

Most Common GRE Words

Top 10 GRE Words of 2012

Alacrity (n.)

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.

The first three weeks at his new job, Mark worked with such alacrity that upper management knew they would be giving him a promotion.

Prosaic (adj.)

Prosaic conjures up a beautiful mosaic for some. 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 forth with imagination, prose (think of text-book writing), lacks imagination. Hence, prose-aic.

Unlike the talented artists in his workshop, Paul had no such bent for the visual medium, so when it was time for him to make a stained glass painting, he ended up with a prosaic mosaic.

Veracity (n.)

Veracity sounds a lot like voracity. Whereas many know voracity means full of hunger, whether for food

or knowledge (the adjective form voracious is more common), few know veracity. Unfortunately, many confuse the two on the test.

Veracity means truthful. Veracious, the adjective form of veracity, sounds a lot like voracious. So be careful.

After years of political scandals, the congressman was hardly known for his veracity; yet despite this distrust, he was voted into yet another term.

Paucity (n.)

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

There is a paucity of jobs hiring today that require menial skills, since most jobs have either been automated or outsourced.

Maintain (v.)

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 supports her theory. The latter context is the one you'll encounter on the GRE.

The scientist maintained that the extinction of dinosaurs was most likely brought about by a drastic change in climate.

Contrite (adj.)

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

Though he stole his little sister's licorice stick with malevolent glee, Chucky soon became contrite when his sister wouldn't stop crying.

Laconic (adj.)

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 at a time. As this allusion betrays my age more than anything else, think of Christian Bale in Batman—the laconic caped crusader.

While Martha always swooned over the hunky, laconic types in romantic comedies, her boyfriends inevitably were very talkative—and not very hunky.

Pugnacious (adj.)

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

The comedian told one flat joke after another, and when the audience started booing, he pugnaciously spat back at them, “Hey, you think this is easy – why don’t you buffoons give it a shot?”

Disparate (adj.)

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.

With the advent of machines capable of looking inside the brain, fields as disparate as religion and biology have been brought together, as scientists try to understand what happens in the brain when people have a religious experience.

Egregious (adj.)

‘Greg’ is the Latin root for flock. At one point, egregious meant standing out of the flock in 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).

The dictator’s abuse of human rights was so egregious that many world leaders asked that he be tried in an international court for genocide.

Top 5 Basic GRE Words

Innocuous (adj.)

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 (adj.)

A straightforward and honest look at something is a candid one. Many great photographers have created enduring work because they turned their respective lens on what is real. Whether these photos are from the Dust Bowl, the Vietnam War, or 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, Charles was always candid and would rarely hold anything back.

Erratic (adj.)

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 is known for his or her erratic play. The stock market is notoriously erratic, as is sleep, especially if your stocks aren't doing well.

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.

It came as no surprise to pundits that the President's attempt at re-election floundered; even during his term, support for his policies was erratic, with an approval rating jumping anywhere from 30 to 60 percent.

Bleak (adj.)

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). Unremitting overcast skies tend to lead people to create bleak literature and lugubrious music—compare England’s band Radiohead to any band from Southern California.

Profuse (adj.)

If something literally pours out in abundance we say it is profuse. This pouring out is usually figurative. A person who apologizes ceaselessly does so profusely. Perhaps a little more vividly, certain men who fail to button up their shirts completely let the world – perhaps not unwittingly – know of their profuse chest hairs (which, on their part, should necessitate a profuse apology). During mile 20 of the Hawaii Marathon, Dwayne was sweating so profusely that he stopped to take off his shirt, and ran the remaining six miles clad in nothing more than skimpy shorts.

Common Words that Students Always Get Wrong

Extant (adj.)

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

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).

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

Contentious (adj.)

This GRE word does not mean content, as in feeling happy. 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!

Since old grandpa Harry became very contentious during the summer when only reruns were on T.V., the grandkids learned to hide from him at every opportunity.

Auspicious (adj.)

This word sounds very sinister, but actually means the opposite of sinister. If an occasion is auspicious, it is favorable.

