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Word Choice

One of the most commonly tested concepts is word choice, choosing the most appropriate word in context. Unfortunately, it's impossible to cover the infinite number of ways this concept can show up. After all, there are hundreds of thousands of words and no formulaic rules for why one word should be chosen over the other. Although you'll have to rely on your fluency in English for most of them, the ACT does not make these questions difficult. In fact, the answer must be clear enough so that it's not up to opinion. Here are a few general guidelines:

1. Choose lively and expressive words

What do I mean by expressive words? On the ACT, you might see a word choice question like:

With a thousand people staring at me, I suddenly felt the need for fresh air and went outside.

Which of the following choices best expresses the idea that the narrator left in a hurry?

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. went
- C. moved
- D. dashed

The answer here is **D** not only because it implies that the person was in a rush but also because *went* and *moved* are boring, everyday words. If the ACT wants an expressive word, don't choose a boring word.

2. Choose specific words

Here's an example:

Fish with bright colors have to be especially careful of dangerous things that lurk in the sea.

Which choice fits best in the context of this sentence?

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. animals
- C. mammals
- D. predators

The answer is **D**. The most specific words convey the most meaning, and on the ACT, the most meaningful words will usually be the answer.

3. Choose the word that's unlike the others

This guideline applies to “acceptable alternative” questions.

The tennis player smashed his racquet in disgust, aggravated by his poor performance.

Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?

- A. angered
- B. enraged
- C. repelled
- D. infuriated

The answer is C. The word *repelled* just doesn't quite fit here, especially when all the other choices share the same meaning.

4. Don't choose casual or informal language

Tired from the 20 mile hike, Yasmine retired to her tent and snoozed.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. hit the sack.
- C. slept.
- D. dozed off.

The answer is C. The other answers are too informal.

5. Don't forget your grammar rules

Some questions look like they're testing you on word choice when they're actually testing you on grammar.

The zombies raised from their graves and hunted the survivors.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. rise
- C. rose
- D. rised

A lot of students think this is a word choice question when it's not. Notice that choice **D**—*rised*—is not a word. Choice **B** is in the present tense when the sentence is in the past tense. Choice **A** uses the wrong verb; the meaning of *raise* is not quite the same as that of *rise*. The answer is C. Here's one more example:

I do my laundry while she does the dishes.

Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?

- A. while
- B. at the same time
- C. as
- D. then

The answer is D. Yes, all the other choices share the same meaning but more importantly, choice **D** would make the sentence a run-on. No matter what type of question you're on, always keep your grammar rules in mind.

Keep in mind that the guidelines above are just guidelines. Every question is different and not all of them will apply to every one. Your own judgment will be your best weapon once you've done enough practice.

Exercise 1: Answers for this chapter start on page 210.

Campbell's Thousand-Faced Hero

Joseph Campbell's 1949 comparative study of mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, presents a fascinating concept that can be applied to many of the great stories of modern times. He found that many hero stories among time and cultures clone a similar pattern, a 17-stage journey, in fact. The three major divisions of this journey are the hero's departure, his initiation, and his return.

In agreement with Campbell's schema, every hero receives a plea to adventure into the unknown, usually inspired by a vision that changes the hero's understanding of himself and his purpose in life. In *Star Wars*, Luke learns that his father was a Jedi knight and receives his father's lightsaber from Obi-Wan Kenobi.

1. Which of the following alternatives would be LEAST acceptable?
 - A. theory
 - B. idea
 - C. thesis
 - D. opinion
2.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. across
 - C. on
 - D. over
3.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. recap
 - C. follow
 - D. redo
4. Which of the following alternatives would be LEAST acceptable?
 - A. parts
 - B. stages
 - C. phases
 - D. areas
5.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. Pertaining to
 - C. According to
 - D. In relation to
6.
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. a ring
 - C. a call
 - D. an invitation
7. At this point, the author wants to indicate that the hero has gone through a dramatic transformation. Which choice most effectively accomplishes this goal?
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. revelation
 - C. goal
 - D. dream
8. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
 - A. NO CHANGE
 - B. discovers
 - C. finds out
 - D. detects

After his foster parents are killed, Luke chooses to embark with Obi-Wan on an adventure through distant galaxies. Similarly, in *The Matrix*, Neo is presented with the truth that he has not been living in⁹ the real world, which is actually a barren wasteland.

He chooses¹⁰ to take “the red pill,” unplugs from the civilized world he has known for his entire life, and enters a desolate¹¹ reality.

The initiation stage involves many trials, temptations, and failures. Luke Skywalker endures¹² dangerous battles, undergoes difficult training with Yoda, and eventually faces the evil Darth Vader, as¹³ well as the truth that Vader is his father. In the process¹³, he loses his hand and is nearly killed. Neo submits to intense training and self-questioning, which culminates in a fight with Agent Smith.

