarships, parents, burgeoning stock portfolio, or even generous relatives.

In order for Sean to attend the prestigious college his magnanimous uncle helped defray the excessive tuition with a monthly infusion of cash.

Stipend

Is a regular allowance, usually for a student (yes it seems that many of these money matters are related to students!). Of course stipends aren't just limited to students; governments provide stipends to a number of different people.

He was hoping for a monthly allowance loan from the government, but after no such stipend was forthcoming he realized he would have to seek other means of defraying his college tuition.

Pittance

A small amount of money, pittance carries with it a negative connotation: a pittance is inadequate and will do little to take care of one's cost.

Vinny's Uncle beamed smugly about how he'd offered his nephew fifty dollars for his Harvard tuition; even twice the amount would have been a mere pittance.

Dupe

This word means to trick or swindle. This word can function as a verb or as a noun. A dupe is a person who is easily swindled.

The charlatan mistook the crowd for a bunch of dupes, but the crowd was quickly on to him and decried his bald-faced attempt to bilk them.

Mulct

This strange looking word also means to swindle or defraud someone. (Though the swindling doesn't always have to relate to money.) Mulct can also mean to fine someone.

The so-called magical diet cure simply ended up mulcting Maria out of hundreds of dollars, but not hundreds of pounds.

Fleece

Don't feel sheepish if you thought this word only pertained to the coat of an ovine. As a verb fleece means to swindle or dupe.

The Internet is filled with get-rich-quick schemes that intend only to fleece the Pollyannaish and unsuspecting.

Vocabulary from up on High

Zenith, Summit, Acme, Pinnacle and Apex

Strangely English has five words that mean the top of a mountain (perhaps our first lexicographers were avid alpinists). Spirited hiking, however, is only the half of it. Typically, you will encounter these words in a figurative sense:

At the zenith of his artistic career, Elvis was outselling any other artist on the charts.

The Ivy League is considered the apex of the education system.

At its pinnacle, the Roman Empire extended across most of the landmass of Eurasia, a feat not paralleled to the rise of the British Empire in the 18th and 19th century.

Apogee

The point at which the moon is farthest from the earth is known as the apogee. In terms of accomplishment or achievement, this word can refer to the highest point or culmination of something.

The apogee of the Viennese style of music, Mozart's music continues to mesmerize audiences well into the 21st century.

Apotheosis

If a person (or a thing) has reached such a point as to be god-like, then that person has reached an apotheosis.

As difficult as it is to imagine, the apotheosis of Steve Job's career, many believe, is yet to come.

Who is Nadir?

With all these people reaching the top of the career, isn't there a word that refers to the bottom or lowest point of a person's career? The answer is, well, of course. Meet nadir. Nadir doesn't have to refer to just a career, but can be the lowest point.

Mike had walked in cold to the new GRE and was not surprised afterwards that he'd hit a standardized test nadir. After he dedicated himself to GRE prep with the same vigor that Sir Edmund Hillary first scaled the summit of Mt. Everest, Mike scored near perfect—the apogee of his academic career.

Preposterous Prepositions

Untoward

You may think that untoward has something to do with a direction. But untoward does not mean disinclined to walk eastwards. Untoward is an adjective meaning not favorable, inconvenient. A popular GRE synonym for untoward is inauspicious.

Upbraid

Upon seeing this word, you may imagine a hair stylist busily braiding patrons' hair. Upbraid, however, relates neither to up nor braiding. It means to scold or berate, and is part of the criticism synonym tree.

Underwrite

If you are writing below the margins of a paper you are not underwriting—you are simply writing below the margins of a piece of paper. Underwrite means to support financially.

The latest symphony broadcast was made possible with the underwriting from various Arts & Humanities associations.

Overweening

What exactly does it mean to 'ween'? To go out on Halloween, perhaps? Making an overweening person one who takes a little bit too zealously to candy collecting and wakes up the next morning with a sugar hangover?

The answer of course is none of the above. To be overweening is to be presumptuously arrogant. What exactly does that mean? Say the aforementioned trick-o-treater grabs three times as much candy as everyone else, because he assumes he is entitled to as much candy as he wants. He would be overweening. Which would make him overweening while Halloweening (okay, I'll stop before my humor becomes overweening!*).

*Overweening can also refer to ideas/opinions/appetites that are excessive or immoderate.

Them's Fighting Words

Bellicose

From the Latin root bell-, which means war, we get bellicose. Someone who is bellicose is warlike, and inclined to quarrel. The word is similar to belligerent, which also employs the bell- root.

Known for their bellicose ways, the Spartans were once the most feared people from Peloponnesus to Persia.

Truculent

A person who is truculent has a fierce, savage nature. As I drive a smaller car, I often find trucks—from the 18-wheeler to the 4×4—to be quite truck-ulent when they drive. A silly mnemonic, but next time you are cut off by a truck, instead of giving the proverbial middle-finger, you can just mutter, what a truculent fellow.

Standing in line for six hours, she became progressively truculent, yelling at DMV employees and elbowing other people waiting in line.

Pugnacious

Pugnacious means having an inclination to fight and be combative. A useful mnemonic is a pug dog—you know, those really small dogs that always try to attack you while releasing a fusillade of yaps.

Nobody wanted to work with Dexter lest he or she become embroiled in some spat; even those who tried to avoid Dexter eventually had to deal with his pugnacity.

Contentious

If you are contentious, you like to fight with words. If you know somebody who is always trying to pick an argument about something, no matter how trivial, that person is contentious.

She became increasingly contentious, misconstruing even an innocuous statement as a hostile one.

Jingoist

Jingoism is bellicosity meets patriotism. A person who thinks their country should always be at war is a jingoist. The word is similar to hawkish, a word that means favoring conflict over compromise.

In the days leading up to war, a nation typically breaks up into the two opposing camps: doves, who do their best to avoid war, and jingoists, who are only too eager to wave national flags from their vehicles and vehemently denounce those who do not do the same.

Animal Mnemonics

Badger

For those who have not lived in the U.S., this animal may be as exotic as the lemur is for the rest of us. A badger is basically a weasel on steroids – you wouldn't want to upset one. Curiously, the verb badger doesn't carry any menacing connotation. To badger simply means to pester repeatedly. Perhaps a buzzing fly comes to mind, however the verb 'fly' was already taken.

Badgered by his parents to find a job, the 30-year-old loafer instead joined a gang of itinerant musicians.

Hound

A hound usually rears its canine head in movies in which the bad guy is on the lam. Or I take that back – the hound usually drops its head to the ground, sniffing out the bad guy as he crosses treacherous terrain. Unsurprisingly, the verb form of hound is to pursue relentlessly.

An implacable foe of corruption, Eliot Ness hounded out graft in all forms – he even helped nab Al Capone.