The opposite, inauspicious, is also common on the GRE. It means unfavorable.

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

Energize (v.)

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

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

Equivocate (v.)

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. More generally, equivocal can mean ambiguous. The related word unequivocal can also be confusing. To state something unequivocally is to state it in such a way that there is no room for doubt.

The findings of the study were equivocal—the two researchers had divergent opinions on what the results signified.

Ambivalent (adj.)

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 what it was like studying for the GRE.

Sam was ambivalent about studying for the GRE because it ate up a lot of her time, yet he learned many words and improved at reading comprehension.

Sedulous (adj.)

I am not quite sure why students can never seem to remember the definition of this word. Perhaps the sed- reminds them of sitting and being idle (like in sedentary). 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 The All Papers’s Website every day.

An avid numismatist, Harold sedulously amassed a collection of coins from over 100 countries—an endeavor that took over fifteen years, and to five continents.

Tricky “Easy” GRE Words with Multiple Meanings

Stem (v.)

To stem means to hold back or limit the flow or growth of something. You can stem bleeding, and you can stem the tide—or at least attempt to do so. However, do not stem the flow of vocabulary coursing through your brains. Make sure to use GRE 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 (adj.)

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.

The true etymology of the word actually comes from the blinkers that are put on racing horses to prevent them from becoming distracted.

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 (n./v.)

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 (adj.)

The meaning of checkered is completely unrelated to the meaning of check, 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 (n.)

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 here's a good mnemonic: imagine a large number of rafts and you have a raft of
Despite a raft of city ordinances passed by an overzealous council, noise pollution continued unabated
in the megalopolis.

Involved (adj.)

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

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

Retiring (adj.)

Sure, many dream of the day when they can retire (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 to be inclined to retract from company.

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

Expansive (adj.)

The common definition of expansive is extensive, wide-ranging. The lesser known definition is 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 (n.)

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 (adj.)

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 beggar the unwanted crumbs from her dinner plate.

Imbibe (v.)

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

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 (v.)

To inundate is a synonym for to deluge, which means to flood. Figuratively, to be inundated means to be overwhelmed by too many people or things.

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 (adj.)

If something gives off sparks, such as when photons collide, it is said to scintillate. Figuratively, scintillating describes someone who is brilliant and lively (imagine Einstein's brain giving off sparks).

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

Benighted (adj.)

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. This latter definition is more common.

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

Galvanize (v.)

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 (n./v.)

If you are really into horticulture—which is a fancy word for gardening—you'll know 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. When asked why he had decided to buy millions of shares at the very moment the tech companies stock soared, the CEO hedged, mentioning something vague about gut instinct.

Flush (adj.)

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.

The GRE Reading Comprehension passage is flush with difficult words, words that you may have learned only yesterday.

Fell (adj.)

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. Now watch out for that tree!

For fans of the Harry Potter series, the fell Lord Voldemort, who terrorized poor Harry for seven lengthy installments, has finally been vanquished by the forces of good—unless, that is, JK Rowling decides to come out of retirement.

Arch (adj.)

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.

The baroness was arch, making playful asides to the townspeople; yet because they couldn't pick up on

her dry humor, they thought her supercilious.

Beg (v.)

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?

By assuming that Charlie was headed to college—which he was not—Maggie begged the question when she asked him to which school he was headed in the Fall.

Tender (v.)

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.

The government was loath to tender more money in the fear that it might set off inflation.

Intimate (adj./v.)

Just as tender doesn't relate to two people in love, neither does intimate, at least in the GRE sense.

The secondary meaning for intimate is to suggest something subtly.

At first Manfred's teachers intimated to his parents that he was not suited to skip a grade; when his parents protested, teachers explicitly told them that, notwithstanding the boy's precocity, he was simply too immature to jump to the 6th grade.

Wanting (adj.)

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

She did not find her vocabulary wanting, yet there were so many GRE vocabulary words that inevitably she did not know a few.

Becoming (adj.)

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

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

Start (v.)

