Vocabulary in Context

How do you figure out what an unfamiliar word means as you read?

Take a look at this paragraph and see if any words are unfamiliar or difficult to use in a sentence of your own. I'm putting a few words that I once needed to learn in bold:

> Fortune cookies are a **prominent** part of Asian-American cuisine and have filtered into popular culture as well. People create **customized** fortune cookies to send funny messages to friends and family—and sometimes to even propose marriage to a loved one! They are even used in advertising campaigns for corporations. Even though popular belief says otherwise, modern fortune cookies are as American as baseball and apple pie.

If you needed to figure out what "prominent" means, what would you do?

Here are some strategies that help many readers:

- Use the central idea and main idea to infer what the author must be saying about the topic. S/he is most likely supporting the main idea of the paragraph and the central idea of the passage.

Fortune cookies are a _____ part of Asian-American cuisine and have filtered into popular culture as well.

We know that the word is an adjective that tells us what kind of part fortune cookies play in Asian-American cuisine and popular culture. We've already figured out that the central idea is the fortune cookie's development in America, and this paragraph seems to be emphasizing how important it is in Asian-American food and in the American culture as a whole. So, we know that the word must relate to words like "important" or "large.

- Underline clues in that sentence and the sentences around it to see if you can figure out what the word means. What kind of clues might you see?

  - A definition set off by commas
  - A word/phrase that has a similar meaning to the word.
  - A word/phrase that has the opposite meaning of the word

This technique does not help us figure out what *prominent* means, but take a look at some sample sentences that use each type of clue to help us figure out the meaning of ebullient:

There was a sense of **ebullience**, or pure joy, when the bell rang that day.

  - The singer seemed **ebullient** after she sang the national anthem, and her friends felt great joy as well.

- o The players seemed downtrodden when they were down by 70 points, and their fans did not look **ebullient** either.

You can use the context clues to figure out that ebullient means "joyful."

- Use your knowledge of Latin and Greek roots. These are great roots to memorize because many English words are based on them.

"pro" is an example of a Latin root that means "in front of" or "on behalf of".

- If you are working with answer choices, you can replace the vocabulary word with each answer choice and see which one makes sense.

Fortune cookies are a **prominent** part of Asian-American cuisine and have filtered into popular culture as well.

    A. distinguished
    B. significant
    C. misleading
    D. new

Answer: B

Now, you can use context clues and your knowledge of Greek/Latin roots to guess what the other bolded word means:

> Fortune cookies are a **prominent** part of Asian-American cuisine and have filtered into popular culture as well. People create **customized** fortune cookies to send funny messages to friends and family—and sometimes to even propose marriage to a loved one! They are even used in advertising campaigns for corporations. Even though popular belief says otherwise, modern fortune cookies are as American as baseball and apple pie.

People create **customized** fortune cookies to send funny messages to friends and family—and sometimes to even propose marriage to a loved one!

    A. traditional
    B. handmade
    C. personalized
    D. inedible

Scroll Down for the Answer …

5

4

3

2

1

Answer: C