Dog

Man's best friend, right? Well, as long as it's not in verb form. To dog means to pursue relentlessly, and is thus a synonym of hound.

Throughout his life, he was dogged by insecurities that inhibited personal growth.

Cow

The verb form of cow always tickles me, as I imagine the cow to be one of the more placid creatures. Despite such bovine equanimity, to cow means to use intimidation to make someone give in. In the 'cheesy' mnemonic department, imagine a cow on steroids (as most tend to be these days) telling you to 'moo'-ve out of the way. Pretty intimidating, huh?

Do not be cowed by a 3,000-word vocabulary list - use quizlet.com and turn that list into a deck of flashcards!

Ferret

A ferret is a tiny weasel, one that moves so quickly that it is used to catch rabbits. Apparently it has a knack for digging our long-eared friend out of their burrows. Unlike some of the verbs above, the verb

form of ferret aptly fits the animal—to ferret means to search for something persistently. Usually the verb is coupled with a preposition as in, “ferret something out” or “ferret around”.

Ever the resourceful lexicographer, Fenton was able to ferret out the word origin of highly obscure words.

Webster's Favorites

Mellifluous

If something sounds as sweet as honey, it is mellifluous. The voices of Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday, and even that of Bill Clinton are mellifluous (listen to the way our former President was able to, through turns of locution and his southern drawl, to imbue the mundane with a sense of pleading urgency). Of course, what sounds mellifluous is a matter of opinion. As long as it's not Justin Bieber.

Palimpsest

A long time ago, even before the days when email was popular, people wrote on scrolls. Apparently papyrus wasn't affordable so scribes reused the same scroll over again, writing on top of what had gone before. By extension, any writing material that has been written on numerous times, so that the vague traces of previous writing can be seen, is a palimpsest. A poorly erased chalkboard, the manically edited essays of my high school days.

More broadly speaking, a palimpsest can refer to anything that has been changed numerous times but which traces of former instantiations can still be seen.

The downtown was a palimpsest of the city's checkered past - a new Starbucks had opened up next to an abandoned, shuttered building, and a freshly asphalted road was inches away from a pothole large enough to swallow a house pet.

Serendipity

This morning I wasn't looking for this article, but there it was – a pleasant find. That's an example of serendipity. Finding something pleasant that you weren't even looking for. The Internet is full of serendipity – something you were never looking for you end up buying. Though if this becomes a habit, it may cease to be serendipitous.

Defenestrate

Okay, fine…there is slim chance that this word will pop up on the GRE, but it is one of my favorite words. It is a comical way of saying to throw someone out of a window, which in a sense is comical, as there is nothing comical about getting thrown out of a window.

These days defenestrate is really nothing more than a linguistic curiosity, yet there was a time, long ago, when windows had neither panes nor glass. Think medieval castle. Apparently, defenestration happened enough that someone thought up a word for it. (To see a defenestration, check out the movie Braveheart, which shows the tyrannical King Edward I defenestrating a hapless lad).

"Occupy" Vocabulary

Invective

The verb form of invective, at least in a loose sense, is inveigh. This word popped up a lot on the old GRE, because it was easily confused with inveigle, which means to coax. Both words are still good to know for the New GRE.

Diatribe

A diatribe is a strong verbal attack against someone or something. The victim of a diatribe is typically some organization, whether it be the FDA, the government, or, in this case, Wall Street. It is understood that the person unleashing the diatribe is angry.

Screed

Screed takes on a more negative connotation, and suggests an abusive rant that has since become tedious and hackneyed. Currently, the Occupy movements have hardly devolved into screeds, and may even intensify, if protestors feel their various demands have not been met. However, if the protest fizzles out months from now, except for the lone dude in the park, gesticulating at a passel of pigeons …well, he is very likely launching into a screed.

Tirade

A tirade is an angry speech, one that suggests the person giving the tirade has become a little too angry, and should probably dismount the soapbox.

Harangue

Harangue can be either a noun or a verb. It is a synonym of tirade and diatribe. Lest someone harangue you for botched phonetics, the pronunciation of this word can be a bit tricky. Harangue rhymes with twang, rang, and, for the dessert inclined, meringue.

Vituperation

This word is fun to say. Vituperating someone is neither fun for the 'vituperater' nor the 'vituperatee.' When you vituperate somebody, or something, you violently launch into an invective or tirade. Spit lassoes out of your mouth, froth forming at your lips. Understandably, vituperate is only used in extreme cases.

Vocab from the Lab

Precipitate

There aren't too many words in the English language that, without any change in spelling, can be a noun, verb, or an adjective. Precipitate, one such word, conjures up the image of technicians in lab coats, mixing test tubes.

The precipitate is part of the solution left inside a test tube (or any other container used in labs these days). This definition, though, is not important for the GRE. The verb and adjective definitions, however, are. To be precipitate is to be hasty or rash. To precipitate something, such as a government precipitating a crisis, means to make something happen suddenly.

Amalgam

An amalgam, in the chemistry sense, is an alloy made of mercury and some other metal (formerly used, before the health scare, as part of our dental fillings). Generally speaking, an amalgam is a mixture of two or more things.

The band's music was an amalgam of hip-hop and jazz.

(In)solvent

In chemistry, a solvent is any substance able to breakdown or dissolve another substance. Outside the lab, to be solvent is to be able to pay off one's debts. To be insolvent, on the other hand, is not to be able to pay off one's debts.

Catalyst

In chemistry, when one substance speeds up a chemical reaction, that substance is said to be a catalyst. Broadly speaking, anything that speeds up (or precipitates) an event is a catalyst.

Mercurial

For those who have since forgotten this slippery word, to be mercurial means to change constantly in terms of personality or mood. Typically, we say a mercurial person is moody and unpredictable. When you think of actual mercury—you know, that strange liquid inside thermometers, not the planet—it too is slippery and constantly changing (do not put this to the test—mercury is highly toxic). This poisonous quality, though, did not make it into the definition of mercurial. Someone who is mercurial is just moody.

Compound Words

Slapdash

One word conjures up a relatively violent action, the other what one typically does if they want to escape a dangerous situation. Put them together and you get, voila, a word meaning careless. That's right-- slapdash means hastily put together.

Heyday

About two of the most ordinary words I can think of, and how someone who is generally apathetic might greet the morning. Put them together, and you get something far more exciting. Heyday is the pinnacle, or top, of a person, time period or career.

In Mike Tyson's heyday, he was the most formidable fighter on the planet, and was simply unstoppable.

During the heyday of Prohibition, bootlegging had become such a lucrative business that many who had been opposed to the 18th Amendment began to fear it would be repealed.

