

Tutorial MA01 Answer Key

M01.2 Exercises

Question 1. Consider the following reference letter written for a student. Go through each sentence and explain why it is not part of its literal meaning that the student is a good student or a hardworking one.

Edward's abilities must be seen to be believed. The amount of material he knows will surprise you. It would be very hard to find someone as capable as he is. He has left a deep impression on all teachers in the department. You will be fortunate if you can get him to work for you.

Answer: The first sentence is compatible with Edward being a mediocre student despite appearing to be a good one, so this mediocrity must be seen to be believed. The second sentence, likewise, is compatible with Edward knowing very little material despite appearing to know a lot of material. The third sentence is compatible with Edward being an exceptionally atrocious student, such that very few students exceed his capacity for procrastination, misunderstanding, and so on. The fourth sentence is compatible with Edward having created in his teachers a strong impression of mediocrity or badness. The fifth, final, sentence is compatible with Edward being extremely lazy and difficult to motivate, so one would count oneself lucky upon managing to have him do any work at all.

Question 2. When we want to distinguish between the literal meanings of two statements, one method is to think of situations where one statement is true, and the other one is false, or to think of the different implications that they may have. Apply this method to each of these pairs of sentences.

Answer: Responses will vary; see the sample answers below.

1. (a) I shall try to come. (b) I shall come.

If I am being forced to come, then (b) is true despite a lack of effort for coming. Conversely, I might have many other obligations that conflict with my coming, so that even though I shall try to come, I do not assert that I shall in fact come.

2. (a) This is the oldest building on campus. (b) This is one of the oldest buildings on campus.

If there are three buildings on campus over 100 years old, and I am talking about the second-oldest building, then (b) is true but (a) is false.

3. (a) Amy convinced Betty to go to the party. (b) Amy encouraged Betty to go to the party.

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If Amy pleads with Betty to go to the party but Betty decides not to go, then (b) is true but (a) is false.

4. (a) Superman will die very soon. (b) Superman might die very soon.

If Superman has been poisoned with kryptonite but there is an antidote available he has yet to take, then (b) is true but (a) is false. In other words, he might die soon if he does not take the antidote, but since he won't die if he does take the antidote, it is incorrect to say he will in fact die soon.

5. (a) It can be proved to be true. (b) It cannot be proved to be false.

Bertrand Russell once wondered whether there might be a teapot floating in orbit between Mercury and Venus. Suppose the teapot is too small to be detectable with our observing equipment. Even though we cannot prove there is a teapot in orbit, we cannot prove there is not one either; absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In this case, (a) is false but (b) is true.

6. (a) Honesty is Tim's biggest virtue. (b) Loyalty is Tim's biggest virtue.

Imagine that Tim always tells the truth, even when this involves betraying or endangering those close to him. Then, (a) is true but (b) is false.

Question 3. Consider these two clauses which might appear as part of a rental agreement. How would you explain their differences in literal meaning?

1. You may terminate the contract after 12 months by giving 2 months' notice.
2. After 12 months, you can give 2 months' notice and terminate the contract.

Answer: The second statement says that notice to terminate the contract can be given only after 12 months. In effect, the minimum duration of the contract is 14 months. This is different with the first statement, which says that the contract can be terminated after 12 months, provided that you give 2 months' notice. There is no requirement that the notice has to be given only after 12 months, so the minimum duration of the contract is 12 months, provided that notice is given after 10 months (or earlier in common practice). This is something to watch out for when you sign a rental contract in the future!