GRE word roots: guess an unknown word intelligently

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One-page cheat sheet · GRE Verbal · roots, direction words, a worked example, traps

> **Most "hard" GRE words come from Latin and Greek parts that repeat across dozens of words. Roots give a direction, not an exact translation — the sentence gives the answer.**

The most useful parts

Part	Meaning	Examples
bene- / mal-	well / badly	benevolent, benign / malevolent, malign
in- / im- / ir-	not	impartial, irrevocable, inept
loqu / locu	speak	loquacious, eloquent, circumlocution
tac / tic	be silent	tacit, taciturn, reticent
ten / tin / tain	hold	tenacious, pertinacious
greg	flock, group	gregarious, egregious ("out of the flock" — outrageous)
-ous / -ose	full of	verbose, bellicose, garrulous
vol	will	benevolent (bene- "well" + vol "will") — kindly
pugn	fight	pugnacious — quarrelsome
magn · anim	great · soul	magnanimous — generous

Worked example — from 20% to the answer

`The senator, usually so ___ that his speeches ran far past their allotted time, surprised reporters by answering their question in just three words.`

Options: loquacious · taciturn · benevolent · pugnacious · magnanimous. None familiar? A random pick is 20%.

Option	Breakdown	Verdict
loquacious	loqu "speak" + -ous "full of" → talkative	✓ about talking — keep
taciturn	tac "be silent" → silent	about talking — keep (opposite pair)
benevolent	bene- "well" + vol "will" → kindly	✗ not about kindness
pugnacious	pugn "fight" → quarrelsome	✗ not the point
magnanimous	magn "great" + anim "soul" → generous	✗ off

Three out of five gone → **50%**, not 20%. Logic: "usually so ___ that his speeches ran far past their time" → usually talkative → **loquacious**. "Surprised" marks the three-word answer as unusual. Trap: taciturn describes that answer, but the blank sits in the "usually" part.

The sentence sets the direction

- Roots tell you: good or bad, for or against, about speech, movement or feeling.
- **Opposite** direction: *however, although, far from*
- **Same** direction: *moreover, indeed*
- Then drop the options pointing the wrong way.

Word families

- **Talkers:** loquacious, garrulous, verbose
- **Silent ones:** taciturn, reticent
- The GRE uses such families all the time — especially in "pick two synonyms out of six".

Three rules so you are not fooled

1. **Sentence first, options second.** Put your own word in the blank (even in your own language: "chatty"), then look for something close.
2. **A root is a hint, not proof.** False friends: *pedestrian* = "walker" but also "dull". If the breakdown argues with the sentence, trust the sentence.
3. **Look for pairs.** Options opposite by root (bene-/mal-, pro-/contra-, loqu/tac) — the answer is often one of them.

How to train roots

- Learn roots **together with words** — roots cut off from words are forgotten (learn *ten*, then meet *tenacious*).
- Recognition and reverse recall are enough; no need to spell roots.
- After each example, spend a few seconds taking one word apart.
- With every new GRE word ask: **what is it made of?**

Common mistakes

✗	✓
Reading the options before thinking about the sentence	Predict your own word for the blank first
Treating a root breakdown as an exact translation	Use it for direction; the sentence logic decides
Picking the word that fits the nearby clause (taciturn)	Check which part of the sentence the blank belongs to ("usually")