

## CONTEXT CLUES

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### 1. Introduction

Learning the meaning of a word through its use in a sentence or paragraph is the most practical way to build vocabulary since a dictionary is not always available when a reader encounters an unknown word. A reader must be aware that many words have several possible meanings. Only by being sensitive to the circumstances in which a word is used can the reader decide upon an appropriate definition to fit the context.

### 2. Definition

Context clues are hints found within a sentence, paragraph, or passage that a reader can use to understand the meanings of new or unfamiliar words.

### 3. When to Use Clues

A reader should rely on context clues when an obvious clue to meaning is provided, or when only a general sense of the meaning is needed for the reader's purposes.

Context clues should not be used when:

- a precise meaning is required,
- clues suggest several possible definitions,
- nearby words are unfamiliar, and when
- the unknown word is a common one that will be needed again.

In these cases, a dictionary should be consulted.

### 4. Types of Clues

There are several different types of context clues. Here are some of them:

#### a. Definition /Description Clue

The new term may be formally defined, or sufficient explanation may be given within the sentence or in the following sentence. Clues to definition include "that is, namely, is defined as..." commas, dashes, and parentheses.

**Example:** His emaciation, that is, his skeleton-like appearance, was frightening to see. "Skeleton-like appearance" is the definition of "emaciation."

### **b. Example Clue**

Sometimes when a reader finds a new word, an example might be found nearby that helps to explain its meaning. Words like “including, such as, and for example...” point out example clues.

#### **Example:**

- ✓ Celestial bodies, including the sun, moon, and stars, have fascinated man through the centuries.
- ✓ “Celestial” objects are those in the sky or heavens.

### **c. Synonym / Restatement Clue**

The reader may discover the meaning of an unknown word because it repeats an idea expressed in familiar words nearby. In other words, that is; commas, dashes, and parentheses are used.

#### **Example:**

- ✓ Flooded with spotlights—the focus of all attention—the new Miss America began her year-long reign. She was the cynosure of all eyes for the rest of the evening.
- ✓ “Cynosure” means “the focus of all attention.”

### **d. Contrast /Antonym Clue**

An opposite-meaning context clue contrasts the meaning of an unfamiliar word with the meaning of a familiar term. Words like “although,” “however,” and “but” may signal contrast clues.

#### **Example:**

- ✓ When the light brightens, the pupils of the eyes contract; however, when it grows darker, they dilate.
- ✓ “Dilate” is the opposite of “contract.”

### **e. Mood /Tone Clue**

The author sets a mood, and the meaning of the unknown word must harmonize with this mood.

#### **Examples:**

- ✓ When the children at the birthday party saw the cake, the balloons and the clown, they were ecstatic.
- ✓ “Ecstatic,” which means “delighted and jumping for joy,” fits into the mood set by the words “party,” “cake,” and “balloons.”

### **f. Experience Clue**

Sometimes a reader knows from experience how people or things act in a given situation. This knowledge provides a clue to a word’s meaning.

#### **Examples:**

- ✓ During those first weeks at university, the thoughts of a freshman go back to high school where he was “in,” knew everyone, and felt at home. A feeling of nostalgia sweeps over him.
- ✓ “Nostalgia” means a sentimental longing for the past

### **g. Word Structure /Analysis Clue**

The parts used to construct a word can be direct clues to meaning. Knowledge of roots, prefixes, and suffixes can aid a reader in using this type of context clue. Learning one word part can add dozens of words to a reader’s vocabulary. The power of word parts lies in the ability to combine the roots and affixes with the context in which a word is used to discover the author’s meaning.

#### **Examples:**

- ✓ The story is incredible.
- ✓ The root “cred” means “to believe,” and the prefix “in” means “not.” Therefore, if a story is incredible, it is unbelievable.

### h. Inference Clue

Sufficient clues might be available for the careful reader to make an educated guess at the meaning.

#### Example:

- ✓ She told her mother, “It was a dull meeting! I was bored every minute. The conversation was absolutely vapid .”
- ✓ “Vapid” means “uninteresting.”

### i. Cause and Effect Clue

The author explains the reason for or the result of the word. Words like “because,” “since,” “therefore,” “thus,” “so,” etc. may signal context clues.

#### Example:

- ✓ She wanted to impress all her dinner guests with the food she served, so she carefully studied the necessary culinary arts.
- ✓ “Culinary” means “food preparation.”

## 5. Conclusion

Context clues constitute a vital strategy that language learners can use to guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. They are there to help them make sense of the text and carry out different activities that relate to comprehension. Students need to systematically learn to use these tools effectively for the sake of responding to written texts and learning new vocabulary.

### Time for practice

**Task:** Underline the part of the sentence that helps you find the meaning of the word in bold, and then write an appropriate definition to it. Use context clues!

- a. The man who used to be very **lax** with the rules, now follows all the laws.  
Definition :
- b. The **comestibles**, including a huge pizza, a birthday cake, chocolate-covered peanuts, and tasty hot dogs, were all in the fridge before my birthday party.  
Definition :
- c. She was so **erratic** that she would be in a great mood one minute and crying the next. You never could predict the way she would act.  
Definition :
- d. The **brawl**, or fight, on the playground got both kids sent to the principal.  
Definition: