Each sentence below has one or two blanks, each blank indicating that something has been omitted. Beneath the sentence are five words or sets of words labeled A through E. Choose the word or set of words that, when inserted in the sentence, best fits the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

SENTENCE COMPLETION

Many students dread the sentence completion sections. After the first few problems, the sentences begin to confuse, and the vocabulary in the answer choices gets increasingly distracting. Worse and more frustrating, the vocabulary in the answer choices is often strangely familiar though somehow beyond recall – until the most difficult questions, where most students are fortunate to be practically familiar with only a couple of choices. Three of the five might as well be another language entirely.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty is that students are usually looking at the sentences in ways that will create confusion, much of the time. In fact, students who look at the test in the ways the testmakers intend are sure to fit into a bell-curve of response. They are sure to be right some of the time, and fooled and confused much of the time. As we've found with all of these sections, much research has been done to fit students into the sacred bell shape: one quarter at one end, the bulk in the middle, the upper quarter at the other end. How do the testmakers want you to look at the sentences? *Like you have to choose from among five vocabulary words*.

Here's the general rule for all reading sections: *good readers develop their own, active understanding*. Looking the Sentence Completion problems from this perspective almost always results in a dramatic turn-around for even the 'poorest' reader. In fact, looking at *every* sort of reading question from this perspective will lead to not only a significantly easier time throughout the GRE, but to improved reading in general!

When the questions are relatively easy – by design at the beginnings of each section – it is relatively easy for nearly every student to recognize the correct answer-choice. Most students, then, choose correctly if they've developed reading skill enough to understand simple clauses in single sentences – and have learned to recognize fit choices. The false answer choices are only distracting to those who are confused by simple sentences. As the problems get more difficult, however, the student needs to navigate increasingly

complex clauses, and longer sentences. For the average student, some of the answers to these questions will often seem tantalizingly familiar.

Although this section may seem like it's primarily testing your vocabulary, it's *really* testing your ability to find meaning in the written language. In other words, if we look at these problems like they are questions about reading comprehension, then we start to get at the simple heart of the matter. The significant point here is that students most prone to falling for the false leads are those looking at the answer choices for clues. That's where most of the false leads are sitting, waiting for you to pay them some attention.

Essentially, a small shift in our perspective is the difference between trying to recognize the right word and trying to *generate meaning* through clues in the sentences. Practically, this means *not looking* at answer-choices unless and until you've decoded the grammar, and found *your own sense of meaning* from the sentence itself.

It's like the magician telling us to pay attention to his right hand, and ignore the left. The magician knows that if we look at the left hand – instead of at the right one doing all the distracting movement – then there isn't any magic. Just a guy trying to fool us.

Single-blanks
Let's first look at the sentences with just one word missing. We'll call these *single-blank* sentences.

> ***Step #1: Read the sentence, using "blank" for the missing word. Do not look at the answers.***
>
> Medieval kingdoms did not become constitutional republics overnight; on the contrary, the change was ----.
>
> (A) unpopular
> (B) unexpected
> (C) advantageous
> (D) sufficient
> (E) gradual

It's tough not to look at the answers, isn't it? If you are like most people, you looked at them automatically – and saw that the correct answer is **(E) gradual**. The language of the directions themselves further leads you toward looking at the answers for a clue: "choose the word…"

As if the point was to find the right word – rather than understand a sentence and use vocabulary to do it.

As the questions get more difficult, this leads the student directly into false answers, often stealing attention from what is most important in these types of questions: looking for **context clues**.

Good readers know how to use context clues to find meaning.

Let me make this clearer. If I were concerned with testing what students *understand* – as opposed to fitting them into a bell-curve – I might change the Sentence Completion directions to read: "Examine each of the incomplete sentences below. Try to discover what they are trying to say. Then, look for the word or set of words that completes the meaning." If the test directions were phrased in that way, the student would be more likely to focus attention on reading, on trying to comprehend the sentence.

In looking for meaning first and primarily, the student will begin to use context clues. That every sentence includes a definition for the missing word makes the task one of attention: where is the clue? Appropriately enough, I call the word or phrase that holds the key to defining the missing word the **clue**.

The *clue* is a word or phrase that holds the key to defining the missing word(s)

In the above sentence, the clue is "did not become…overnight."

In this case, the clue is the *opposite* of the word that completes the meaning of the sentence. The **pivot**, "on the contrary," tells me this.

The *pivot* is that word or phrase in every sentence that marks the relationship among words.

Step #2: Underline your clues, and circle your pivot.

Medieval kingdoms did not become constitutional republics overnight; on the contrary, the change was ----.

(A) unpopular
(B) unexpected

(C) advantageous
(D) sufficient
(E) gradual

The important thing for the way that we approach these problems is that we have first tried to understand the sentence, seeking clues in the grammar and syntax. So, I am looking for a word that means *the contrary of becoming overnight*. We have, in fact, understood that the contrary of "becoming overnight" is **slow**.

Step #3: Write into/above the blank a word or phrase that completes the meaning of the sentence.