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

All alone in the mansion, Henrietta started when she heard a sound.

Fleece (v.)

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.

Many have been fleeced by Internet scams and have never received their money back.

Telling (adj.)

If something is telling, it is significant and revealing of another factor. If a person's alibi has a telling detail, often that one little detail can support—or unravel!—the person's alibi.

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

Wax (n./v.)

Melting wax will only lead you astray. The secondary meaning for wax is to increase. The opposite of wax is to wane. Both words are used to describe the moon: a waxing moon becomes larger and larger

each night until it becomes a full moon, at which point it becomes small and smaller each night and becomes a waning moon.

Her enthusiasm for the diva's new album only waxed with each song; by the end of the album, it was her favorite CD yet.

Check (n./v.)

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

When government abuses are not kept in check, that government is likely to become autocratic.

Qualify (v.)

This is perhaps the most commonly confused secondary meaning, and one that is very important to know 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.

Qualify (v.)

This is perhaps the most commonly confused secondary meaning, and one that is very important to know 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 (adj.) vs. Frugal (adj.)

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, but was simply frugal, wisely spending the little that he earned.

Prevaricate (v.) vs. Variance (n.)

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 (adj.) vs. History (n.)

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 (v.) vs. Demure (adj.)

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 is typically used to describe a woman, so don't call a man demure, as they will surely demur.

Beatific (adj.) vs. Beautiful (adj.)

A beatific person is one who radiates bliss. This person is so happy, they almost seem blessed and holy (think of a saint, or 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 (adj.) vs. Preemptive (adj.) vs. Peremptory (adj.)

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 either do perfunctorily or avoid doing altogether.

Indigent (adj.) vs. Indigenous (adj.) vs. Indignant (adj.)

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 ask for 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 (adj.) vs. Arrant (adj.) vs. Errand (n.) vs. Err (v.)

To be errant is to be wandering, not sticking to a circumscribed path. It can also connote deviating from accepted behavior or standards.

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!) to make an error.

He erred in thinking that errant and arrant were synonyms.

Artless (adj.) vs. Artful (adj.) vs. Artifice (n.)

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 stickfigures.

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 these definitions.

Expurgate (v.) vs. Expunge (v.)

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 of. 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 (v.) vs. Censor (v.)

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 (adj.) vs. Imponderable (adj./n.)

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—the answer to this question would be imponderable.

Interesting (and International) Word Origins

Around the World

Kowtow (v.)

Nope, kowtow is not a giant truck for pulling bovines, but rather 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.

Paul kowtowed to his boss so often the boss herself soon became nauseated by his sycophancy.

Powwow (n./v.)

No, it's not kowtow's cousin. 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). Before the team takes the field, the coach always calls for a powwow so that he can make sure all the players are mentally in the right place.

Junta (n.)

Junta means to join and comes via Portugal and Spain. But this joining was in no way peaceful.

Whenever military groups joined forces to usurp the existing regime, they would form a military junta.

Today, junta can refer to the aggressive takeover by a group.

As dangerous of a threat as North Korea is, some analysts believe that were a junta suddenly to gain power, it could be even more unpredictable and bellicose than the current leadership.

Imbroglio (n.)

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 an imbroglio that viewers will not soon forget.

Juggernaut (n.)

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 one's 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 (n.)

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 (adv.)

To run amuck (also spelled amok) 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 a glance of his boyish face.

Pariah (n.)

This word means an outcast. It comes from Tami, a language spoken in South India and Northeast Sri Lanka. 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 Tamil. 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 (n.)

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.

The nabobs can be seen, heads a bobbing, driving by in their Italian sports cars, listening to techno.

Zeitgeist (n.)

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 (n.)

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

The hostage negotiator exhibited a sangfroid that oftentimes was more menacing than the sword at his throat or the gun at his head.

Parvenu (n.)

This is a person who has recently acquired wealth, and has therefore risen in class. Parvenu has a derogatory connotation, meaning that if you win the lottery and someone calls you a parvenu they are not trying to be flattering.

