

Context clues

(1-5 from *Skillful Reading*)

There are three basic ways that a reader can use to understand the meaning of an unfamiliar word. One way is to identify the structure of the word; that is, to analyze the different parts of the word (its prefix, suffix, and root). A second way is to look the word up in a dictionary. A third way, and perhaps the most important and most useful one of all, is to use the context of a word to understand its meaning. 'Context' is the sentence or paragraph in which a word appears. Many times, the sentence or sentences around the unfamiliar word will offer an indication of, or clue to, the word's meaning. These indications or clues are referred to as 'context clues.'

The following list shows some of the different kinds of context clues authors provide in their writing. After each kind of clue you will find a brief explanation and some examples.

1. Synonyms or restatement clues:

Authors sometimes use another word in the same sentence or a neighboring sentence that has the same meaning as the unfamiliar word.

Do you know the meaning of these words: plight, emulate, cocksure?

Read each sentence in the following list. Try to find another word or words with the same meaning as the *italicized* word.

- The woman found herself in a difficult situation. In fact, her *plight* was so serious that she decided to get help.
- Children often try to *emulate* or copy the behavior that they see on television.
- Mr. Kelada was incredibly *cocksure*. It was his excessive self-confidence that made you want to prove him wrong whenever he gave an opinion.

2. Comparison / contrast clues:

A sentence may contain a word that has the opposite meaning from the unfamiliar word. Authors sometimes use words such as *on the other hand*, *however*, *although*, *unlike*, *yet*, and *but* to alert the reader to the fact that a word with an opposite meaning is being used.

Do you know the meaning of these words: stroll, slip, deprecating?

Read each sentence in the next list. Try to find a word or words with an opposite meaning from the *italicized* word. What word is used to indicate an opposite meaning?

- Some people like to walk quickly home after work, but I prefer to *stroll* home and look at the store windows along the way.
- Although the doctor usually performed the operation perfectly, the nurse knew he had *slipped* when she saw the patient's blood pressure suddenly rise.
- When I was a child my mother seemed to approve of almost everything I wanted to do. My father, however, always seemed to have a *deprecating* reaction to whatever I did.

3. Example clues:

Authors sometimes provide specific examples to illustrate or explain the meaning of a word.

Do you know the meaning of these words: detachment, demeanor, loquacious?

Use the examples in each sentence to identify the meaning of the *italicized* word.

- There was a kind of *detachment* about the old man's behavior. It appeared as if he didn't care what you were saying to him, as if what you were saying were of no interest to him.
- In a battle situation he always appeared calm and relaxed. It was this calm *demeanor* that earned him the respect and admiration of the other soldiers.
- Mr. Kelada was the most *loquacious* man I'd ever met. He talked with everyone on the ship, and he always had something to say, no matter what the topic.

4. Direct explanation clues:

Sometimes a writer may directly explain the meaning of a word. The author may indicate a direct explanation by using commas, dashes, or parentheses. A third way may simply be to use a phrase that explains a word's meaning.

Do you know the meaning of these words: imperceptible, phial, siren?

Try to find the explanation for each *italicized* word in the following sentences.

- The powerful poison was *imperceptible* when mixed in liquid; that is, it could not be tasted, seen, or smelled.
- From the shelf above him, the old man took down a *phial*, a small glass bottle used to keep liquids, and he placed it on the table in front of him.

- c. According to ancient mythology many sailors met their deaths at sea at the hands of *sirens*, beautiful creatures who were part women and part bird and who were able to seduce men with their singing.

5. Experience or situation clues:

Some words can be understood simply by the circumstances or situation in which they are used. The reader may be able to understand a word's meaning because the situation described is similar to the reader's own experience. This includes looking for key words.

Use the situation described in each sentence to identify the meaning of the *italicized* word.

- a. Alan found himself on the first floor of an old, seemingly abandoned building. As he walked up to the second floor he could hear the old wooden stairs *creak* with each step he took.
- b. It was the first time Nancy had been in a big city. She felt a little *apprehensive* as she walked out onto the street, with so many strange faces staring at her.
- c. It was our first night on the ship. Feeling tired after a long, uneventful day at sea, I returned to my cabin, lay down on my *berth*, and quickly fell asleep.

6. Other words in the same sentence or paragraph or passage

Related words, sometimes in another paragraph, will be useful in guessing meaning.

Use other words in the sentence below to guess the meaning of 'fringe benefit.'

At the commuter train station, a ten-minute walk away, he flashes his transit pass – a *fringe benefit* from Kawasaki that lets him ride free.

7. Word analysis

Some words, like *dishpan*, consist of two or more other English-origin words, and we can understand their meaning just by recognizing this fact. Many other English words are made of Latin and Greek roots and affixes. We already know the basic meaning of some of these words. For example, we know that *audio* has to do with listening, and we know that the affix *-able* (or *-ible*) has to do with possibility. We can use that knowledge to guess other words that use the same root (as in the example below).

Use the affixes to figure out the meaning of *audible*, *amicable*, *credible*

- a. Your voice is barely *audible* over the sound of the train whistle.
- b. The two neighbors came to an *amicable* decision about the fence.
- c. The witness gave a *credible* account of the accident.

Notes

- Most situations use Method 6.
- A metaphor is understood more easily if you recognize the fact that it is a metaphor. If you know the root meaning of the word, imagine how it used in its new situation. If you don't know the root meaning, use one or a combination of the methods above.
- Occasionally you will come across a word that you cannot figure out even after using all of the methods above. In cases, it is enough to guess a general meaning, and in many cases knowledge of an individual word's meaning is not essential for understanding the meaning of the author's point; in this case, just try to understand the sentence.