

The Work Done by 'Natural'

Three hundred and sixty words on a single word, and what it is paid to do on the side of a bottle.

7 min read

Before you read

- **naturalise** — to present a contingent arrangement as though it were simply given
- **contingent** — true as a matter of fact, but capable of having been otherwise
- **connotation** — the associations a word carries beyond its literal sense
- **ideology** — here: the set of assumptions a culture holds without examining
- **signifier** — the word or image doing the signalling, as distinct from the thing signalled
- **inoculation** — admitting a small fault in order to protect against a larger charge
- **sedimented** — settled, through long repetition, into something that feels obvious
- **interrogate** — to examine critically rather than accept at face value



Product shelf in a Paris supermarket, own-brand labelling

¹ The word on the bottle is *naturel*. It has no legal definition in this context, no measurable referent, and no claim attached to it that could be shown to be false. This is not a weakness of the word. It is the condition of its usefulness.

² A claim that can be falsified can be regulated. "Contains no added sugar" invites an audit. *Naturel* invites nothing, because it does not describe the product. It describes a relation the buyer is invited to assume between the product and a state of affairs prior to industry — a state that the bottle, the preservative and the distribution network all contradict, and that the word is nonetheless able to evoke without asserting.

³ What interests the critic is not that this is dishonest. It is barely dishonest; nobody is deceived about the existence of factories. What interests the critic is the direction of the operation. The word takes something contingent — an industrial process, a commercial decision, a particular supply chain assembled in the past forty years — and gives it the grammar of something given. Nature is what was there before anyone chose. To call a manufactured thing natural is to borrow that grammar: to move a decision out of the category of things that could have been decided differently.

⁴ This is the mechanism worth naming, because it is not confined to labels. The same move is available for a wage structure, a border, a division of domestic labour, a school timetable. In each case the rhetorical work is identical: an arrangement that has a history, and therefore an author, is re-presented as a condition that has none. Arrangements with authors can be argued with. Conditions cannot.

⁵ The defence usually offered is that everyone knows what *naturel* means on a bottle, and that nobody takes it seriously. The defence is weaker than it sounds. Sedimented language does its work precisely where it is not taken seriously — attention is what the operation cannot survive. A reader on guard against the word is, for that moment, outside its reach. The difficulty is that no one is on guard for long, and the vocabulary is waiting when the guard drops.

⁶ The critical task, then, is modest and endless. Not to expose a lie, since there is no lie. Only to keep returning the word to the question it was constructed to foreclose: *who decided this, and when, and what else was available?*

Part A **Select the best answer**

Circle the letter next to the answer best supported by the text.

1. The author argues that the vagueness of *naturel* is
 - A a loophole regulators have failed to close
 - B the very source of its usefulness
 - C evidence that consumers are deceived
 - D a consequence of translation between languages

2. "The grammar of something given" (paragraph 3) refers to
 - A the syntax of advertising copy
 - B the legal standard applied to food labelling
 - C the manner in which a chosen arrangement is made to seem unchosen
 - D the historical origin of the word in French

3. The author's reply to the "everyone knows" defence rests on the claim that
 - A most consumers in fact believe the label literally
 - B the operation works best on inattentive readers
 - C the defence confuses connotation with denotation
 - D regulation would resolve the problem entirely

4. The final paragraph characterises the critical task as "modest and endless" chiefly because
 - A no single exposure can permanently restore attention
 - B critics lack the authority to change labelling law
 - C the deception is too small to merit sustained effort
 - D the meaning of the word changes over time

Part B **Analyse and explain**

Answer in continuous prose. Refer to the text by paragraph number where it strengthens your point.

5. Explain the distinction the author draws between a claim that can be audited and one that merely invites an assumption.

6. Paragraph 4 extends the argument beyond labelling. Explain the extension, and assess whether the mechanism really is "identical" in the examples given.

7. "Arrangements with authors can be argued with. Conditions cannot." Explain what is at stake in this pair of sentences.

8. The author concedes early that the label is "barely dishonest". Analyse what this concession does for the argument that follows.

9. The passage is unusually short and makes no use of evidence beyond a single example. Evaluate whether this weakens it.

Part C **Argue a position**

There is no single correct answer. Take a position, and make the reasoning that supports it visible.

10. Choose a word currently doing comparable work in public discussion — *organic*, *traditional*, *innovative*, *realistic*, *common sense*. Apply the author's method to it and report what you find.

11. Is there a defensible use of *natural* that survives this critique? Construct one, and test it against paragraph 3.

12. The author treats naturalisation as something done to readers. To what extent do readers participate in it willingly? Argue a position.

13. If the mechanism works best on the inattentive, is criticism of this kind practically useful, or only intellectually satisfying? Defend your answer.

14. The passage assumes that moving something from 'given' to 'decided' is always a gain. Is it? Give a case where it might not be.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B | 2. C | 3. B | 4. A

Part B

5. An auditable claim states a fact about the product and so can be tested and regulated; *naturel* states nothing testable and instead cues the buyer to supply a relation between the product and a pre-industrial condition. The first exposes the seller to challenge; the second transfers the assertion to the buyer, where it cannot be falsified.

6. The extension is that any arrangement with a history can be re-presented as a condition without one. Strong answers test rather than accept 'identical' — a border and a label differ in the institutions that sustain them, and the rhetorical move may be the same while its consequences are not. Credit either verdict if the test is done.

7. Argument presupposes an agent who chose and could choose otherwise. Recategorising an arrangement as a condition removes the agent, and with it the standing to object — so the move is not merely descriptive but forecloses political contest in advance.

8. It removes the weakest reading of the thesis (that consumers are duped) before an opponent can attack it, which is inoculation in the sense given in the vocabulary list. It also shifts the charge from deception to something harder to dismiss — a structural effect that does not require anyone to be fooled.

9. Either verdict is markable. Strong answers distinguish a conceptual argument, where one well-analysed case can suffice, from an empirical claim about effects on readers, which paragraph 5 makes and does not evidence.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the conclusion.

10. Credit the application, not the choice of word: the test is whether the student identifies what the word presents as given and what decision it conceals.

11. The obvious candidate is a contrastive, technical use (naturally occurring versus synthesised). Strong answers notice this survives because it is auditable, which concedes the author's point rather than refuting it.

12. Reward engagement with complicity — the convenience of not interrogating every label — without collapsing into blaming the reader.

13. Look for a serious account of what criticism can do at scale: education, regulation, norms of writing. A purely pessimistic answer is acceptable if argued.

14. Strong answers find cases where treating something as settled is enabling rather than oppressive — stable rights, scientific consensus — and distinguish those from the case in the passage.

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