Hodgepodge

Okay, I'm not really sure what a hodge is, or for that matter, a podge. But if you put them together, you get hodgepodge, a word that means a confusing mixture or jumble.

Long after his heyday as Germany's pre-eminent visionary philosopher, Nietzsche began to populate his writing with a hodgepodge of aphorisms.

Aboveboard

I guess whatever is below the board is deceptive, because aboveboard means open an honest. It usually refers to government officials who are honest.

The mayor, despite his avuncular visage plastered about the city, was hardly aboveboard - some concluded that it was his ingratiating smile that allowed him to engage in corrupt behavior and get away with it.

Thoroughgoing

If something is thorough it is complete. Therefore, thorough isn't too far from the meaning of thoroughgoing, which means absolute.

As a thoroughgoing bibliophile, one who had turned his house into a veritable library, he shocked his friends when he bought a Kindle.

Telltale

If I tell a tale, I am telling a story, one that is usually a fib. Telltale, however, simply means revealing.

The many telltale signs of chronic smoking include yellow teeth, and a persistent, hacking cough.

Halloween Vocabulary

Cadaverous

If someone is so skinny or emaciated that they look like a dead person, then that person is cadaverous. This word comes from cadaver, which is a corpse. Besides emaciated, a good synonym for cadaverous is gaunt.

Some actors take challenging roles in which they have to lose so much weight that they appear cadaverous.

Macabre

If a story, film, or, for that matter, any description is filled with gruesome details about death and horror, we say that it is macabre.

Edgar Allen Poe was considered the master of the macabre - his stories vividly describe the moment leading up to - and often those moments after - a grizzly death.

Goosebumps

I would never have considered this a vocabulary word (let alone a GRE word), until, that is, the New GRE Power Prep test included a text-completion in which goosebumps was the answer.

Goosebumps describe that sensation on our skin when we become frightened. You know, those sudden pimple-like bumps that suddenly appear when you are watching the first half of a horror movie (the last part of horror movies are typically cheesy, once they show the monster). Well, this is now a good word to remember for the GRE, lest you want to get goosebumps test day.

Diabolical

This word comes from the Latin and Greek for devil (for those speak Spanish, you may notice that the word is very similar to diablo). To be diabolical is to be extremely wicked like the devil.

The conspirators, willing to dispatch anyone who stood in their way, hatched a diabolical plan to take over the city,

Phantasmagorical

This is a terrifying word, just from the standpoint of pronunciation: [fan-taz-*muh*-**gawr**-ik-al] The definition is equally frightening– a series of images that seem as though they are out of a dream,

whether those images are real or in one's head.

Those suffering from malaria fall into a feverish sleep, their world a whirligig of phantasmagoria - if they recover, they are unsure of what actually took place and what was simply a product of their febrile imaginations.

Talkative Words

Gregarious

If you are sociable, you are talkative, right? Well, not exactly. To be gregarious is to be likely to socialize with others. A good synonym is flocking, like what birds do. But, just as birds do not talk to one another outside of a Pixar flick, people can hang out with each other and not necessarily have to chat. Therefore, do not confuse gregarious with garrulous, which means talkative.

Ingenuous

You may think you've heard someone exclaim, *what an ingenuous plan*! But, it's actually an ingenious plan. To be ingenuous is to be naïve and innocent. So, if you are likely to go along with a devious plan, whether or not it is ingenious, you are ingenuous.

Peruse

Peruse means to read very carefully. Unfortunately, the colloquial usage not only ignores this definition, but goes so far as to flip this definition on its head. Now, peruse means to read over quickly. So, make sure to remember this definition, and, if necessary, peruse the definition.

Disabuse

To disabuse is not the opposite of abuse (which would be a strange word to have an opposite for in the first place). To disabuse is to persuade somebody that his/her belief is not valid. Often, disabuse goes together with the word notion:

As a child, I was quickly disabused of the notion that Santa Claus was a rotund benefactor of infinite largess; one night I saw my mother diligently wrapping presents and storing them under our Christmas tree.

Mettlesome

When you poke your nose in somebody else's business, you are being meddlesome. If you are mettlesome, on the other hand, you are filled with mettle (no, not the hard stuff). Mettle means courage or valor. A soldier on the battlefield is mettlesome when he runs into enemy fire to save a comrade.

By the Letter

A-Words

Amiable

Amiable means friendly. It is very similar to amicable, another common GRE word. Amicable, however, does not refer to a person the way that amiable does, but rather refers to relationships between people. You'll notice that amicable is, therefore, the opposite of acrimonious (see below).

Affable

Likeable, easy to talk to: affable is similar to amiable. The differences are subtle, and as far as the GRE is concerned, you can treat them as the same word. Like amiable, this word is great to use to describe people we know. After all, everyone knows an affable person.

Amenable

Easily persuaded: if someone is cooperative and goes along with the program, so to speak, that person is amenable. Amenable can also be used in the medical sense—if a disease is amenable to treatment, that disease can be treated.

Attenuate

To weaken (in terms of intensity), to taper off/become thinner: attenuate can refer to both abstract and tangible things (e.g. her animosity towards Bob attenuated over the years, the stick is attenuated at one end).

Animosity

Intense hostility: animosity should be reserved for extreme cases. That is, if you really loathe someone, and that person feels the same way, then you can say animosity exists between the two of you.

A related word, and a synonym, is animus (though animus can also mean motivation, as in impetus).

Anomalous

Not normal, out of the ordinary: this is simply the adjective, and scarier looking, form of anomaly, which is a noun. Anomalous can be used in cases to describe something that is not typical, like this cold California spring we've been having over here.Acrimony

Bitterness and ill-will: acrimony—don't forget the adjective form, acrimonious—describes relationships filled with bitterness and ill will. Disputes and arguments can also be modified with acrimonious, depending on the case.

Aberration

A deviation from what is normal or expected: this word is tinged with a negative connotation. For instance, in psychology there is a subset of behavior known as aberrant behavior. So, basically, if you're narcissistic, psychotic, or just plain old cuckoo, you are demonstrating aberrant behavior.

Ambiguous

Open to more than one interpretation: let's say I have two friends, Bob and Paul. If I tell you that he is coming to my house today, then that is ambiguous. Who do I mean? Paul or Bob?

Amorphous

Shapeless: Morph- comes from the Latin for shape. The root a-, as in atypical, means not or without. Therefore, if something is amorphous, it lacks shape.

C-Words

Conciliate

To conciliate is to make peace with

His opponents believed his gesture to be conciliatory, yet as soon as they put down their weapons, he unsheathed a hidden sword.

Corroborate

To corroborate something is to confirm or lend support to (usually an idea or claim)

Her claim that frog populations were falling precipitously in Central America was corroborated by locals, who reported that many species of frogs had seemingly vanished overnight.

