Context & meaning 1

When we see a new word (in a reading passage, for example), we can often work out what it means, or get an *idea* of what it means, by looking at the context in which it appears (for example, what is the *passage* about, what is the *sentence* about and what information comes before and after the word?).

Identifying the meaning of a word from its context is an especially useful skill in the IELTS Reading Test.

1 Look at these words, and answer the questions which follow.

nocturnal cites coherently feat

1. Without seeing them in a sentence, do you know (or can you guess) what the words in the box mean?
   nocturnal: Yes / No cites: Yes / No
   coherently: Yes / No feat: Yes / No
2. Now look at the words in the passage. Can you guess what they mean now? In your own words, explain what they might mean.

The remarkable success of Simon Weber's book on owls, bats, foxes and other **nocturnal** creatures, *A Call in the Dark*, is probably not surprising in view of the popularity of his recent television series, 'Night Prowlers'. It is a very thorough book by an author who is an expert in his field and who has clearly done a lot of research. In addition to describing his own findings, he **cites** the research carried out by others, including Wright and Lawson in the 1990s, and discusses where they might have gone wrong with some of their assumptions. He writes **coherently** on the subject, beginning by looking at basic facts before discussing progressively complex theories, without once confusing his readers. This is a remarkable **feat,** considering the complexity of the subject and the science that is often involved.

nocturnal: .....

cites: .....

coherently: .....

feat: .....

2 Look at the words in bold in sentences 1 – 15, and try to decide what they mean.

1. The journey across the hills was long and **arduous,** much of it having to be done on foot in temperatures of over 40°C.
2. Foxes are a common sight in our towns and cities, where they **forage** in dustbins, in gardens and on waste ground.
3. The cuckoo is a rare and **elusive** bird which is often heard but rarely seen.
4. The research they carried out was **exhaustive,** so by the time the project was complete, they knew everything they had to know about their subject.
5. The hotel we stayed in was a **mediocre** place, with small rooms, rather dull food and an uninspiring view of a car park.

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6. Research suggests that children are more **resilient** than adults when it comes to getting over an illness.
7. The room was extremely untidy, with **stacks** of books and piles of paper all over the floor, and unwashed coffee cups on the tables.
8. He was an extremely **prolific** author, writing three or four novels a year as well as many short stories.
9. Water is essential for human life, so it is **imperative** we make sure that in the future there is enough for everyone.
10. Attempts to **implement** change met with strong resistance at first, but gradually people realised that this change was needed.
11. Many men say that they are willing to share the **burden** of domestic duties like washing and cooking, but I doubt that they mean it.
12. The building is designed to **sway** slightly in strong winds, but it's still a rather frightening sensation when you are on the upper floors.
13. Many people would like to own a house in the city centre, but **prohibitive** property prices mean that very few of them would ever be able to buy such a place.
14. The city centre has some beautiful old buildings, but there are some extremely ugly industrial estates on the **fringe.**
15. Employees are encouraged to use their **initiative** when they are faced with a problem and there is nobody more senior there to help them.

3 Now match the words in bold in sentences 1 – 15 above with their definitions (a) – (o) below.

(a) A serious or difficult responsibility that you have to deal with *burden*
(b) Producing a lot of things, ideas, etc. .....
(c) The ability to decide what to do in an independent way. .....
(d) Able to quickly become healthy, happy or strong again. .....
(e) Move or swing slightly from side to side. .....
(f) Difficult or impossible to catch or find. .....
(g) Make something such as in idea, plan, system, etc., start to work. .....
(h) Extremely difficult and involving a lot of effort. .....
(i) The outer edge of something. .....
(j) So expensive that nobody can afford it. .....
(k) Thorough and complete. .....
(l) To search in a wide area for something, especially food. .....
(m) Piles of things placed one on top of another. .....
(n) Extremely important and urgent. .....
(o) Average or below average. .....

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