Word Meaning in Nonfiction: Figurative, Connotative, Technical

Name: _____ Date: _____ Score: _____ / 10

Quick Review

A nonfiction writer may use a word for its TECHNICAL meaning (a precise field term), its CONNOTATIVE meaning (the feeling around it), or FIGURATIVELY (an explicit comparison, not literal). The sentence and the words around it tell you which the author intends.

PART 1 — READ

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Inside an mRNA Vaccine

Most older vaccines work by introducing the body to a weakened or inactive virus. An mRNA vaccine takes a different route: instead of bringing in a piece of the virus itself, it carries a short set of genetic instructions — a recipe — that tells the body's own cells to build one harmless protein from the virus. The body sees the protein, recognizes it as foreign, and begins building defenses. The recipe itself breaks down within days. The defenses, however, can last much longer.

The molecule at the center of this technology is called messenger RNA, or mRNA. In a healthy cell, mRNA is constantly being copied from DNA and then carried, like a memo from a manager, to the ribosomes — the tiny factories that translate the message into proteins. An mRNA vaccine simply hand-delivers an extra memo to those same factories. Because the molecule is fragile, scientists wrap each strand in a lipid nanoparticle, a microscopic bubble of fat that protects the message until it reaches the cell. Without that protective wrapper, the mRNA would be torn apart by enzymes in the blood within minutes.

The technology is not new. Researchers had been refining mRNA delivery for more than thirty years before the first mRNA vaccines reached the public during the coronavirus pandemic. Public reaction, however, often outran public understanding. Critics described the vaccines with words like "experimental" and "untested," terms with a heavy connotation of recklessness, when in fact the underlying platform had been studied since the 1990s. Supporters, meanwhile, sometimes described the vaccines as a "miracle," a word whose connotation of magic obscures decades of patient laboratory work. Honest writing about new science requires careful word choice. A vaccine is not a miracle; it is a tool. The mRNA inside it is not a memo in the literal sense — it is a strand of nucleotides — but the comparison helps non-specialists see why the technology works.

PART 2 — PRACTICE

Use the passage to answer each question.

1. Read this sentence from paragraph 1: "It carries a short set of genetic instructions — a recipe — that tells the body's own cells to build one harmless protein from the virus." The word "recipe" is used —

A. literally, to mean a cooking recipe.

B. figuratively, to compare a strand of genetic instructions to a familiar set of steps.

C. technically, as the official scientific term for mRNA.

D. sarcastically, to mock the science.

2. Read this phrase from paragraph 2: "the ribosomes — the tiny factories that translate the message into proteins." The word "translate" is used —

A. figuratively, to compare ribosomes to language teachers.

B. technically, as the established biological term for building a protein from an mRNA sequence.

C. connotatively, to suggest the proteins are confusing.

D. literally, to mean changing English into another language.

3. In paragraph 3, the author writes that words like "experimental" and "untested" carry "a heavy connotation of recklessness." The word "connotation" MOST NEARLY means —

A. the official dictionary definition of a word.

B. the emotional feeling or association a word carries beyond its literal meaning.

C. a word's spelling and pronunciation.

D. the field in which a word is most often used.

4. Read this line from paragraph 2: "mRNA is constantly being copied from DNA and then carried, like a memo from a manager, to the ribosomes." The phrase "like a memo from a manager" is —

A. a technical term in molecular biology.

B. an explicit figurative comparison meant to help readers picture the role of mRNA.

C. a connotation that suggests mRNA is unimportant.

D. a definition that replaces the technical term.

5. In paragraph 3, the author writes that "miracle" has a connotation of "magic." The MAIN purpose of pointing this out is to —

A. argue that vaccines are in fact magical.

B. show that an over-positive word can hide the years of real laboratory work behind the science.

C. criticize people who use the word "miracle" in religious contexts.

D. explain how miracles are studied in biology.

6. The word "platform" in paragraph 3 ("the underlying platform had been studied since the 1990s") MOST NEARLY means —

A. a raised stage where speeches are given.

B. a technical term referring to the underlying mRNA technology used across many specific vaccines.

C. a political position taken by a public figure.

D. a kind of shoe with a thick sole.

7. In paragraph 2, the author writes that mRNA "would be torn apart by enzymes in the blood within minutes." The word "torn apart" is used —

A. technically, as the precise biochemical term for enzyme activity.

B. figuratively, to give a vivid sense of how rapidly enzymes break the molecule down.

C. literally, as if scissors were physically cutting the strand.

D. connotatively, to praise the strength of enzymes.

8. Read these lines from paragraph 3: "A vaccine is not a miracle; it is a tool. The mRNA inside it is not a memo in the literal sense — it is a strand of nucleotides — but the comparison helps non-specialists see why the technology works." The author's MAIN purpose here is to —

A. argue that figurative language has no place in science writing.

B. show that figurative comparisons can help readers understand technical ideas, even when the literal terms are more precise.