Calumny

A calumny is a false statement meant to injure a person's reputation

With the presidential primaries well under way, the air is thick with calumny, and the mud is already waist-high.

Commensurate

To be commensurate to is to be in proportion or corresponding in degree or amount

The definition of this word tends to be a little unwieldy, regardless of the source. Therefore, it is a word that screams to be understood in context (for this very reason, GRE loves commensurate, because they know that those who just devour flashcards will not understand how the word works in a sentences). Speaking of a sentence…

The convicted felon's life sentence was commensurate to the heinousness of his crime.

An increase in crop yield will not lead to a commensurate increase in profit, as the market is already glutted with too many crops.

Churlish

Someone who is churlish is lacking manners or refinement; rude and unpleasant

The manager was unnecessarily churlish to his subordinates, rarely deigning to say hello, but always quick with a sartorial jab if someone happened to be wearing anything even slightly unbecoming.

Castigate

To castigate someone is to reprimand harshly

This word is very similar to chastise. They even have the same etymology (word history).

Drill sergeants are known to castigate new recruits so mercilessly that the latter often break down during their first week in training.

Chastise

Very similar to castigate, it also means to reprimand harshly

See sentence for castigate.

Cogent

Something that's cogent is clear and persuasive

His essay writing, while full of clever turns of phrases, lacks cogency.

Contentious

Contentious has two meanings: controversial (in terms of an issue); inclined to arguing (in terms of a person)

This word does not mean content. It comes from contend, which means to argue. Be chary (see below) of this word.

As soon as the discussion turns to politics, Uncle Hank becomes highly contentious, vehemently disagreeing with those who endorse the same positions.

Chary

Chary rhymes with wary, and it means to be cautious. They are also synonyms.

Jack was wary of GRE words that looked similar, because they usually had different definitions; not so with chary, a word that he began to use interchangeably with wary.

Easily Confusable F-Words

Fractious

If someone is fractious, he/she is irritable and is likely to cause disruption.

We rarely invite my fractious Uncle over for dinner; he always complains about the food, and usually launches into a tirade on some touchy subject.

Factious

Factions result when a large group splinters into smaller ones. Anything that causes factions is factious.

The controversial bill proved factious, as dissension even within parties resulted.

Factitious

A tricky word, to say the least. When I preface a word by saying it's tricky, you can bet that the word's definition is not what you would expect. Factitious is no exception, in that it does not relate to fact. Indeed, factitious is almost the opposite of fact. Factitious means artificial, not natural. A laugh can be factitious. A gesture. Your alacrity on the first day of a new job.

Factitious can also be used literally to refer to something artificial. The houseplant that never needs watering, for instance. A good synonym for factitious—and a word people use frequently—is phony.

Vicious Pairs of V's

Vindictive vs. Vindicate

These words look very similar, so their definitions must be somewhat related. Right? Actually, the two words are very different. To be vindictive means to have a very strong desire for revenge.

As for vindicate, it means to prove oneself right. What, exactly, does this mean? Say you claim to your friends that you will score at the 95th percentile on the verbal. They doubt your claim, and lightly tease you on your lofty and seemingly unattainable goal. Now, it's up to you to prove that you can do it. If you score at the 95th percentile on test day, then you've vindicated yourself. You've proven that your original claim was correct. If you score way below that…well, then you avoid your friends for some time.

Vicarious vs. Vicissitude

Isn't travel great? You get to experience other cultures, and see the world. Well, actually, sometimes traveling can be more stressful than a rush-hour commute—lost luggage, stolen items, and inclement weather are just a few of the many woes that can beset the traveler.

So, why not stay at home and watch the travel channel? With just one flick of the wrist, you can journey to the distant lands of Machu Picchu or Angkor Wat. Enjoying something through another person's experiences—in this case the host of the travel show—is to live vicariously. The contexts, of course, can vary widely. Maybe your best friend has told you all about his or her graduate school experiences via weekly blog posts. Now you, too, feel that you've gone through grad school. That's living vicariously.

A vicissitude is any change in one's circumstances, usually for the worse. That is, life is full of ups and down that are beyond our control. Those are the vicissitudes. Speaking of, traveling—especially any of those quit-your-job six-week jaunts through Europe—is full of vicissitudes, so again, sometimes it's better to stay at home and tune into the travel station (as long as the remote control doesn't give out).

Venal vs. Venial

You definitely do not want to confuse these two. To call someone venal is to say they are corrupt, and likely to accept bribes. To be venial actually doesn't refer to a person but rather a sin or an offense. A venial offense is one that is minor and pardonable.

His traffic violations ran the gamut from the venial to the egregious—on one occasion he simply did not come to a complete stop; another time he tried to escape across state lines at speeds in excess of 140 mph.

Veracious vs. Voracious

These words not only deviate by only one letter, they also sound very similar. As for their definitions, you definitely do not want to confuse them. Veracious means truthful; voracious means hungry, either literally or figuratively.

Steven was a voracious reader, sometimes finishing two novels in the same day.

Venerate vs. Enervate

Okay, fine, this one is deviating from the agenda a little. Still, despite not starting with a 'v', enervate actually contains all the letters found in 'venerate', only scrambled. As for their meanings, these two words are anything but similar. To venerate someone is to respect that person deeply. To enervate, on the other hand, is to sap that person of energy.

Dave found the professor's lecture so enervating that not even a potent cup of joe could keep his eyes from drooping.

The professor, despite his soporific lectures, was venerated amongst his colleagues, publishing more papers yearly than all of his peers combined.

"X" words

Excoriate

To yell at someone is one thing; to excoriate them is a whole other. A martinet of a boss whom you've once again upset; a drill sergeant berating a feckless, smirking recruit; now we are closer.

So to criticize really, really harshly is to excoriate. Interestingly, the second definition of the word is to tear one's skin from his/her body. To verbally excoriate is to figuratively rip off a person's skin (with such an arresting visual, I don't think I need an example sentence!).

Extenuating

Extenuating means making less guilty or more forgivable. The phrase 'extenuating circumstances' is common courtroom lingo. Say somebody broke into a drugstore to steal some expensive medication. Later we learn that medication was for that person's wife, who was dying of some disease that only the medication could cure. Most of us, presumably, would be more likely to forgive the man. Why? Because of the extenuating factor of his wife's disease.

Execrate

This word just sounds awful. The good news is the word has a very negative connotation. To execrate somebody is to curse and hiss at them. For instance a certain American basketball player left his team of many years so he could make more money with another team. Fans of the original team execrated the player for his perfidy and his mercenary motives.

Interestingly, the adjective form of 'execrate' is the relatively common GRE word 'execrable.' If something is execrable, we condemn it as awful (and worthy of hissing).