The theater was full of parvenus who each thought that they were flanked by aristocrats.

Demur (v.)

Demur means to object or express reluctance to do something. Demur should not be confused with demure, which as an adjective that means coy. They both come from around the time of the Norman Conquest (though the Anglophiles may have demurred to use either).

When asked if she wanted to visit the war torn region without a translator by his side, the journalist demurred.

Arriviste (n.)

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

The city center was aflutter with arrivistes who each tried to outdo one another with their ostentatious sports cars and chic evening dress.

Melee (n.)

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, melee is an important word and 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 all the French-related words into one 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!

Lagniappe (n.)

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—indeed, I doubt you’ll ever see it on the test—but if lagniappe happens to show up on the test, then consider it an unexpected gift.

The islanders thought that the seafarers had brought them a lagniappe when the latter presented them with gold coins; little did the islanders know that their days of bartering were numbered.

Picayune (adj.)

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.

English teachers are notorious for being picayune; however, the English language is so nuanced and sophisticated that often such teachers are not being contrary but are only adhering to the rules.

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 (v.)

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 (v.)

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.

Years ago, savvy politicians had gerrymandered the city center to ensure their re-election.

Hector (v.)

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 (adj.)

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 prospective customers hung up on her.

Chauvinist (n.)

Many have heard this word, and some may even have a visceral reaction to it. 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.

The chauvinist lives on both sides of the political spectrum, outright shunning anybody whose ideas are not consistent with his own.

Pyrrhic (adj.)

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.

George W. Bush's win in the 2000 election was in many ways a pyrrhic victory: the circumstances of his win alienated close to half of America.

Kafkaesque (adj.)

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.

The process of applying for a passport was so Kafkaesque that Charles ultimately decided not to take a vacation.

Quixotic (adj.)

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.

For every thousand startups with quixotic plans to be the next big thing in e-commerce, only a handful ever become profitable.

Maudlin (adj.)

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 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.

Just as those who were alive during the 70's are mortified that they once cavorted about in bellbottoms, many who lived during the 80's are now aghast at the maudlin pop songs they used to enjoy—really, just what exactly is a total eclipse of the heart?

Panglossian (adj.)

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 (n.)

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 called *The Rivals* by the largely forgotten Richard Brinsley 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 flamigo (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 (n.)

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.

History looks unfavorably upon quislings; indeed they are accorded about the same fondness as Nero — he who watched his city burn down while playing the violin.

Byzantine (adj.)

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 (v.)

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.

Religious Words

Cardinal (adj.)

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 have 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. As for what St. Louis has to do with cardinals, 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.

Most cultures consider gambling a cardinal sin and thus have outlawed its practice.

Syncretic (adj.)

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 I concoct a new religion and decide to take bits and pieces from other religions—I don a cardinal's robe, shave my head à la Buddha, and disseminate glossy pamphlets about the coming apocalypse—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, depending on your view) dose of Freud.

Parochial (adj.)

This word comes from parish, a small ecclesiastical district, usually located in the country. Parochial 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.⁴⁶

Jasmine was sad to admit it, but her fledgling relationship with Jacob did not work out because his culinary tastes were simply too parochial; “After all,” she quipped on her blog, “he considered Chef Boyrdee ethnic food.”

Catholic (adj.)

We have many associations with Catholicism: cardinals at mass, nuns wielding crucifixes at frothing

demons. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that a second definition of catholic—and the one that will be tested on the GRE—means universal.

Or perhaps not too surprising, 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. Catholic also implies wide-ranging or all-embracing.

Jonah's friends said that Jonah's taste in music was eclectic; Jonah was quick to point out that not only was his taste eclectic but it was also catholic: he enjoyed music from countries as far-flung as Mali and Mongolia.

Anathema (n.)

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, 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.

Hundreds of years ago, Galileo was anathema to the church; today the church is anathema to some on the left side of the political spectrum.

Desecrate (v.)

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.⁴⁷

Apostasy (n.)

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 party but dubs himself a “literal independent.”

