

## Special Unit **Strategies for Unlocking Word Meaning**

What happens when you come across an unfamiliar word in your reading? If you have a dictionary at hand, you can look up the word. If you don't have a dictionary, you still have two excellent strategies that can help you make sense of the word: **context clues** and **word parts analysis**. You will be using these strategies in every unit of this book. With practice you can master these strategies and improve your reading skills.

### **Part A Determining a Word's Meaning from Context**

Skilled readers often use context clues to figure out a word's meaning. **Context** refers to the words or sentences before or after a certain word that help explain what the word means. There are several types of context clues you can look for, including **definition and restatement, example, comparison, contrast, and cause and effect**.

#### **Definition and Restatement**

Sometimes a writer will directly define a word, especially if the word is a technical term that may be unfamiliar to readers. Here is an example:

The new music was *dissonant*, that is, it sounded harsh and incomplete.

More often, a writer will restate the meaning of a word in a less precise form than a dictionary definition.

John sat at the *periphery* of the audience, as far away from the stage as possible.

The meaning of *periphery*—"the outer part; outskirts"—becomes clear from the restatement: "as far away from the stage as possible." Definition and restatement are often signaled by punctuation (note the comma in the preceding examples) and by certain key words and phrases.

#### **Words Signaling Definition and Restatement**

which is  
that is

or  
in other words

also known as  
also called

## Example

The context in which a word appears may include one or more **examples** that are clues to its meaning. Look at the following sentence.

Writers use many literary *genres*, such as poetry, the short story, and the novel, to express their ideas.

The phrase *such as*, followed by a list of examples helps explain the meaning of *genre*—“a kind or type, especially of art or literature.” The following words and phrases often signal an example:

### Words Signaling an Example

like	for example	other
including	for instance	this
such as	especially	these
		these include

## Comparison

Another type of context clue is **comparison**. With this clue the writer compares the word in question with other, more familiar words. By noting the similarities between the things described, you can get an idea of the meaning of the unfamiliar word.

This bike route seems as *arduous* as the one in the Rocky Mountains that’s called Agony Trail.

The comparison context clue “as the one in the Rocky Mountains that’s called Agony Trail” clearly conveys the meaning of *arduous*—“hard to do.” Comparisons are often signaled by one of these key words or phrases.

### Words Signaling a Comparison

like	similar to	similarly
as	resembling	also
in the same way	likewise	identical
		related

## Contrast

Context may also help reveal the meaning of a word through **contrast**, as in this example:

Maria was *lethargic* in school, but she was a bundle of energy at cheerleading practice.

In this sentence the word *but* signals a contrast. Therefore, you can assume that *lethargic* means the opposite of *a bundle of energy* (the dictionary defines *lethargic* as “abnormally drowsy or dull”). The following key words and phrases signal a contrast.

#### Words Signaling a Contrast

but	on the other hand	instead
although	unlike	different
on the contrary	in contrast to	however

### Cause and Effect

Another type of context clue is **cause and effect**. The cause of an action or event may be stated using an unfamiliar word. If, however, the effect is stated in familiar terms, it can help you understand the unfamiliar word. Consider the following example:

Because Marek was a *negligent* babysitter, his younger brother wandered off and fell into the river.

In this sentence the cause—Marek’s being negligent—leads to the effect—his brother falling into the river. Therefore, *negligent* must mean “careless or inattentive.” Certain key words and phrases may signal cause and effect.

#### Words Signaling Cause and Effect

because	consequently	so
since	therefore	as a result

### Inference from General Context

Often the clues to the meaning of an unfamiliar word are not in the same sentence. In such cases you will need to look at the sentences that surround the word and **infer**, or draw a conclusion about, the word’s meaning. A single piece of information several sentences away from the unfamiliar word may unlock the meaning. Study the following example:

“You can speak *candidly*,” the principal said. The student said nothing. The principal tried again, “I can’t help you unless I know what really happened.”

The clue to the meaning of *candidly* is in the last sentence of the paragraph. The detail “unless I know what really happened” suggests that *candidly* means “honestly and openly.”

Sometimes the supporting details in a paragraph must be examined together to help you infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

Ellen continued to *vacillate* until it was too late to go to the movies. At first, she was sure she wanted to see the new horror film. Then she chose the comedy. Then she changed her mind again.

A series of descriptive details follows the unfamiliar word *vacillate*. The details help you draw a conclusion about what *vacillate* means—"to waver and be unable to decide."

**Determining Meaning from Context** Each of the following sentences and paragraphs contains an italicized word you may not know. Look for context clues to help you determine the meaning of the word. Write the definition in the blank. **Sample** \_\_\_\_\_ **a.**

1. Ellis was *contrite* after breaking the window. He apologized to his mother again and again and promised to be more careful next time. He also offered to pay for the window out of his allowance.  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Unlike boring activities, which can *deplete* your energy, activities that you enjoy can actually increase your interest and revive you.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. The plot of Mia's story was light and *whimsical*. Humorous and unexpected events followed one another in a way that was very entertaining.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Although that explanation is *plausible*, I can think of one that is even more likely.  
reasonable, seemingly true
5. "What an *innovative* idea, Jana," said her father. "How did you ever think of something so original?"  
I
6. I never knew I could be such a *glutton*. I had five ears of corn, two hamburgers, a quart of lemonade, and three pieces of watermelon at the picnic last night.  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Because the land was so *arid*, water had to be piped in from miles away to keep the crops from drying up.  
excessively dry \_\_\_\_\_ ter

8. The speaker led her listeners carefully from one point to the next. She developed her thoughts logically from beginning to end and never once *digressed*.

~~to~~ \_\_\_\_\_ ~~ject~~ \_\_\_\_\_

9. That man was considered the city's most *elusive* burglar. It took the police fifteen years to catch him.

~~haru~~ \_\_\_\_\_

10. Because my baby sister was *premature*, she was not as fully developed as a baby born after nine months. She had to be given food and oxygen through tubes until she was strong enough to eat and breathe on her own.

~~not developed fully, born early~~ \_\_\_\_\_

11. After the accident, my cousin was *incoherent*, babbling nonsense words that nobody could understand.

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Unlike his older sister, who spent every penny as soon as she earned it, Liam was extremely *thrifty*.

\_\_\_\_\_ ~~v~~ \_\_\_\_\_

13. My aunt is a musical *prodigy*. She began playing the violin at age two and gave her first concert when she was only four.

~~a~~ \_\_\_\_\_ ~~s~~ \_\_\_\_\_

14. Although Jeff was usually quite serious, he sometimes told jokes that sent everyone into fits of *hilarity*.

~~mer~~ \_\_\_\_\_ ~~ter~~ \_\_\_\_\_

15. I had an *erroneous* idea about my lung capacity. I was sure I could swim the length of the pool underwater. When I tried it, though, I had to come up for air halfway across.

\_\_\_\_\_

Number correct \_\_\_\_\_ (total 15)