Though the new sitcom did decently in the ratings, Nelson railed against the show, say that it was nothing more than execrable pastiche of tired cliché's and canned laughter.

Exegesis

This word refers to a critical interpretation of a scholarly work. If you think that definition is intimidating, the adjective form is exegetical.

The Bible is fertile ground for exegesis—over the past five centuries there have been as many interpretations as there are pages in a Gideons.

Exhort

To exhort means to strongly urge on, encourage.

Nelson's parents exhorted him to study medicine, urging him to choose a respectable profession that would do more than pay the bills; intransigent, Nelson left home to become a graffiti artist.

High-Difficulty Words

Negation Words: Misleading Roots

Insufferable

Think of somebody, or something, that you simply can't tolerate. That thing is insufferable. A person bleating into their cell phones on a crowded bus is insufferable. So is a person who only talks about him or herself, and usually in the most flattering vein possible. Depending on the person, certain television shows or genres can be insufferable. This word is derived from the second definition of suffer, which means to put up with, or tolerate.

Impertinent

Impertinent can actually be the opposite of pertinent, but this definition is seldom accounted. Most of the time, impertinent means not showing the proper respect. You can think of it this way – if somebody's behavior is not pertinent to the given social context, e.g. an occasion calling for formality, then you can think of that person as being impertinent. The definition usually only applies if a person is being rude where respect is expected, and not staid where frivolity is apt.

Unconscionable

If you are thinking of being knocked over the head and lying in a pool of blood on the sidewalk, you have the wrong word (not to mention a vivid imagination). In this case, the correct word is unconscious. If an act is so horrible and deplorable that it makes everyone around aghast, then that action is unconscionable. Unconscionable can also mean something that is in excess of what is deemed tolerable. This second definition doesn't have the unethical smear of the first definition.

The felon committed the unconscionable act of robbing a blind person.

The lawyer's demands were unconscionable, and rather than pay an exorbitant sum or submit himself to any other inconveniences, the man decided to find a new lawyer.

Immaterial

While immaterial can describe a ghost, phantom, or run-of-the mill ectoplasm, immaterial primarily means not relevant.

The judge found the defendant's comments immaterial to the trial, and summarily dismissed him from the witness stand.

Inflammable

Depending on the circumstances, this can be a very important word. That is, if you read that something is inflammable, that means it can easily light on fire. The opposite would be nonflammable. Strangely enough, inflammable is the same as flammable in the sense that it describes anything that can light on fire. Inflammable – but not flammable – can mean extremely controversial, incendiary.

Unnerve

This word does not mean to make less nervous, but its opposite. If you unnerve a person, you disconcert him or her to the point he or she is likely to fail.

At one time unnerved by math problems, she began avidly "Magooshing", and soon became adept at even combinations and permutations questions.

Difficult Words that the GRE Loves to Use

Belie

This is ETS's number one favorite word for harder questions. Period. If ETS needs to make a Text Completion or Sentence Equivalence questions difficult, all it needs to do is throw in "belie".

The key to answering a text completion question that uses the word "belie" is to know how the word functions in context. Let's take a look below:

Her surface calm belied her roiling emotions.

The effortless fluidity with which the pianist's fingers moved belied the countless hours he had practiced.

Her upbeat attitude during the group project belied her inherent pessimism towards any collective endeavor.

In each case, note how the outward appearance does not match up with the reality. That contradiction is the essence of belie.

Disinterested

Much as the addition of belie is a difficult vocabulary word that tends to make a question harder, the addition of disinterested into a text completion can make it a difficult question. Why? Everybody assumes that disinterested means not interested. While this is acceptable colloquially, the GRE, as you've probably come to learn by now, is anything but colloquial. The definition of "disinterested" is unbiased, neutral.

The potential juror knew the defendant, and therefore could not serve on the jury, which must consist only of *disinterested* members.

Equivocal

Equivocal does not mean equal. It means vague, undecided.

"Equivocal", especially in its more common form "equivocate", has a negative connotation. If a politician is equivocating, he/she is not answering a question directly, but is beating around the bush.

In the academic GRE sense, if a phenomenon is open to multiple interpretations it is equivocal.

Whether we can glean an artist's unconscious urges through his or her art remains equivocal – that we can ever even really tap into another person's hidden motives remains in doubt.

Instead of answering the reporter's question directly, the politician equivocated by providing an answer so vague that it could have referred to anything.

Undermine

"Undermine" is common in all sections of the GRE, not just difficult sections. It can pop up in reading comprehension answer choices just as commonly as text completion questions.

"Undermine" means to weaken and is usually paired with an abstract term, such as authority. It can also have the connotation of slowly or insidiously eroding (insidious mean subtly harmful).

The student undermined the teacher's authority by questioning the teacher's judgment on numerous occasions.

Sententious

This word looks like it would relate to a sentence. If you know the GRE, you will know this is probably not the case, as the GRE is likely to subvert people's gut reaction. Sententious means to be moralizing, usually in a pompous sense.

The old man, casting his nose up in the air at the group of adolescents, intoned sententiously, "Youth is wasted on the young."

Propitiate

If somebody is really angry, and you want to make them less angry, then you attempt to placate or appease them. Or, if you like really big GRE words, then you propitiate them.

The two sons, plying their angry father with cheesy neckties for Christmas, were hardly able to propitiate him – the father already had a drawer full of ones he had never worn before or ever planned to.

Feckless

Feck, probably for its phonetic similarity to another word, has been dropped from the language. That or the lexicographers have become feckless, which means that they lacked the drive or initiative to include feck in the dictionary. Feckless means lazy and irresponsible. So, don't get feckless and drop the –less, lest somebody totally misinterprets you. In which case, you'll have to do a fair amount of propitiating.

By the way, I'm feckless- I won't include an example sentence.

Tendentious

If you are likely to espouse a controversial view, you are being tendentious. A good synonym for tendentious is biased, though biased doesn't necessarily relate to a controversial view.

Because political mudslinging has become a staple of the 24-hour media cycle, most of us, despite proclamations to the contrary, are tendentious on many of today's pressing issues.

Limpid

This word does not relate to limp, it relates to clarity in terms of expression. Limpid is typically used to describe writing or music.

Her limpid prose made even the most recondite subjects accessible to all.

Betray

To betray means to go against one's country or friends. Right? Well, yes, but not always. Especially on the GRE. To betray means to reveal or make known something, usually unintentionally.

Let's try a sentence equivalence question:

> As we age, our political leanings tend to become less ——-; the once dyed-in-wool conservative can betray liberal leanings, and the staunch progressive may suddenly embrace conservative policies.
>
> A. pronounced
> B. obscured
> C. contrived
> D. earnest
> E. diplomatic

In this case betray means reveal. As we age our political biases become less obvious/extreme (my own words). Which word is the closest? A. pronounced.

