

Reading Skills

Contextual Clues

When we come across an unfamiliar word in a sentence, we do not just ignore it. Examine the context that the word appears in. This means that we look at the other words that surround the unfamiliar word. These “other words” could help us guess the meaning of the unfamiliar word.

There are 5 very useful contextual clue techniques that we can use to help us make the best guess:

1	<p>Look for other words in the sentence that may have the same or similar meaning.</p> <p>Perhaps the unfamiliar word may be one of the several words used in a series of synonyms. If we know at least one of the synonyms in the series, we would be able to guess the meaning of that unfamiliar word.</p> <p>For example: The executive’s report was short, simple and succinct.</p> <p>Here, the word succinct is linked with short and simple, in a series, we could reasonably assume that these words could be close in meaning and we might decide that succinct means short and clear.</p> <p>Sometimes, an unfamiliar word is linked to a familiar word by “and”. For example, suppose we do not know the word defraud as shown below.</p> <p>The store owner’s attempt to deceive and defraud his customers put him in some serious trouble with the law.</p> <p>Here, deceive and defraud are linked by “and”, we can assume that these 2 words might have similar meanings. So we can guess that defraud means to deceive or to cheat.</p> <p>Another example: The coach reproached the team, expressing his displeasure at the way they had played during the game.</p> <p>We could guess that the word reproached might be linked to the phrase “expressing his displeasure”. Hence if the coach expressed his displeasure and reproached the team, it would mean he scolded or even criticised them.</p>
2.	<p>Look for a familiar word near the unfamiliar word that might contrast or have an opposite meaning from it. These words might be linked with words like not, although, however, but, and nevertheless.</p> <p>For instance: Although the supervisor claims that she is flexible, she refuses to even consider a new work schedule.</p> <p>Here, we can guess that although signals a contrast between these two actions of this supervisor; her refusal to even consider a new work schedule would prove her claim to be untrue, so we can guess that flexible would mean capable of change.</p>

3.	<p>Look for the definitions, explanations, or restatements that the author might supply for the unfamiliar word or term used. A phrase like <i>that is, in other words</i> or even punctuation marks like <i>commas or dashes</i> could be used to link the explanation to the unfamiliar word.</p> <p>For example: When people contravene – break or violate – the law, they can expect to face legal consequences.</p> <p>Here, the explanation “Break or violate” is the definition of the word “contravene”.</p> <p>Another example: Mr Tan, my biology lecturer has the tendency to digress, or get off the subject, whenever he talks about the theory of evolution.</p> <p>Perhaps we have never seen the word digress, but after looking at the explanation which is set off in commas, we can guess that digress means to move away from the main topic or subject.</p>
4.	<p>Look at the examples or illustrations of the unfamiliar word that the author might give to suggest its meaning.</p> <p>For example: Bats, owls, raccoons, and crickets are some examples of nocturnal creatures.”</p> <p>The list of examples of “nocturnal creatures”, especially owls and bats might help us to guess that nocturnal creatures must be creatures of the night.</p> <p>Another example: For a movie to be a hit, a villain’s role is crucial as the audience will always remember them most. Some famous villains are Thanos, Captain Hook and also Lex Luther.</p> <p>Here, we might recognise Thanos from the Avengers, Captain Hook from Peter Pan and Lex Luther from Superman and they were all the bad characters, and we can conclude that a villain must refer to a bad person.</p>
5.	<p>Look for other information in the sentence that could help us guess. This is because authors generally provide enough information that can help us to infer or guess the meaning of the unfamiliar word.</p> <p>For example: It would be an egregious mistake to wear bright coloured clothes to a funeral.</p> <p>Here, although the explanation for “egregious” is not directly stated, we would be able to infer that it would be really inappropriate or even offensive to wear bright coloured clothes to a solemn and sad occasion like a funeral.</p>

List of references:

Lumen Learning. (n.d.). *Developmental English: Introduction to College Composition*. Retrieved from Lumen Learning: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/vccs-enf102-17fa/chapter/text-context-clues/>

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