

Using Context Clues to Decipher and Find Meaning

When authors write, they often include context clues to the meaning of words they use but think that some of their readers may not know. The context clue is usually presented in the sentence or paragraph in which the word occurs.

Each time you hear or read a word in a different sentence, you get more information about what it means. Finally, you have an idea in your mind about what the word means. You have learned from the context of the word. The context is simply the words or ideas around your unknown word. Using context clues as you read is important for two reasons.

1. If you skip over the meaning of unfamiliar words, you may come to the end of the passage you are reading with a very fuzzy idea of what you have read.
2. On the other hand, if you stop and look up every word you don't know, you may become irritated at the slow rate of your reading and stop altogether.

. . . So, if you can be alert to context clues and figure out meanings as you read, you will help your speed as well as your comprehension.

Here are six types of context clues used by authors to help the reader understand the meanings of words. An example is provided for each.

1. Definition context clue

Sometimes the writer will save you the trouble of looking up a word by defining it for you. Often this kind of definition will not sound much like a dictionary definition.

The people of the town were warned not to eat the tainted fish. The local newspaper published a bulletin in which readers were clearly told that eating fish that had a disease could be very dangerous. This was especially true for fish caught in Lake Jean.

It is a fact that a large number of small businesses fail because the owner hasn't enough capital to tide him over slack periods and emergencies. Meaning, it takes a certain amount of working money to keep a business going.

When you see expressions like *that is* or *means*, you will know to watch for a definition of some kind. A second kind of definition is what is called an appositive. An appositive is just a phrase that follows a word and explains it. But instead of being introduced by one of the definition-type expressions, this kind of phrase is set off on both sides by commas.

An aquarium needs scavenger fish, swimming garbage collectors, to keep the tank clean.

2. Examples

The context of a word will sometimes give examples that will give you a pretty clear idea of meaning. Suppose you want to know the meaning of the word gestures in the paragraph below. How many examples are given in the paragraph?

Some dogs can be trained to respond to gestures instead of sounds. For example, a hand pointing in a certain direction, an open hand, palm down, or arms outstretched can be used to mean go sit or come to a well-trained dog.

Look for words like for example, for instance, such as, like that signal examples are coming.

3. Synonym context clue

The author includes a synonym to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. A synonym is a word that means the same as or nearly the same as another word. In the following example, the synonym "pity" helps the reader understand the meaning of "compassion."

After seeing the picture of the starving children, we all felt compassion or pity for their suffering.

4. Antonym (Opposites) context clue

One further way to pick up the meaning of a new word or expression is by looking for clues that tell you what the word does not mean. Words like but, except, and however, tell you that you are now going to read an opposite or a contrasting idea. In the following example, the antonym "eager" helps the reader understand the meaning of "reluctant."

Joe was reluctant to take on the position of captain of the basketball team. He was afraid that the time it would take would hurt his grades. On the other hand, Billy was eager for the chance to be captain; he thought that being captain of the team would make him very popular in school.

He tried to smile because the mood of the party was not somber but happy.

You know that somber must mean something that is the opposite of happy. In fact, it means sad or dreary.

Sometimes the way a sentence is put together will tell you what you are looking for the opposite of a word or idea that is found in one half of the sentence.

If you can't find anything to praise in the class, at least don't denounce it.

You know here that denounce must mean something opposite to praise. It means to condemn or criticize.

5. Description context clue

The author includes one or more descriptions to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, descriptions of President Kennedy as having charm, enthusiasm, and a magnetic personality help the reader understand the meaning of "charismatic."

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, our 35th president, improved human rights and equal rights for all people. He was a very charismatic president. People were attracted to his charm and enthusiasm. His personality was described as magnetic.

The first impression that crossed my mind was that the woman was obese. Her clothing was stretched across her vast surface of skin like a lumpy balloon stretched to the bursting point.

6. Summary context clue

The author makes a number of statements that help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, statements about being rude, showing no respect, having poor manners, and being impolite help the reader understand the meaning of "impertinent."

Andrea was a very impertinent young lady; she was so rude that she talked while her teacher was explaining a lesson and showed no respect for other students. Her manners were very poor. Even her parents thought that Andrea was impolite.