Re- Doesn't Always Mean Again

Remiss

This does not mean to miss again. It means to be negligent in one's duty. For some reason, students of mine have always had difficulty remembering this word. Sometimes I chide them, "Don't be remiss as vocabulary scholars by forgetting the word remiss." While arguably clever, this admonish isn't usually as efficacious as I'd hope it would be. (So don't be remiss!).

Remiss in his duties as a principle, he was relieved of his position after only three months.

Restive

Sounds like rest. It's actually the opposite, and means restless. Though most of the 're-' words are common, 'restive' is definitely the 're-' word you are most likely to see test day. It can be used to describe both people and groups of people.

The crowd grew restive as the comedian's opening jokes fell flat.

Repine

The verb pine means to yearn for. Like remiss, however, the addition of the prefix re- does not signify again. To repine means to complain or fret over something. Note: the verb pine can also mean to waste away.

Standing forlornly by the window, she repined for her lost love.

Remonstrate

You've probably guessed already that this does not mean to demonstrate again. To remonstrate means to make objections while pleading.

The mothers of the kidnapped victims remonstrated to the rogue government to release their children, claiming that the detention violated human rights.

GRE Vocabulary Books: Recommended Fiction and Non-Fiction

For those of you who live near a bookstore (and my heartfelt condolences to those who live near what is now the carcass of an erstwhile Border's store), to simply walk in and pick up a book that is captivating, and charged with GRE-style language, is tantamount to finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

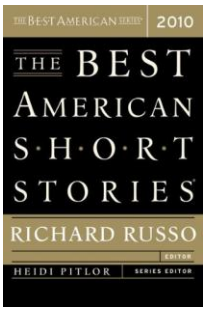
To save you the futility of such a search, I will recommend books that I feel are topical, engaging, and filled with enough GRE vocabulary that you will be underlining words as you go along, and, of course, entering them as you go.

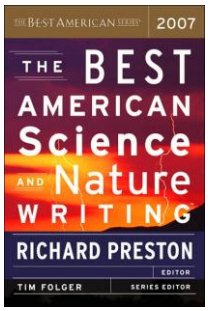
At the same time, make sure your reading is not so laden with vocabulary as to be inscrutable – you want to be reading, not underlining. To avoid this, simply choose a book or article that is less dense with challenging words. Work your way up to challenging writing.

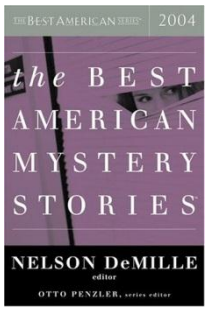
For those with e-books, you can avail yourself of the latest Internet tools to make your own flashcards. And with the mega-store a moribund feature of the consumer landscape, we may soon be doing most of our reading – GRE prep or otherwise – under the futuristic glow of an e-reader.

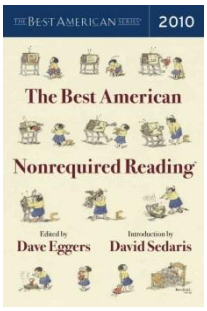
Whether on an e-reader or in paper-based form, the books below offer an alternative to sifting through magazines looking for engaging stories. And now, you need not wander through a cavernous bookstore, or click through the endless forest that is Amazon.com.

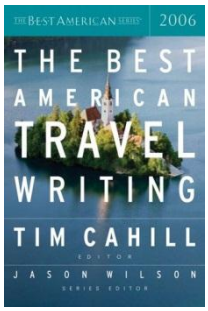
The Best American Series











This annual series selects the best writing from hundreds of journals and magazines. Not only are you provided with engaging and informative articles, but you also can choose from many different genres. That's right – the Best American Series is not one book, but many books, broken down into different genres.

I recommend the Best American Science and Nature Series. For those who are a little more intrepid, and up for the challenging stuff, then the Best American Essays is for you. The thoughtful, eloquent prose here will help prime your brain for the more difficult verbal section of the Revised GRE.

There is also a Best American Sports Writing (yes, sports writers use GRE vocab as well), a Best American Travel Writing (travel writers love descriptive GRE words) and a Best Short Stories (if fiction is more your thing).

So, whatever your predilections, the Best American Series has something to tickle your fancy. Or, for a potpourri of genres, styles, and voices, you can order the whole bunch. Your reading brain will grow exponentially.

The Classics

In order to learn vocabulary, and become accustomed to an elevated prose style, I do not recommend fiction as highly as I do non-fiction. At the same, we all love a good story. And, staying hooked over the course of 200-300 pages of a protagonist's vicissitudes is far easier than doing the same for science writing.

A great place to start for fiction is the Classics. Pick them up – they are classics for a reason. I lean towards 20th Century literature. Especially from a GRE prep angle, the language, and the way words are used, is more consonant with the language found on the Revised GRE. That doesn't mean that if Jane Austin or Charles Dickens, two prominent 19thCentury authors, make for highly enjoyable reading you should pass them up. Indeed, they use GRE words such as supercilious, peremptory and impetuous, as though those words were colloquial (I presume back then they were).

Otherwise, you can try Modern Library's Top 100 Fiction Works of All Time (they also have a non-fiction list) if you need some guidance on where to start reading. Besides the odd take on language, namely James Joyce's later works, most of these novels will have many vocabulary words.

BTW, a fun little tidbit – if you want to read the first few pages of any of these books – to see if the story is for you, and if GRE words abound – go to Amazon.com. Click on the image of any novel and you will be able to read the first ten pages of any book (depending on the book, you can read much more than that).

Takeaway

Reading is an excellent way to supplement vocab lists and flashcards. Be a word detective, and significantly augment your vocabulary.

Vocabulary in Context: Articles from Magazines and Newspapers

Over the last few months, I've declaimed on many occasions that the days of studying only from a deck of flashcards are long over. Instead, The Revised GRE requires us to have a far greater sense of how words function in context. The flashcard, however, strips the word of its context so it is dead and entombed in the stilted wording of a formal definition.

Instead I've recommend learning vocabulary by reading voraciously from prescribed sources. These sources include The New York Times, The Economist, The Atlantic Monthly, and The New Yorker. Most of the writing found within the pages of these august publications is not only replete with GRE-level vocabulary but is also similar in tone and style to that found on the Revised GRE.

Here, I am going to take actual articles from the aforementioned sources. I will highlight important vocabulary and also discuss ways you should approach learning words when you encounter them in context.

Finally, the articles come from a wide variety of fields, e.g. business, science, literature, etc. I've done my best to select pieces that I think a majority will find interesting, a criteria that I recommend you employ when you embark on your own reading quest.

In each case, I've specifically taken excerpts that contain not only GRE words (though these are sprinkled throughout each article) but also engage in analysis of some issue.