Medieval kingdoms did not become constitutional republics overnight; on the contrary, the change was ----. slow

(A) unpopular
(B) unexpected
(C) advantageous
(D) sufficient
(E) gradual

In this case, we may very well have understood that the word "slow" completes the meaning even before we looked at the answers. Our attention, in other words, was directed toward *reading and understanding the sentence*. In this case, it's a small step to the answer, (E) gradual.

Step #4: Look for and choose the answer-choice closest to your own word

Medieval kingdoms did not become constitutional republics overnight; on the contrary, the change was ----. slow

(A) unpopular
(B) unexpected
(C) advantageous
(D) sufficient
● gradual

Finally, we'll want to read the answer that we've chosen back into the sentence, and make sure that the sentence sounds and feels right. Often, the correct answer is the one that *sounds* the best. In fact, the correct answer will never sound awkward, or be idiomatically questionable once you replace the blank(s) with them.

Double-blanks

Sentences with two blanks are just like the others, except that we have the added dimension of relationships between missing sentence parts. This forces a shift in strategy: in the case of double-blanks, we'll learn how to eliminate incorrect answer-choices.

Start double-blanks just like the single-blanks, by reading the sentence to yourself, with "blank" in for the missing word. Again, don't look at the answers (yet)!

Step #1: *Read the sentence, using "blank" for the missing words. Do not look at the answers (yet).*

> The general view of gorillas as menacing, ferocious King Kongs was not successfully ---- until Dian Fossey's field studies in the 1960s showed gorillas to be peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures, unlikely to ---- humans.
>
> (A) counteracted. .please
> (B) enhanced. .murder
> (C) verified. .attack
> (D) dispelled. .captivate
> (E) challenged. .threaten

Next, we'll want to look at the sentence as two separate clauses, with a relationship between them. We do this because there is always one clause with a more apparent meaning – and there's always a relationship between clauses. In this case, we can see that "peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures" would be "unlikely to *harm* humans." That is, the **clue** and **pivot** for the second blank are more readily apparent, and we treat it like a single-blank sentence. The **clue** in this case is "peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures." The **pivot** is that they would be "unlikely" to what? We might say *harm.* But first things first. Let's mark our sentence.

Step #2: Which blank has the most apparent clue and trigger?

> The general view of gorillas as menacing, ferocious King Kongs was not successfully ---- until Dian Fossey's field studies in the 1960s showed gorillas to be peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures, unlikely to ---- humans.
>
> (A) counteracted. .please
> (B) enhanced. .murder

(C) verified. .attack
(F) dispelled. .captivate
(G) challenged. .threaten

Next, we generate our own word or phrase to fill in the blank and complete the meaning of the sentence. Notice that we still don't look at our answer-choices; we still do not want to be distracted by a word that might sound right, but gets us wasting our attention and mental energy. Again, we treat this clause just like a single-blank sentence, and write in the word that completes its meaning. Again, it seems to us that *harm* fits pretty well.

Step #3: Write your own word in to complete the meaning of the clause.

The general view of gorillas as menacing, ferocious King Kongs was not successfully ---- until Dian Fossey's field studies in the 1960s showed gorillas to be peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures, unlikely to harm humans.

(A) counteracted. .please
(B) enhanced. .murder
(C) verified. .attack
(D) dispelled. .captivate
(E) challenged. .threaten

The next step is perhaps one of the most satisfying in these sections: eliminate the incorrect answer choices.

Step #4: Eliminate choices that diverge the most from the word you write in.

The general view of gorillas as menacing, ferocious King Kongs was not successfully ---- until Dian Fossey's field studies in the 1960s showed gorillas to be peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures, unlikely to harm humans.

~~(A) counteracted. .please~~
(B) enhanced. .murder
(C) verified. .attack
~~(D) dispelled. .captivate~~
(E) challenged. .threaten

In this case, we can see that choices (A) and (D) are both clearly incorrect: neither *please* nor *captivate* relates semantically to *harm*. If we all did was this work, in eliminating two answer-choices, then we'd still be in good shape to guess. But surely, we can narrow down the choices even further by using our first clause.

Step #4: Find the clue/trigger for the remaining clause, and its relationship to the other.

The general view of gorillas as menacing, ferocious King Kongs was not successfully ---- until Dian Fossey's field studies in the 1960s showed gorillas to be peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures, unlikely to harm humans.

~~(A) counteracted. .please~~
(B) enhanced. .murder
(C) verified. .attack
~~(D) dispelled. .captivate~~
(E) challenged. .threaten