After hammering away¹⁴ through great suffering and adversity, the hero returns as a new person with greater power and self-understanding, in possession of some knowledge, ability, or token that indicates¹⁵ his newfound mastery. Luke successfully faces Darth Vader and wins him back to the good side. Batman returns, and Neo rises from the dead with greater powers than before.

9. Which choice fits most specifically in the context of this sentence?
- NO CHANGE
 - is shown
 - confronts
 - sees
10. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
- elects
 - is forced
 - decides
 - opts
11. Which choice fits most specifically in the context of this sentence?
- NO CHANGE
 - unpleasant
 - sad
 - painful
12. At this point, the author would like to suggest that Luke was successful in battle. Which choice most effectively accomplishes this goal?
- NO CHANGE
 - triumphs through
 - suffers through
 - goes through
13. A. NO CHANGE
B. furthermore
C. also plus
D. with
14. A. NO CHANGE
B. hanging tough
C. sticking it out
D. persevering
15. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
- conveys
 - points to
 - reflects
 - describes

Exercise 2: Answers for this chapter start on page 210.

Chivalry

In modern times, the word “chivalry” is generally assumed to refer to men treating women with respect and courtesy, opening doors for them, pulling out chairs for them, and giving up their seats on buses and in crowded rooms. In medieval times, however, the term transported¹ a much richer meaning that underlay the expectations placed on aristocratic men. The word derives from the French² word *chevalier*, which means “horseman.” In general, it referred to any man who could allow³ to arm himself and ride his own horse into battle—in other⁴ words⁴, a knight. In those days very few men were able to do it, hence the association⁵ between chivalry⁶ and the aristocracy.

1. A. NO CHANGE
B. moved
C. carried
D. displayed
2. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
A. extends from
B. derives from
C. comes from
D. originates from
3. A. NO CHANGE
B. afford
C. provide
D. bear the expense
4. A. NO CHANGE
B. in which case,
C. therefore,
D. in summary,
5. A. NO CHANGE
B. that
C. those
D. such
6. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
A. NO CHANGE
B. attachment
C. connection
D. link

Over time, what began as an idealization of knightly conduct during the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries transformed⁷ into a complex system of ethics governing a knight's behavior toward God, his lord, both his allies and his enemies, and women and children. The literature of the late middle ages, particularly the Arthurian legends, shaped⁸ the imaginations of many⁹ peasants to love and believe in the ideal of the courtly knight. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in the late 1300s, Sir Gawain displays an almost obsessive desire to ful-¹⁰ fill the chivalric code. Other characters constantly reference his reputation as a knight known for both his fantastic mind¹¹ in battle and his excellent manners.

7. All of the following are acceptable alternatives EXCEPT:
- A. persisted
 - B. developed
 - C. turned
 - D. evolved
8. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
- A. sparked
 - B. shaped
 - C. inspired
 - D. amped up
9. Which choice provides the most specific information?
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. a lot of
 - C. thousands of
 - D. tons of
10. Which of the following choices is LEAST acceptable?
- A. NO CHANGE
 - B. achieve
 - C. honor
 - D. respect
11. A. NO CHANGE
- B. know-how
 - C. smarts
 - D. prowess

Raymond Lull's 13th-century book on chivalry 12 details the ethical expectations, rules, and instructions a knight should follow. He was to be a man of 13 able body, good lineage, and wealth. He was to be in 14 control of his abilities and his wealth, giving aid to 14 those in need and protecting women and children. He was to be loyal to his lord, courageous in his defense, and a wise advisor. Basically, he was to be a 15 man of honor, who would stay true to his Christian faith and keep his word at all costs.

This old notion of chivalry should not be a relic of the past. After all, honor, loyalty, humility, courage, and generosity are relevant in all aspects 16 of our increasingly global society. Perhaps the modern definition of chivalry should be revisited. 17

12. Which choice fits most specifically in the context of this sentence?
- NO CHANGE
 - publication
 - manual
 - tome
13. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
- confirms
 - lays out
 - specifies
 - describes
14. Which choice fits most specifically in the context of this sentence?
- NO CHANGE
 - generous with
 - courteous with
 - responsible with
15. At this point, the author wants to emphasize that honor was the highest priority for a knight. Which choice most effectively accomplishes this goal?
- NO CHANGE
 - First,
 - Above all,
 - Initially,
16. Which of the following alternatives would NOT be acceptable?
- NO CHANGE
 - a big deal
 - important
 - essential
17. Which of the following alternatives would be LEAST acceptable?
- NO CHANGE
 - revised.
 - changed.
 - varied.