Let's start with an article taken from the business section of The Atlantic Monthly.

The Atlantic Monthly

> *Outsider, non-founder CEOs are often overvalued because many corporate boards think the answer to their problems is a superstar CEO with an outsized reputation. This leads them to overpay for people who are good at creating outsized reputations through networking, interviewing, and taking credit for other peoples' achievements-all bad indicators of future success.*
>
> *Rakesh Khurana has **amply** shown how this **delusion** of the **charismatic** savior creates a **dysfunctional** market for CEOs, allowing the small number of existing public-company CEOs to demand and receive extravagant **compensation**. The myth of the generalist CEO is **bolstered** by the many **fawning*** media portrayals where CEOs say that their key jobs are understanding, hiring, and motivating people–leading board members to believe that you can run a technology company without knowing anything about technology.

This passage is great because it is full of relatively difficult words, many of which are high-frequency GRE vocabulary (fawning, bolstered, ample/amply). This excerpt is also filled with analysis, which will help sync your synapses for the Revised GRE.

The article also scores big points on topics of interest. After all, it's Steve Jobs – revere him or fear him, most of us have an opinion of the company and its ubiquitous products (and now that this tech titan has just stepped down this article is more timely than ever).

Perhaps you find business blah or maybe you like to vary your reading. A great field to draw from is science. Part of the reason is the Revised GRE will typically have one science passage. While it may be drier than the typical fare found in the magazines cited above, often the science writing on the GRE is similar in tone and style to what you'll encounter in these magazines.

So let's take the article Bird Brain, which appeared in the New Yorker last year. It explores the development of language in human beings and whether language is the province only of humans. To do so, it tells the story of an African gray parrot, Alex, and his owner, Irene Pepperberg—namely how she trained Alex to say hundreds of words (though none, I believe, were GRE vocab) so that Alex, by the time he was an adult, was able to form relatively coherent sentences.

Below is an excerpt from the article, which is about 15-pages long. In general I would recommend the entire piece, especially if the above sounds intriguing. The excerpt includes a few vocab words (but of course) and some reflection and analysis.

The New Yorker

> *All children grow up in a world of talking animals. If they don't come to know them through fairy tales, Disney movies, or the Narnia books, they discover them some other way. A child will grant the gift of speech to the family dog, or to the stray cat that shows up at the door. At first, it's a* ***solipsistic*** *fantasy—the secret sharer you can tell your troubles to, or that only you understand. Later, it's rooted in a more philosophical curiosity, the longing to experience the* ***ineffable*** *interiority of some very different being. My eight-year-old daughter says that she wishes the horses she rides could talk, just so she could ask them what it feels like to be a horse. Such a desire* ***presumes****—as Thomas Nagel put it in his 1974 essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"—that animals have some kind of* ***subjectivity****, and that it might somehow be* ***plumbed****.*
>
> *In any case, Nagel explained, humans are "restricted to the resources" of our own minds, and since "those resources are inadequate to the task," we cannot really imagine what it is like to be a bat, only, at best, what it is like to behave like one—to fly around in the dark, gobble up insects, and so on. That inability, however, should not lead us to dismiss the idea that animals "have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own." We simply can't know. Yet many of us would be glad for even a few glimpses inside an animal's mind. And some people, like Irene Pepperberg, have dedicated their lives to documenting those glimpses.*

Though you may already know a few of these words, you should definitely look them up, especially if you are inferring the meaning based on the context. Always validate your hunch, don't assume you can always glean the exact definition of the word simply by looking at context.

After looking up these words, you'll notice a word with a secondary meaning, plumbed, and a couple of words from philosophy – subjectivity and solipsistic. After consulting Word Smart, Barron's Words You Need to Know, or other vocabulary lists I've recommend you'll notice that subjectivity (or subjective) is a very important word; solipsistic, on the other hand, is not as likely to pop up on the test. But if you already have a strong vocabulary, and are looking to score in the top 10%, then definitely learn solipsistic.

You will notice that the definition of interiority isn't very surprising, as it is directly related to interior. You may also notice that it is similar to subjective. Finally, you learn the word ineffable, which say you've never seen before, and you also find it on a few lists. Write it down on a flashcard along with an example sentence (oh, the irony of ineffable – for to say something is ineffable is undermining the very essence of the word).

Following a process similar to the one above is important. You don't want to simply underline the words and look them up. You want to digest them, so that, much like Alex the parrot, you will be able to use them in a coherent sentence.

Of course reading the entire article is also a good idea. Essentially you are training your brain to read through a long, relatively challenging piece, a skill that is indispensable for the much longer Revised GRE.

Let's say that you read Bird Brain and enjoy it. You are already familiar with a number of words and want something more challenging, maybe something couched in academic jargon or that oozes literary style. (I'm assuming that if you fall into this category, you are also looking to get the difficult verbal section).

A good resource is the New York Times Book Review. Here you will find the truly erudite waxing literary on a recently published novel/book that is just as scholarly (Are these the very writers who craft byzantine Text Completions for ETS?).

Below are two excerpts from the same book review of a biography of Joseph Heller, the reclusive, and frequently irascible, author of Catch-22, one of the great novels of the 20th century.

New York Times Book Review

> *But again, Daugherty is often perceptive about Heller's place in the larger culture, even if the novelist himself rarely comes into focus. For the human aspect, one turns to Erica Heller's frank but loving memoir of her father, "Yossarian Slept Here," which comes as close as possible,*

> *I dare say, to deciphering the enigma behind the obsessive, pitch-black fiction. Joseph Heller, the opposite of **demonstrative**, was given to **oblique** ways of showing affection…*
>
> *That was the year Heller published his second novel, "Something Happened," which Daugherty **commends** as follows: "Joe stepped beyond Wilson's **sentimentality** and Yates's bitterness to **eviscerate** modern America's success ethic." Such a **pat** comparison to Sloan Wilson, the author of "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," and Richard Yates, the author of "Revolutionary Road," is the sort of thing Daugherty might have **emended** given a bit more time to think about it; at any rate, "Something Happened" is perhaps the one work of postwar American fiction that makes Yates seem positively **Panglossian**. Erica Heller, for her part, describes the novel (probably her father's best) as "569 pages of hilarious but **mordant**, **caustically** wrapped, **smoldering** rage" — though of course it's personal in her case. Primary among the targets of the protagonist Bob Slocum's paranoid, **solipsistic** rant is his family…*

This article is clearly the most challenging of all the ones printed in this post. There are many difficult words, some that may give even the literate amongst us pause (Panglossian is derived from a character in Voltaire's Candide, Dr. Pangloss. The doctor was always optimistic, regardless of the circumstances).