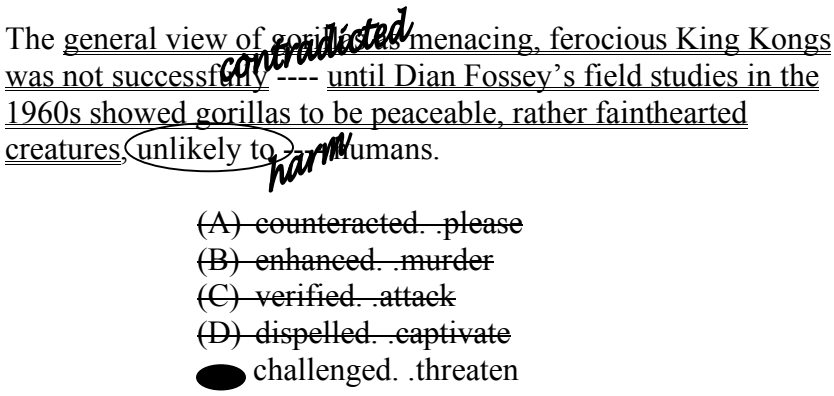
We might break this mess into its essential elements: A general view of gorillas as ferocious would be successfully ---- if Fossey showed gorillas to be fainthearted and peaceful. *Contradicted*, or *argued against* is what I might write in. (Notice how I stripped away words and modifiers that got in the way of the direct meaning. For instance, "ferocious King Kongs" is nice writing, but adds little to the sentence but color. If you keep track of these things, you can see that I'm looking for the simple subjects and predicates as my biggest clues to the meanings of sentences. In a like way, we'll focus much of our attention on the topic sentences of paragraphs when we get to the Reading Comprehension sections.)

Step #5: Write your own word or phrase into/above the blank(s) to complete the meaning of the sentence.

The general view of gorillas as menacing, ferocious King Kongs contradicted was not successfully ---- until Dian Fossey's field studies in the 1960s showed gorillas to be peaceable, rather fainthearted creatures, unlikely to harm humans.

~~(A) counteracted. .please~~
~~(B) enhanced. .murder~~
~~(C) verified. .attack~~
~~(D) dispelled. .captivate~~
(E) challenged. .threaten

Finally, we look for the answer-choice closest to what we've written in on our own, after we've come to an understanding about the meaning of the sentence. In this case, we can eliminate every choice but **(E) challenged. . threaten**. Notice how close these words are to what we've already written into the blanks, **contradicted. .harm**. So, our sentence makes sense to us *before* we choose words – in this case, the general view of gorillas as menacing wasn't **contradicted** until Fossey showed them to be peaceful, unlikely to **harm** humans. When we read the correct answer-choice back into the sentence, it makes the same sense. The general view as menacing wasn't **challenged** until Fossey showed that they were unlikely to **threaten** humans. That means the right thing, it sounds right, it has absolutely no awkwardness. Done. Blacken in the oval.



I know that this all may seem rather complicated – and certainly there's a lot of writing where the paper looked all nice and neat before. Now we have to go through five steps to pick the answer where before you thought there was only one or two: read the sentence and pick a word. Well, the problem was, that quicker tactic only works for the easy ones and the rare shot in the dark. When the distance between the two points is relatively short, that strategy actually works – and fools us into thinking that we can take a single step when the problems get more difficult. I'm sure that you don't mind stepping across a puddle in a single step – but ten or twelve feet of water means stepping on a few stones in between or very definitely getting wet.

What's also true is that practice with this strategy will get you to the right answer more quickly, more of the time, than anything but cheating. But the operative word here is *practice*. And I don't mean the kind of practice that you do before you study for that History test that you really don't care much about. The kind of practice I'm talking about needs to happen consistently over an extended period of time; it's about building a set of skills, and not memorizing a procedure or words or formulas.

In time, and with all such practice comes automaticity, and rhythm. At first, this strategy, like almost all the others in this book, will most likely cause you to spend more time on each question. But once you've practice with this strategy even minimally, you'll notice

that your 'thought' has changed character, and your mind is simply in action. You'll notice that in writing what you need to write, in the way you need to write it, the thinking as you're used to it stops in favor of a kind of investigation. Instead of speculation, there is the certain recognition of clues, ultimately leading you to a clear, unambiguous conclusion.

In short, our strategy and approach takes us to the practical understanding of simple and complex sentences, and the use of context to find meaning.

Summary:

1. Read the sentence with 'blank(s)', and **do not** look at the answers.

2. Look for and underline the **clue(s)**. The clue is the definition of the blank, embedded within the context of the sentence.

   Look for and circle the **pivot(s)**. The pivot expresses the relationship between the clue(s) and the blank, and is often as simple as a punctuation mark, or a phrase like 'on the contrary', 'despite', 'although', etc.

3. Write your own word or phrase into the blank to complete the meaning of the sentence. When you are approaching a question with two (2) blanks, begin with the blank that has the clearest clue or meaning, narrow down your answer choices, and then approach the other blank.

4. Look for the answer choice closest in meaning to what you wrote.

5. Eliminate choices unrelated to what you wrote.
   Eliminate choices that mean similar things to each other.
   Eliminate choices that are true **only if you take at least one step away from what you wrote to fill in the blank**

6. Read your choice back into the sentence. The correct answer will always sound, feel, look less awkward than the others.

(Remember, some people access the world through their visual sense, some through their auditory sense, some through their kinesthetic sense, some through feelings and emotion. So for some people, simply looking at their choices and sentences is enough evidence for them to draw a conclusion; for others, a reading **out loud** is necessary before they can *hear* the distinctions between choices; for others, it's necessary read each sentence in a certain way until they get the *feel* for differences. If you want to know which category you fit into, try checking yourself in a number of ways. One of them should give you a clearer, more certain sense of knowing.)