Sanctimonious (adj.)

This is a tricky word, and thus you can bet it’s one of GRE’s favorites. 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 as she eyed those who were attending church for the first time.

Iconoclast (n.)

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.⁴⁸

Words from Political Scandals

Malfeasance (n.)

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.

Not even the mayor's trademark pearly-toothed grin could save him from charges of malfeasance: while in power, he'd been running an illegal gambling rink in the room behind his office.

Lascivious (adj.)

Lascivious, like lecherous, prurient, and libidinous, all refer to perversion. In terms of linking these words to the world of politics...well, given the sordid events that surface every few months, I don't think I need to elaborate.

Jerry's coworkers were confused as to why Jerry thought that the word mango carried lascivious connotations; when he tried to explain, they only became more perplexed.

Embroiled (adj.)

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 (n.)

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.

If our legal system becomes plagued with venality, then the very notion of justice is imperiled. 49

Prevaricate (v.)

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 (I'm alluding to Richard Nixon and his dog Checkers).

Bobby learned not to prevaricate when his teacher asked him where his homework was; by giving a straightforward answer, he would avoid invoking the teacher's wrath.

Turpitude (n.)

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. During his reign, Caligula indulged in unspeakable sexual practices, so it not surprising that he will forever be remembered for his turpitude. 50

Money Matters: How Much Can You Spend?

Thrifty (adj.)

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 (n.)

This word is the opposite of thrifty. If you are a 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 and five-star restaurants on Tuesday evenings, Megan was a spendthrift whose prodigality would inevitably catch up with her.

Parsimonious (adj.)

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 was so parsimonious that he followed a diet consisting of nothing more than bread and canned soup.

Sybarite (n.)

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.)

Despite the fact that he'd maxed out fifteen credit cards, Max was still a sybarite at heart: when the feds found him, he was at a \$1,000 an hour spa in Manhattan, getting a facial.

Impecunious (adj.)

The word pecuniary means relating to money. Impecunious, on the other hand, 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. 51

Penurious (adj.)

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 (adj.)

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 (adj.)

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. 52

Money Matters: Can't Spend it Fast Enough

Profligate (adj./n.)

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. Profligate is also a person known for his or her profligacy.

Most lottery winners go from being conservative, frugal types to outright profligates who blow millions on fast cars, lavish homes, and giant yachts.

Prodigal (adj.)

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. To be prodigal is to squander or waste wealth (it doesn't necessarily have to be familial wealth). This word should not be

confused with prodigious, which means vast or immense.

Successful professional athletes who do not fall prey to prodigality seem to be the exception—most live decadent lives.

Avarice (n.)

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

The Spanish conquistadors were known for their avarice, plundering Incan land and stealing Incan gold.

Cupidity (n.)

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, imagine Cupid flying around shooting arrows into people's wallets/purses and then swooping in and taking the loot. Oh what cupidity!

Some people that amassing as much wealth as possible is the meaning to life—yet they often realize that cupidity brings anything but happiness. 53

Money Matters: A Helping (or Thieving!) Hand

Defray (v.)

Is to help pay the cost of, either in part or 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 (n.)

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 (n.)

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 costs.

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 (n./v.)

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 (v.)

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.⁵⁴

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

Fleece (v.)

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. ⁵⁵

Vocabulary from up on High

Zenith (n.), Summit (n.), Acme (n.), Pinnacle (n.) and Apex (n.)

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 (n.)

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 (n.)

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 Mark Zuckerberg's career, many believe, is yet to come.

Nadir (n.)

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.⁵⁶

Preposterous Prepositions

Untoward (adj.)

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.

Some professors find teaching untoward as having to prepare for lectures and conduct office hours prevents them from focusing on attaining tenure.

Upbraid (v.)

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, a meaning it shares with many other words: reprimand, reproach, chide, and castigate.

Bob took a risk walking into the “Students Barbershop”—in the end he had to upbraid the apparently hung over barber for giving him an uneven bowl cut.

Underwrite (v.)

