Read the following:

Some sharks are *rapacious* by nature. They will devour almost anything, whether or not it is edible and whether or not they are hungry. In addition to organic remains, a wide variety of inedible objects have been found inside sharks’ bodies. Examination of the stomach contents of one shark revealed that it had swallowed a whole cinder block.

If you did not already know that “rapacious” means “predatory,” you could have used the context surrounding the words to unlock its meaning. The most important clue is the sentence, “They will devour almost anything, whether or not it is edible and whether or not they are hungry.” This, plus the fact that sharks ingest inedible objects, could have helped you figure out that a person or creature that is *rapacious* is given to seizing for plunder or the satisfaction of greed.

Read another paragraph:

If the name Charles Sherwood Stratton does not sound familiar to you, it may be because Stratton was best known by his circus name: General Tom Thumb. That name was appropriate because Stratton was a *little person*. His body was *diminutive* but perfectly formed. As a young man, he was only 25 inches tall and weighed 15 pounds. Later on, he grew to be 40 inches tall and weighed 70 pounds. He was a sensation wherever Phineas T. Barnum exhibited him.

Someone who did not know that “diminutive” means “tiny” or “very small” could have used the context clues to derive its meaning. You read that Stratton was a little person. In addition, you read that he was only 40 inches tall and weighed only 70 pounds as an adult.

Using this approach in your reading, you can often identify the meaning of words you do not know. Of course, you could look them up in a dictionary. But sometimes a dictionary is not readily available, and sometimes you just do not want to take the time. That is why it is very helpful to be able to *identify words from context* or to *derive their meaning by reading around them*.

Read the following paragraph about smallpox inoculation. If you do not know what the word *dissemination* means, think about how it is used and look carefully for information that gives your clues to its meaning.

No discussion of smallpox vaccination would be complete without including the one man who made the miracle possible, Dr. Edward Jenner. Jenner was a country doctor in 18th-century England when the dream of finding a way to stop the smallpox scourge first came to him. In those days, the only measure taken against smallpox was a form of inoculation introduced in England in 1717 by a woman of great stature, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the British Ambassador to Turkey. While staying in that country, Lady Montagu had observed a unique and apparently satisfactory technique of inoculation, and was so impressed by it that she described it in a letter she wrote home. This letter ultimately led to *dissemination* of the procedure throughout England.

Based on what you read, you have figured out that *dissemination* means *widespread scattering* or *extensive spreading*. How? With the following clues from the above passage:

1. A form of inoculation had been introduced into England by Lady Montagu in 1717.
2. This was the only measure being taken against smallpox when Jenner began his work.

When you come across an unfamiliar word while reading and you cannot look it up, carefully analyze its context to derive its meaning. While this method is not effective 100 percent of the time, it does work more often than not.
Read each of the following paragraphs and determine the meaning of the italicized word from its context. Then complete the exercise by circling the appropriate answer or answers to the multiple-choice question.

1. Learning the metric units did not really bother us. We were going to have our troubles relating our old concepts of weight, volume, and distance to the metric units. Americans were not bothered by theoretical considerations like how many cubic centimeters in a liter (1,000). Our concern was more pragmatic. We wanted to know how many liters of milk we would have to buy if we normally got three quarts a day. Three liters would have been fine, because the liter is not quite 1-1/2 ounces more than a quart, and serves the same as a quart for most purposes.

A synonym for pragmatic is:

a. hardworking.
b. habitual.
c. annoying.
d. unquestioning.
e. bothersome.
f. practical.

Which of the following is not a synonym for baleful?

a. ominous  
b. menacing  
c. threatening  
d. soothing

Which of the following describe something that is inexplicable?

a. Observers watch as a fly tries to free itself from a spider’s web.
b. Medical authorities are baffled by strange, unexpected deaths.
c. Relatives are unable to figure out what caused a man’s sudden, bizarre behavior.
d. A solar eclipse occurs when the moon passes between the earth and the sun so that we cannot see the sun.

Continued
4. Experimental programs were once tested around the country to see how a “cashless society” would work. In 1972 the nation’s first automatic paperless deposit and bill-paying plan began in California. Similar programs followed in Atlanta, Boston, and Minneapolis. Under these programs, employees authorized their employers to deposit their pay into their checking accounts automatically each payday in lieu of the conventional procedure. They also arranged to automatically pay recurring bills.

5. Everybody resisted the advent of the metric system, and all for the same reason. It was tough getting used to a change. We would never be more comfortable with the new than the old.

6. Outraged by the Boston Tea Party, the British Parliament passed laws intended to penalize the people of Massachusetts, and to serve as a threat to the other American colonies. The laws, however, were ineffectual because the colonists ignored them and revolted against the British.

7. My brother is studying medicine and is especially interested in pathology. He plans to make a career of the study of the causes and nature of diseases.

8. Last night the young ballet dancer gave a magnificent performance. In beauty and grace, it transcended any she had ever given before. Some special quality seemed to burst forth, and she was transformed from a competent artist into a rare and gifted one.