Interestingly, solipsistic makes another appearance. Maybe it's not such an arcane word after all. Higher-frequency words—GRE-wise—include mordant, caustic, emend, enigma, and oblique.

Also, you want to be careful not to rely too much on assumptions. Demonstrative does not simply mean to demonstrate (it means tend to expression one's emotions outwardly). And pat, such a diminutive word, so folksy-sounding and innocuous, has many meanings. The adjective form, which is employed in the book review, could easily pop up on the GRE, and cause you to answer a text completion incorrectly. So be sure to look up such word (if an explanation is pat it is superficial/cursory and unconvincing).

Surprisingly, difficult vocabulary words and highfalutin prose aren't only found in the esoteric niche of the book review. Let's take an opinion piece we are far more likely to read: the movie review.

The New York Times

> *At a certain point, though — to say exactly when would ruin a fairly stunning surprise — the cat-and-mouse psychology is **jettisoned** in favor of something more **procedural**. The two halves of "Love Crime" divide according to the words of the title: the first explores the **knotty**, **feverish**, **ambiguous** bond between Christine and Isabelle, while the second is all about guilt, innocence, evidence and motive. It is interesting and **ingenious**, even if some of the kinky, **queasy** fascination that had been so intoxicating in the earlier scenes **ebbs** away.*

While the words here aren't as recondite as Panglossian, the prose style is relatively challenging and has echoes of the GRE Text Completion.

Practice Questions

Sentence Equivalence

Select exactly two words that best complete the sentence and produce sentences that are alike in meaning

The critic, in his lengthy review of the new recording of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, employs jargon and inflated syntax, suggesting that genuine appreciation of the music and the musicians is an _____ capacity closed to the untrained listener, however enthusiastic.

- ☐ irresponsible
- ☐ esoteric
- ☐ arrogant
- ☐ arcane
- ☐ elementary
- ☐ intuitive

The answers are "esoteric" and "arcane".

Try the question online and watch the video explanation: http://gre.magoosh.com/questions/2086

Text Completion

For each blank select one word from each column that best completes each sentence.

Most of Redding's recent books have been dismissed as markedly inferior to her (i) _____ early work; her newest novel, which is technically (ii) _____ and yet utterly (iii) _____, will do nothing to mitigate that judgment.

Blank (i)	Blank (ii)	Blank (iii)
vaunted	bereft	ingenuous
capricious	intransigent	jocular
acerbic	adept	vacuous

The answers are "vaunted", "adept", and "vacuous".

Try the question online and watch the video explanation: http://gre.magoosh.com/questions/2094

Reading Comprehension

Choose the option that best answers the question.

The human experience and observation of time has been variously interpreted. Parmenides, an Italiote Greek (Eleotic) philosopher (6th-5th century BC), and Zeno, his fellow townsman and disciple, held that change is logically inconceivable and that logic is a surer indicator of reality than experience; thus, despite appearances, reality is unitary and motionless. In this view, time is an illusion. The illusoriness of the world that flows in time is also to be found in some Indian philosophy. The Buddha held that life in the time flow, though not wholly illusory, is at best a low-grade condition by comparison with the Nirvana, in which desires are extinguished. Similarly, many Greeks, including Plotinus and, naturally, Plato, believed in the Platonic world of Ideas—incorporeal timeless exemplars of which phenomena in the time flow are imperfect and ephemeral copies.

In the context of the last sentence, the word "ephemeral" most nearly means

- exact
- incomplete
- eternal
- crude
- evanescent

The answer is "evanescent".

Try the question online and watch the video explanation: http://gre.magoosh.com/questions/2024

GRE Vocabulary: Free Resources on the Internet

The Internet is a great resource for vocabulary. And, I'm not just talking about those *New York Times* articles with challenging words – many sites offer a word of the day, or, better yet, an entire write-up on a word (the latter is courtesy of The New York Times).

By immersing yourself in a world of words, you will allow your brain to pick up more words than when you simply subject it to a deck of flashcards. That is, varying backdrops keep your brain alert, so that it is more likely to hold a vocabulary word in long-term memory.

So, check out these links, and they should help you develop a stronger vocabulary that will definitely come in handy on the day of your exam:

http://magoosh.com/gre

We have Vocabulary Wednesday videos and word lists every week, in the style of the word lists above, so be sure to check in for blog posts about everything on the GRE—not just vocab, but Math and Writing and the rest of the Verbal section as well, and leave us comments with suggestions for themes of word lists or any other GRE study tips you'd like to see!

http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/category/word-of-the-day/

This helpful word-of-the-day does more than just define a word. It cites the word as used in context from *The New York Times* galaxy of articles. These articles generally tend to be a trove of other useful words, so your word-of-the-day can become words-of-the-day…make sure, though, to have wordnik.com open, so as to get even more context on a word. Wordnik, you ask?

http://www.wordnik.com/

I've already trumpeted the wonders of wordnik.com elsewhere on this site. But, if you didn't catch those posts, here is the quick rundown: any word (and by any, I mean any) you can think of is defined, along with a plethora of examples taken from a gamut of sources (from Shakespeare to the last Yahoo article). If you want context on a word, this is the place to get it.

http://www.dictionary.com/

Their word-of-the-day feature is great—a dictionary.com definition right below the word, along with popular uses of the word in media (this last part is great for getting the sense of context). And, the best part is the word-of-the- day has been archived; so, now you can go all the way back to 2000 or so, and learn words (okay, that may be a tad ambitious – but at least you won't run out anytime soon).

With any word-of-the-day, always use common sense as to whether a word is a GRE word. So, if the word of the day is nares – another name for the nostrils – then you probably don't need to learn it. Likewise, really obscure words – say, words that are from Old English (ferly is a recent one on dictionary.com), then don't learn these words.

http://www.merriam-webster.com

This is a dynamic, robust site for vocabulary. Word-of-the-day is just the beginning. There are word games (I like the synonym finder – though it may not be challenging enough for high verbal scorers), and Trend Watch, a feature that shows which words have gained a sudden ascendancy (pariah, meaning outcast, shot up in the ensuing days of Gaddafi's death).

You can also see what other people have been looking up over the last 24 hours. As I look now, GRE words you have to know, such as pragmatic, didactic, and facetious, are all on the top 10 list (hmm, it seems a lot of SAT and GRE students – and maybe even some Magooshers! – have been visiting this site of late).

Finally – or perhaps not quite finally, as this site offers so much for the vocab hound – a seen and heard column features words people looked up and their respective motivations for doing so (hagiography, apparently, does not describe Steve Job's top-selling biography).

So, avail yourself of the Internet and fill yourself with word-of-the-days. And, don't forget to always check context.

Sign up for Magoosh GRE!

We give you everything you need to start studying today.

http://gre.magoosh.com/