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 (adj.)

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.⁵⁷

Mark was so convinced of his basketball skills that in his overweening pride he could not fathom that his name was not on the varsity list; he walked up to the basketball coach and told her she had forgotten to add his name. ⁵⁸

Them's Fighting Words

Bellicose (adj.)

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 (adj.)

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 4x4—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 (adj.)

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 did their best to avoid Dexter eventually had to deal with his pugnacity.

Contentious (adj.)

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 (adj.)

Jingoism is what happens when bellicosity meets patriotism, and both drink too much whiskey. 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.⁵⁹

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. ⁶⁰

Animal Mnemonics

Badger (v.)

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 (v.)

A hound usually rears its 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 (v.)

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 (v.)

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: turn that list into a deck of flashcards!

Ferret (v.)

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 61 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 GRE words.62

Webster's Favorites

Mellifluous (adj.)

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.

Chelsea's grandmother thought Franz Schubert's music to be the most mellifluous ever written; Chelsea demurred, and to her grandmother's chagrin, would blast Rihanna on the home stereo speakers.

Palimpsest (n.)

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 on which traces of former iterations 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 (n.)

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, since something you weren't looking for in the first place often falls into your lap. Though

if such compulsive buying becomes a habit, it may cease to be serendipitous.

The invention of the 3M Post It Note was serendipitous, because the scientist who had come up with the idea was looking for a strong adhesive; the weak adhesive he came up with was perfect for holding a piece of paper in place but making it very easy for someone to pull the paper free. 63

Defenestrate (v.)

Okay, fine...there is slim chance that this word will pop up on the GRE, but it is one of my favorite words. It's 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 of a 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).

Defenestration is rare in these days of sealed windows. 64

“Occupy” Vocabulary

Invective (n.)

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. Invective is used to describe harsh, critical language.

The Internet has unleashed the invectives in many of us; many people post stinging criticism on the comments section underneath newspaper articles or YouTube videos.

Diatribes (n.)

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.

Steve's mom launched into a diatribe during the PTA meeting, contending that the school was little more than a daycare in which students stare at the wall and teachers stare at the chalkboard.

Screed (n.)

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.

Joey had difficulty hanging out with his former best friend Perry, who, during his entire cup of coffee, would enumerate all of the government's deficiencies, only to break ranks and launch into some screed against big business.

Tirade (n.)

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.

In terms of political change, a tirade oftentimes does little more than make the person speaking red in the face.

Harangue (n./v.)⁶⁵

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.

Tired of his parents haranguing him about his laziness and lack of initiative, Tyler finally moved out of home at the age of thirty-five.

Vituperation (n.)

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 shoots from your mouth, froth forming at your lips. Understandably, vituperate is only used in extreme cases.

Jason had dealt with disciplinarians before, but nothing prepared him for the first week of boot camp, as drill sergeants would vituperate him for forgetting to double knot the laces on his boots. 66

Vocab from the Lab

Precipitate (adj./n./v.)

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.

Instead of conducting a thorough investigation after the city hall break-in, the governor acted precipitately, accusing his staff of aiding and abetting the criminals.

Amalgam (n.)

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 (adj.)

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.

Many once-great athletes have become insolvent, as they are unable to pay off their debts or hold down jobs that would potentially free them from debt.

Catalyst (n.)

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.

Rosa Park's refusal to give up her bus seat acted as a catalyst for the Civil Right's Movement, setting into motion historic changes for African-Americans. 67

Mercurial (adj.)

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.

The fact that Ella's moods were as mercurial as the weather was problematic for her relationships—it didn't help that she lived in Chicago. 68

Compound Words

Slapdash (adj.)

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.

The office building had been constructed in a slapdash manner, so it did not surprise officials when, during a small earthquake, a large crack emerged on the façade of the building.

Heyday (n.)

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.

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 (n.)

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 (adj.)

I guess whatever is below the board is deceptive, because aboveboard means open and 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 (adj.)

