

The question consists of a word printed in capital letters, followed by five words or phrases. Choose the word or phrase that is most nearly opposite in meaning to the word in capital letters.

Since some of the questions require you to distinguish fine shades of meaning, be sure to consider all the choices before deciding which one is best.

ANTONYMS

As we've learned from each of the previous sections, the GRE is primarily a test of basic skills rather than knowledge or memory, a matter of approach and attention rather than academic brilliance.

But the Antonym questions on the GRE, more than any other type of problem, require that the student have a store of vocabulary knowledge, and a memory for words. With this in mind, I've suggested that you keep careful note of words that give you any trouble, throughout your practice with all the Verbal questions, AND throughout the day in all your activities. I've also suggested that you 'work' at least a few of these words each day (as detailed in our Building Vocabulary chapter), finding roots and families, context and connotations as part of your daily routine, and mapping these relationships in your vocabulary journal. Beyond helping you build what we might call etymological foundations, such practice is an exercise in consciousness, teaching you to pay attention in an entirely different way to words that you'd normally not even hear.

In short, the practical student has been building his or her skill with vocabulary and language, and is now reading to tackle the questions that depend most on a working familiarity with a deep bench of words.

But the operative word in the Antonym sections is 'familiarity'. The student need not know the exact definitions of words in order to do well. As we've seen, the student needs to take on the role of thesaurus, rather than dictionary: the point is not definition, but *relationship*.

Approach

Here is the basic approach to Antonyms:

1. Is the word a noun, verb or modifier? (Establish your **context**)
2. Find a synonym for the given word: **what does it mean to you?**
3. Think of its **opposite**, before you look at the answer choices
4. Find its opposite in the answer choices

5. When confused, work backwards from the answer choices

Let's look at an example.

ADHERE :

- detach
- cleanse
- engulf
- incise
- contain

If I have any difficulty placing the word, I look for **context**. Just as with Analogies, I first determine the part of speech. In this case, ADHERE is a verb (if I didn't know this, I ought to look at the answer choices, like we did with Analogies). Looking for context also means to think of a situation or event in which you've heard the word used. For example, I recall hearing a phrase like: 'the tape needs to adhere'. If I had any question before, I now know that ADHERE means 'to stick' – putting me on a path to find a word that means 'not to stick' in the answer choices.

'Detach' is a likely suspect, and 'cleanse' could mean to 'take away'. I'll keep both of them. 'Engulf' (to eat), 'incise' (to cut) and 'contain' are all out.

Make sure that you keep note of this if you need to. Once again, the tendency is for the student to keep too much in his/her head. Use your pencil to free up the space in your mind, by setting it down in your notes. You need not write everything down, but simply keep track of territory crossed – so that you don't have to re-cross it. And again, you'll find that freeing up so much mind-space helps you see things you normally might miss. At this point, my notes look like this:

Not to stick:

√
√
X
X
X

Now I'm caught between 'detach' and 'cleanse'. So, let me make up sentences, for which I'll also make up opposites. Like the Analogy questions, I'm looking for the sentence with *necessity*. If it's a relationship that is only *sometimes* true, then the sentence has no necessity.

To ‘cleanses’ something is to make it clean. Is its opposite true?: to ‘adhere’ something is to make it dirty. Not necessarily. Let me try the next answer choice. To detach something is to pull it away. Its opposite: to adhere something is to put it on. Yes. Necessarily.

The correct answer is ‘detach’.

Such ease is usually true for only some of the questions. When the vocabulary gets more difficult, it’s necessary to do a bit more work. Here’s a basic approach to finding context that ought to focus your attention directly when the given word is relatively unfamiliar:

1. Where have you heard this word before?
2. Look at the roots of the word, its stems and its suffixes (Do you recognize its family?)
3. Use your knowledge of associations and other languages
4. Are the words positive/affirmative, negative/negating or neutral?

