

Understanding Vocabulary from Context

The context of a word is its environment or the words which surround it. By looking closely at these surrounding words, you can pick up hints or clues which will help you with the meaning of a difficult word. Research has shown that most good readers use context clues regularly. It has also been shown that these readers are generally aware of the different types of context clues. Knowing something about these different types can help sharpen your word attack skills and improve your overall reading ability.

Types of Context Clues

1. Clues supplied through synonyms:

Carly is fond of *trite*, worn-out expressions in her writing. Her favorite is "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

2. Clues contained in comparisons and contrasts:

As the trial continued, the defendant's guilt became more and more obvious. With even the slightest bit of new evidence against him, there would be no chance of *acquittal*.

3. Clues contained in a definition or description:

Paul is a *transcriptionist*, a person who makes a written copy of a recorded message.

4. Clues through association with other words in the sentence:

Brian is considered the most troublesome student ever to have walked the halls of Central High School. He has not passed a single class in his four years there and seldom makes it through an entire hour of class without falling asleep or getting sent to the office. His teachers consider him completely *incurable*.

5. Clues which appear in a series:

The *dulcimer*, fiddle, and banjo are all popular among the Appalachian Mountain people.

6. Clues provided by the tone and setting:

The streets filled instantly with *bellicose* protesters, who pushed and shoved their way through the frantic bystanders. The scene was no longer peaceful and calm as the marchers had promised it would be.

7. Clues derived from cause and effect:

Since no one came to the first voluntary work session, attendance for the second one is *mandatory* for all the members.

Using Clues to Figure Out Meanings of Words

1. Reread the sentence. Look for ideas and words that offer meaning clues.
2. Read the two or three sentences that precede the one that contains the unfamiliar word(s). Look for meaning clues (i.e., synonyms or antonyms).
3. Read the two or three sentences that come after the one that contains the unfamiliar word(s). Look for meaning clues (i.e., synonyms or antonyms).
4. Find the base or root word and think of its meaning.
5. See if the prefix can help you understand the word.
6. Ask yourself: Have I seen or heard this word in another text or situation? What do I recall?
7. Think of the overall meaning of the selection you are reading. Does your understanding of the whole help you figure out particular words?

Adapted from Robb, L. *Teaching Reading in Middle School*.