

Building the Meaning of Words

Introduction

Building a larger vocabulary is not an easy task. It requires time, effort, vast amounts of reading, and an engagement with the word that will move meaning from short term memory to long term memory. Despite this, there are some seldom advertised methods to determine meaning or, at minimum, to have a chance of understanding the sentence or passage.

Testing Note: When vocabulary style questions appear in standardized testing, the strategies work equally well on passage, questions, and answers.

Building Meaning

There is no magic bullet for understanding the meaning of a word. Instead, readers should employ all the tools and methods necessary in an attempt to build their understanding of a word.

The Obvious (or not so obvious)

Often readers overlook important meaning clues. Readers need to examine titles, subtitles, photos, graphs and anything else on the page that might help them to understand the meaning of individual words or the meaning of the overall passage.

Read and Reread

Often readers will give up on meaning after only one reading. Often a simple rereading of the passage with renewed focus can help with meaning.

Close Reading

Even without putting it into writing, readers must employ tools such as SOAPStone or CLOSE Reading Analysis Questions. What purpose of the piece? Who is the author? What are the main ideas? What is the author's viewpoint? Can you summarize any of the piece?

Look at the Words Before or After the Unknown Word

Quite often a close examination of the words or phrases before or after a word can point towards its meaning.

Look for Prefixes, Roots, and Suffixes

If the prefix is "pre" then we know that part of the meaning of the word is "before." If the prefix is "con" then we know that part of the meaning is "with" or "together" and so on. The same applies for suffixes. The same applies for word roots. Use these clues to build meaning.

Word Similarity

An often overlooked method to determine meaning is to try to think about the unknown words in terms of a word where you already know the meaning. Sometimes, the meaning is closely related to the word the reader does know.

Categories

Quite often readers can build meaning or answer questions related to an unknown word by determining which type of category the word fits. Context clues are especially important here. Think about positive versus negative. If you label the word as more negative in tone then that can help point to its meaning (or what it doesn't mean). Think about large versus small, plant versus animal, human versus machine, exciting versus dull, complex versus simple, and on and on. Regardless, make a decision and let it guide your thinking about meaning.

Part of Speech

Readers should try to determine the part of speech for the unknown word. This can usually be accomplished through the placement of the word in the sentence. Knowing an unknown word is a noun versus a verb is essential in determining meaning or answering questions.

Putting It All Together

The unknown word is "disequilibrium." **Solution:** The prefix "dis" can mean "not." The root of the word "equi" is similar to the word "equal." The word is used as a noun and sometimes noun suffixes can relate to "a state of being." The meaning conclusion: not equal state.