C. claim that mRNA is in fact a kind of memo.

D. criticize non-specialists for misunderstanding science.

9. In your own words, explain the difference between a TECHNICAL meaning and a FIGURATIVE meaning, using ONE example from the passage of each.

_____

_____

10. Choose ONE word from paragraph 3 whose CONNOTATION the author calls attention to. State the word, its connotation, and why the author thinks careful word choice matters.

_____

_____

Answer Keys

1	A	**B**	C	D	6	A	**B**	C	D
2	A	**B**	C	D	7	A	**B**	C	D
3	A	**B**	C	D	8	A	**B**	C	D
4	A	**B**	C	D	9	See below			
5	A	**B**	C	D	10	See below			

Explanations

1. B	"Recipe" is an explicit comparison meant to help a reader picture instructions — a figurative use. A is the literal meaning, which does not fit a cell. C is wrong: the technical term is mRNA, not recipe. D reads sarcasm into a neutral comparison.
2. B	"Translation" is the precise biology term for protein synthesis from mRNA — a technical use, signaled by the field context. A treats a field term as a metaphor. C invents a feeling. D applies the everyday meaning.
3. B	B is the textbook definition of connotation. A confuses connotation with denotation. C and D confuse connotation with unrelated language features.
4. B	"Like a memo" is a simile — an explicit figurative comparison the author uses to make the role visualizable. A misreads a simile as a field term. C invents a negative feeling. D reverses the order: the simile illustrates, not replaces, the technical term.
5. B	The author is showing how a high-praise word can OBSCURE the technical work — the very point the passage makes about word choice. A inverts the point. C drags religion in. D invents a research field.
6. B	"Platform" is being used as a technical term — a shared underlying technology that supports many products. A, C, and D are all real meanings of the word but do not fit a sentence about vaccine technology.
7. B	"Torn apart" is dramatic shorthand for enzymatic breakdown — a figurative use that helps the reader feel the speed. A treats a vivid phrase as a field term. C imagines scissors. D invents praise.
8. B	The author both names the limit of the simile ("not a memo in the literal sense") AND defends its usefulness — the careful both-and the question asks for. A is too extreme. C ignores "not… in the literal sense." D blames readers.
9.	**Answer:** Strong answer: A technical meaning is the precise way a word is used inside a specific field — for example, "translate" in the passage refers to the actual biological process of making a protein from mRNA. A figurative meaning is a deliberate comparison, not a literal one — for example, the passage compares mRNA to a "memo from a manager" to help readers picture its role. Acceptable variations: any technical example ("translate," "platform," or "lipid nanoparticle" used as a field term) paired with any figurative example ("recipe," "factories," "memo," "torn apart," or "bubble of fat"). NOT acceptable: defining only one of the two; using the same example for both; defining connotation in place of technical or figurative. A 2-point answer (1) defines BOTH terms in the student's own words AND (2) uses ONE example of EACH from the passage.

10.	**Answer:** Strong answer: The author points to "experimental" (or "untested," or "miracle"). "Experimental" carries a connotation of recklessness — it makes a careful product sound careless. The author thinks word choice matters because words with strong connotations can hide what is actually true about a technology — that mRNA had been studied since the 1990s and is not magic, just a tool. Acceptable variations: "untested" with the connotation of recklessness; "miracle" with the connotation of magic. NOT acceptable: choosing a word the author does NOT discuss ("recipe," "memo"); answers that only restate the dictionary definition; answers without any reference to the author's larger point about careful language. A 2-point answer names a paragraph-3 word, its connotation, AND why word choice matters to the author.

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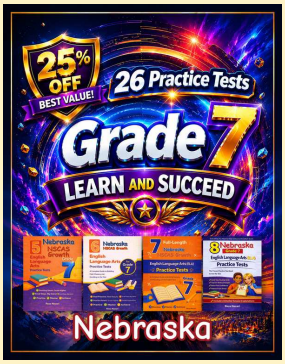

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