If something is thorough it is complete. Therefore, thorough isn't too far from the meaning of thoroughgoing, which means absolute.⁶⁹

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

Telltale (adj.)

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.⁷⁰

Halloween Vocabulary

Cadaverous (adj.)

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 (adj.)

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 grisly death.

Goosebumps (n.)

I would never have considered this a vocabulary word (let alone a GRE word), until, that is, the New GRE PowerPrep 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.

Some people believe that goosebumps result when a ghost brushes up against you.

Diabolical (adj.)

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.⁷¹

Phantasmagorical (adj.)

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.⁷²

Talkative Words

Gregarious (adj.)

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.

Often we think that great leaders are those who are gregarious, always in the middle of a large group of people; yet, as Mahatma Gandhi and many others have shown us, leaders can often be introverted.

Ingenuous (adj.)

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.

Two-years in college in Manhattan had changed Jenna from an ingenuous girl from the suburbs to a jaded urbanite, unlikely to fall for any ruse, regardless of how elaborate.

Peruse (v.)

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. In light conversation, peruse means to read over quickly. The GRE constitutes anything but light conversation, so make sure to remember that peruse means to read over carefully (perusing the first part of this paragraph helps!).

Instead of perusing important documents, people all too often rush to the bottom of the page and plaster their signature at the bottom.

Disabuse (v.)

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.⁷³

Mettlesome (adj.)

When you poke your nose in somebody else's business, you are being meddling. 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.

For its raid on the Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Seal Team Six has become, for many Americans, the embodiment of mettle. ⁷⁴

By the Letter

A-Words

Amiable (adj.)

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).

Amy's name was very apt: she was so amiable that she was twice voted class president.

Affable (adj.)

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.

For all his surface affability, Marco was remarkably glum when he wasn't around other people.

Amenable (adj.)

Amenable means 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.

Even though she did not like bad weather, Shirley was generally amenable and decided to accompany her brother to the picnic.

Attenuate (v.)

Attenuate means to weaken (in terms of intensity), to taper off/become thinner. Attenuate can refer to both abstract and tangible things.

Her animosity towards Bob attenuated over the years, and she even went so far as to invite him to her party.

The stick is attenuated at one end to allow the villagers to forage for ants. 75

Animosity (n.)

Meaning 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).

The governor's animosity toward his rival was only inflamed when the latter spread false lies regarding the governor's first term.

Anomalous (adj.)

Anomalous means not normal, out of the ordinary, and 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 an unusually cold California spring.

According to those who do not believe in climate change, the extreme weather over the last five years is simply anomalous—average temps should return to average, they believe.

Acrimony (n.)

Acrimony means bitterness and ill will. Don't forget the adjective form, acrimonious, which describes relationships filled with bitterness and ill will.

The acrimonious dispute between the president and vice-president sent an unequivocal signal to voters: the health of the current administration was imperiled.

Aberration (n.)

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.

Aberrations in climate have become the norm: rarely a week goes by without some meteorological phenomenon makes headlines.

Ambiguous (adj.)

Ambiguous means 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?76
The coach told his team, "Move towards that side of the field"; because he did not point, his directions were ambiguous, and the team had no idea to which side he was referring.

Amorphous (adj.)

Amorphous means 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.
His study plan for the GRE was at best amorphous; he would do questions from random pages in any one of seven test prep books. 77

C-Words

Conciliate (v.)

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 (v.)

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 (n.)

Calumny is the making of 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 already waist-high.

Commensurate (adj.)

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, the 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.

Churlish (adj.)

Someone who is churlish lacks manners or refinement. A churlish person lacks tact and civility is often outright rude.

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.⁷⁸

Castigate (v.)

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 (v.)

Very similar to castigate, it also means to reprimand harshly.

Though chastised for his wanton abuse of the pantry, Lawrence shrugged off his mother's harsh words, and continued to plow through jars of cookies and boxes of donuts.

Cogent (adj.)

Something that's cogent is clear and persuasive.

His essay writing, while full of clever turns of phrases, lacks cogency: the examples he uses to support his points are at times irrelevant and, in one instance, downright ludicrous.