Let’s look at an example of a more difficult Antonym problem:

- OBDURATE : –
- complaisant +
 - similar =
 - commensurate =
 - uncommunicative –
 - transitory =

In this case, I know that OB- often means to ‘get in the way’, as in ‘obnoxious’ or ‘obstruction’. What would be the opposite of getting in the way? Most simply: NOT getting in the way. On the basis of this alone – again, roots are often decisive for me – I might pick the first choice, ‘complaisant’. However, more clues are needed until I feel sure.

Even if I didn’t know its roots, I would still peg OBDURATE as a negative word. Noting the ‘charge’ of each of the answer choices, I see that only the first, ‘complaisant’, is positive. On this basis, I’d pick it as my answer as well – and so go on to define OBDURATE: Someone who is ‘complaisant’ is likely to simply do what their told; someone who is OBDURATE, then, is someone who is stubborn.

The correct answer is ‘complaisant’.

Eliminating Answer Choices and Backdoor Strategies

On most difficult questions, a couple of strategies help to eliminate incorrect answer choices – to go in through the ‘backdoor’:

1. Watch out for and eliminate traps: ‘doubles’, ‘sound-opposites’
2. Work backwards from the answer choices

Let’s look at an example of a most difficult problem:

SUPINE :	?
○ vigilant	+
○ flustered	–
○ distorted	–
○ brittle	–
○ awkward	–

Since I don’t know what SUPINE means, I look at the answers to see that it’s a modifier – an adjective. It doesn’t sound positive or negative to me, but it doesn’t sound neutral either, so I put a question mark (?) in my notes. Looking for roots, I can say that the second half of the word, -INE, seems to relate to a position: I know words built in a similar way, like ‘recline’, and ‘incline’, and ‘opine’. Each word designates some kind of position or direction, and indicates one ‘family’ of words to which SUPINE belongs. I don’t know, however, what SUP- indicates. Could it be related to ‘Superman’? Superior? Could SUP- have something to do with *high* or *up*?

Examining the answer choices, I see that the first choice, ‘vigilant’, has the only positive charge. The rest seem to have negative connotations, and I mark them accordingly. This in itself is good evidence for ‘vigilant’ as our answer (even without knowing anything about the original word!), but let’s look for more clues. What else can we say about the answer choices? While not exactly synonyms, ‘flustered’, ‘distorted’ and ‘awkward’ all give the same sense of something or someone off the mark, or off his/her game. In such a case, I would eliminate all three words – rather than a ‘double’, this question uses a ‘triple’ in its answer choices.

Now let’s look at what we have left.

If the correct answer were ‘brittle’, then I would expect that SUPINE would mean flexible. It sounds like the word ‘supple’, after all and as evidence. The difficulty is that

it *sounds* like ‘supple’ – a trap that the GRE often uses. Rather than guess ‘brittle’ right away, or eliminate it right away, I’ll examine my next answer choice and compare investigations.

If the correct answer were ‘vigilant’, then I would expect that SUPINE would mean to lie down, and be at ease. Since we’ve already discovered some of the implications of the root –INE in the word, I’m going to go with ‘vigilant’ as its opposite. Although ‘supple’ sounds like SUPINE, I cannot imagine someone or something in a ‘supple’ position or direction, nor in a ‘brittle’ direction or position as its prospective antonym. In contrast, ‘vigilant’ seems to work – and gives us a definition of SUPINE: having everything facing *up*. It means, most directly, to be laying *down* or reclining. In this case, the root and family that I know is again the decisive factor, and once I put the word into the sentence I’ve found through the answer choice ‘vigilant’, it sounds right to me.

The correct answer is ‘vigilant’.

As with the Analogy sections, and for that matter every section of the GRE, you’ll most likely discover a number of patterns and telltales that help you eliminate answer choices, every time you practice for or take the test. Remember, you’re not trying to be a pedantic dictionary but an investigative thesaurus.

Summary:

1. Is the word a noun, verb or modifier? (Establish your **context**)
2. Find a synonym for the given word: **what does it mean to you?**
3. Think of its **opposite**, before you look at the answer choices.
4. Find its opposite in the answer choices.
5. When confused, work backwards from the answer choices.