

CONTEXT CLUES

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.

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.

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 relied upon when a precise meaning is required, when clues suggest several possible definitions, when 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.

There are several different types of context clues. Some of them are:

1. 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," commas, dashes, and parentheses.

Examples:

a. His emaciation, that is, his skeleton-like appearance, was frightening to see.

"Skeleton-like appearance" is the definition of "emaciation."

b. Fluoroscopy, examination with a fluoroscope, has become a common practice.

The commas before and after "examination with a fluoroscope" point out the definition of "fluoroscopy."

c. The dudeen – a short-stemmed clay pipe – is found in Irish folk tales.

The dashes setting off "a short-stemmed clay pipe" point out the definition of "dudeen."

2. EXAMPLE CLUES

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.

Examples:

a. Piscatorial creatures, such as flounder, salmon, and trout, live in the coldest parts of the ocean.
"Piscatorial" obviously refers to fish.

b. Celestial bodies, including the sun, moon, and stars, have fascinated man through the centuries.
"Celestial" objects are those in the sky or heavens.

c. In the course of man's evolution, certain organs have atrophied. The appendix, for example, has wasted away from disuse.
"Atrophied" means "wasted away."

3. **SYNONYM RESTATEMENT CLUE**

The reader may discover the meaning of an unknown word because it repeats an idea expressed in familiar words nearby. Synonyms are words with the same meaning.

Examples:

a. 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."

b. The mountain pass was a tortuous road, winding and twisting like a snake around the trees of the mountainside.

"Tortuous" means "winding and twisting."

4. **CONTRAST / ANTONYM CLUE**

Antonyms are words with opposite meanings. 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.

Examples:

a. When the light brightens, the pupils of the eyes contract; however, when it grows darker, they dilate.

"Dilate" means the opposite of "contract."

b. The children were as different as day and night. He was a lively conversationalist, but she was reserved and taciturn.

"Taciturn" means the opposite of a "lively conversationalist."

5. **MOOD / TONE CLUE**

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

Examples:

a. The lugubrious wails of the gypsies matched the dreary whistling of the wind in the all-but-deserted cemetery.

"Lugubrious," which means "sorrowful," fits into the mood set by the words "wails," "dreary," and "deserted cemetery."

6. **EXPERIENCE CLUE**

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

Examples:

a. During those first bewildering weeks, the thoughts of a college freshman drift back to high school where he was "in," knew everyone, and felt at home. A feeling of nostalgia sweeps over him.

b. She walked away from her closet and quickly slipped a jersey over her head. She smoothed it into place over her hips, added a belt, glanced at the mirror, and left for work.

7. **ANALYSIS OR STRUCTURE CLUE**

The parts used to construct a word can be direct clues to meaning. Knowledge of prefixes, roots, 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:

a. 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.

b. The somnambulist had to be locked in his bedroom at night for his own safety.

If a reader knows the meaning of ambular (walk) and somn (sleep) and sees the sentence, the reader may realize that a "somnambulist" is a sleepwalker.

8. **INFERENCE CLUE**

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

Example:

a. She told her friend, "I'm through with blind dates forever. What a dull evening! I was bored every minute. The conversation was absolutely vapid."

"Vapid" means "uninteresting."

9. **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:

a. 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."

CONTEXT CLUES – PRACTICE EXERCISES

EXERCISE I: **Circle the letter of the best meaning for the underlined word as it is used in context.**

1. **My brother said, "I just freed myself from a very loquacious history professor. All he seemed to want was an audience."**
   a. pretentious
   b. grouchy
   c. talkative
   d. worried

2. **There is no doubt that the idea of living in such a benign climate was appealing. The islanders seemed to keep their vitality and live longer than Europeans.**
   a. tropical
   b. not malignant
   c. kind
   d. favorable

3. **It is difficult to imagine a surfeit of talent in one individual, yet Leonard Bernstein simply does not have the time to make complete use of his talent as conductor, performer, writer, and lecturer.**
   a. excess
   b. variety
   c. superiority
   d. lack

4. **There is a large demand all over the United States for plants indigenous to the desert. Many people in Arizona have made a good business of growing and selling cacti and other local plants.**
   a. native
   b. necessary
   c. foreign
   d. alien

5. **After the Romans left, a millennium and a half passed before people again lived in such comfort. Churchill wrote, "From the year 400 until the year 1900 no one had central heating and very few had hot baths."**
   a. a decade
   b. many years
   c. 1000 years
   d. a century

6. **Many years before, Caesar's men had tried and failed to invade Britain. No doubt this contributed to the xenophobia of the Romans. They were cautious about strangers who entered their country.**
   a. honesty
   b. fear of foreigners
   c. kindliness
   d. stubbornness

7. **Such are the vicissitudes of history. Nothing remains the same. Three hundred years of peace ended in darkness and confusion.**
   a. evils
   b. mistakes
   c. changes
   d. rules

8. **The purpose of the psychiatrist is to mitigate the suffering of the patient.**
   a. make milder
   b. beautify
   c. increase
   d. banish

9. **We knew he couldn't hold out much longer, because he had been doomed from the beginning. One night he met his ineluctable fate.**
   a. forgotten
   b. inevitable
   c. hidden
   d. unhappy

10. **A combination of fog and industrial smoke, called smog, has vitiated the air in and around many big cities.**
    a. concentrate
    b. fill up
    c. replace
    d. contaminate

CONTEXT CLUES -- PRACTICE EXERCISES

EXERCISE II: In the space provided, write a synonym for each underlined word as it is used in context.

1. His lucid lectures, along with his clearly presented explanations, made him a popular professor.

   _____

2. Their vociferous chatter made me wish I had ear plugs.

   _____

3. He was so impudent to his mother that I would have punished him if he talked to me that way.

   _____

4. The Russians are skillful at sending cryptic messages, open to many interpretations. Our State Department spends days puzzling over their meanings.

   _____

5. The Great Flood of Noah's day was caused by incessant rain that fell for 40 days and nights.

   _____

6. The students who arrived late told the teacher an implausible story about stopping to watch a UFO.

   _____

7. After spending three weeks in the hospital, I had a surfeit of daytime TV programming.

   _____

8. The prisoners liberated from the Nazi death camp were so emaciated that they looked like skeletons.

   _____

9. Bob decided to be prudent and call ahead for reservations, instead of just showing up.

   _____

10. The ambiguity of Joe's directions made it almost impossible to find his house.

    _____

11. The job candidate's background was impeccable – good references and many years of experience, but the company did not give her the job.

    _____

12. The tranquilized grizzly bear was lethargic enough for the scientists to safely examine his teeth and tattoo his ears.

    _____