Contentious (adj.)

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 (adj.)

Chary rhymes with wary, and it also 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.⁷⁹

Easily Confusable F-Words

Fractious (adj.)

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.

Factionous (adj.)

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

Factionous is typically not used to describe people.

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

Factitious (adj.)

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.

The defendant's story was largely factitious and did not accord with eyewitness testimonies. 80

Vicious Pairs of V's

Vindictive (adj.) vs. Vindicate (v.)

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 may want to avoid your friends for some time.

Vicarious (adj.) vs. Vicissitude (n.)

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. Such travel, in which you enjoy 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 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 go traveling off somewhere).

Venal (adj.) vs. Venial (adj.)

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.⁸¹

Veracious (adj.) vs. Voracious (adj.)

These words not only deviate by only one letter, but 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 (v.) vs. Enervate (v.)

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.⁸²

"X" words

Excoriate (v.)

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, figuratively speaking, is to rip off a person's skin.

Entrusted with the prototype to his company's latest smartphone, Larry, during a late night karaoke bout, let the prototype slip into the hands of a rival company—the next day Larry was excoriated, and then fired.

Extenuating (adj.)

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.

The jury was hardly moved by the man's plea that his loneliness was an extenuating factor in his crime of dognapping a prized pooch.

Execrate (v.)

This word just sounds awful. The good news is the meaning of execrate is consistent with the way it sounds. 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, what they claim, were his mercenary motives. Interestingly, the adjective form of execrate is the relatively common GRE word execrable. If something is execrable, it is so awful that it is worthy of our hissing.

Though the new sitcom did decently in the ratings, Nelson railed against the show, saying that it was nothing more than execrable pastiche of tired clichés and canned laughter.⁸³

Exegesis (n.)

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 Gideon.

Exhort (v.)

To exhort means to strongly urge on, encourage. The encouragement is for a positive action. So a mentor figure will exhort you to make the most of your life, whereas the miscreant will cajole you into doing something you'll regret.

Nelson's parents exhorted him to study medicine, urging him to choose a respectable profession; intransigent, Nelson left home to become a graffiti artist.⁸⁴

High-Difficulty Words

Negation Words: Misleading Roots

Insufferable (adj.)

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.

Chester always tried to find some area in which he excelled above others; unsurprisingly, his coworkers found him insufferable and chose to exclude him from daily luncheons out.

Impertinent (adj.)

Impertinent can actually be the opposite of pertinent, but this definition is seldom used. 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.

Dexter, distraught over losing his pet dachshund, Madeline, found the police officer's questions impertinent—after all, he thought, did she have to pry into such details as to what Madeline's favorite snack was?

Unconscionable (adj.)

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 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.⁸⁵

Immaterial (adj.)

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 (adj.)

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.

It only takes one person to leave an inflammable comment on an Internet thread for that thread to blow up into pages upon pages of reader indignation.

Unnerve (v.)

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 "Magoosh-ing", and soon became adept at even combinations and permutations questions.⁸⁶

Difficult Words that the GRE Loves to Use

Belie (v.)

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 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 (adj.)

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 (adj.)

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.⁸⁷

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.

Undermine (v.)

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 (adj.)

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 reactions. 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 (v.)

Want to make an angry person less angry? Well, then you attempt to placate or appease. Or, if you like really big GRE words, 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 (adj.)

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 (oops, I just walked into a contradiction).⁸⁸

Tendentious (adj.)

If you are likely to espouse a controversial view, you are being tendentious. A good synonym for tendentious is biased, though if you are biased you aren't necessarily leaning towards a view that is controversial.

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 (adj.)

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 (v.)

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 Text Completion 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.⁸⁹

Remiss (adj.)

Remiss 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 admonishment isn't usually as efficacious as I'd hope it would be. (So don't be remiss!).

Remiss in his duty to keep the school functioning efficiently, the principle was relieved of his position after only three months.

Restive (adj.)

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 (v.)

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 (v.)

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.