

Module: RT

Level: 1st Year

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Building A Strong Vocabulary By

Inferring meaning of unfamiliar words: Context Clues, and Word Part Clues

I- Context Clues

Context clues are hints in the text that you can use to infer meanings of specific words or phrases. They're really useful when you need to decipher new vocabulary, so you don't have to whip out a dictionary every time. For example, sometimes you will find **synonyms** (words that mean the same thing) or **antonyms** (words that mean the opposite), or **details (explanations)** that lead you to identify the vocabulary word in question. Once in a while, you will find a group of words set off by commas (called an appositive), which gives you a very clear **definition** of the word.

* **Unfamiliar words** can pose a serious problem for reading comprehension. Therefore, in order to improve your ability to understand what you read, you will need to expand your vocabulary. There are a couple of things you can do when you encounter a word you don't understand:

- You can look it up! Sometimes a text will provide definitions for key words, either in the text or in a sidebar or glossary.
- Otherwise, you can look up unfamiliar words in a paper or electronic dictionary.
- Another thing you can do is **look for clues in the word or text that can help you decipher its meaning.**

-There are two types of clues you can look for: **context clues** and **word-part clues**.

-What is a context clue?

A context clue is a word or phrase in the same sentence or a nearby sentence that can help the reader decipher the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

- There are different kinds of context clues.

- 1- **A Definition Clue:** A definition clue is a word or phrase that defines the unfamiliar word.

Look for words or phrases that introduce a definition for the unfamiliar word, **such as, is defined as, means, and refers to**. Also, look for **punctuation marks** that set off a definition, such as **quotation marks, parentheses, and brackets**. For example:

-Telepathy **is defined as** the ability to communicate information to another person without the use of any known senses or communication devices.

*In this sentence the phrase **“is defined as”** is a definition clue that introduces a definition for the word “telepathy.”

2- **A Synonym Clue:** A synonym clue is a word or phrase that has a similar meaning to the unfamiliar word. Look for words or phrases that introduce a synonym, such as **in other words, or, that is to say, and also known as**. Also, look for **punctuation marks** that set off a synonym, such as **commas, parentheses, dashes, and brackets**. For example:

- The cheerleader appeared vapid—spiritless—as he delivered his pitiful performance in front of the stands.

In this sentence the dashes around the word “spiritless” suggest that it is a synonym for the word “vapid.”

3- **A Contrast Clue:** a contrast clue is a word or phrase that has the opposite meaning of the unfamiliar word. In other words, it’s **an antonym**. Look for words or phrases that introduce a contrast, such as **however, but, instead of, on the other hand, on the contrary, whereas, in contrast, unlike, although, and even though**. For example,

- Lions are solitary creatures that prefer to hunt alone, **but** hyenas are gregarious creatures that hunt in packs.

In this sentence the word **“but”** is a contrast clue that suggests hyenas are different from lions.

If lions are solitary and hyenas are gregarious, then you can guess that the meaning of the word "gregarious" is **the opposite of solitary**.

- **A working definition might be:** “tending to group together.”

4- **An Example Clue:** An example clue is a word or phrase that provides an example to illustrate the unfamiliar word. Look for words or phrases that introduce examples, such as **for example, for instance, to illustrate, like, and such as**. For example,

- The manager disliked obsequious behavior, **such as** fawning and kowtowing.

In this sentence the phrase “such as” is an example clue that suggests the words “fawning” and “kowtowing” describe “obsequious.”

- 5- An** The unknown word is explained within the sentence or in a
Explanation C sentence immediately preceding. For example:
lue :

Nanotechnology is becoming more widespread in society. As computer chips continue to shrink, manufacturers are placing them in everything from clothing, to building materials, to even the human body.

In this sentence you can guess that the phrase “computer chips continue to shrink” in the second sentence refers to the word “nanotechnology” in the first sentence. Therefore, “nanotechnology” has to do with technology that is very small in size.

With one or more of these clues, you should be able to deduce the meaning of many unfamiliar words as you read. And be sure to check your definition with a dictionary afterward to make sure your deduction is correct.

Exercise:

Read the following sentences and try to choose the best definition for the italicized word by searching for context clues in the sentence.

1. The designer window treatments in her house, installed 17 years ago, were outmoded.
a. unnecessary b. pointless c. out-of-date d. worthless
2. The spies conducted a *covert* operation.
a. dangerous b. foreign c. hidden d. illegal
3. The baseball player’s malice toward the referee was revealed in his *spiteful* remarks to the media, which almost ruined the referee’s career.
a. vindictive b. crazy c. rude d. unpleasant
4. Although Zachary is much too inexperienced for the managerial position, he is a willful young man and *obdurately* refuses to withdraw his application.
a. foolishly b. reluctantly c. constantly d. stubbornly
5. His neighbor’s *superficial* remarks trivialized the property line dispute and infuriated Malcolm.
a. enraged b. petty c. insulting d. misleading
6. She showed a *blatant* disregard for the rules.

a. obvious b. hidden c. last-minute d. rebellious

7. Her fashion sense was usually described as *flamboyant*, but on the night of the party, Tanya's outfit was uncharacteristically modest.

a. impeccable b. showy c. sloppy d. unassuming

8. Mr. Powers was so *gullible* that he believed even the most outlandish excuses of his insincere employees.

a. intelligent b. naïve c. dishonest d. critical

9. You cannot become a certified teacher without completing the *prerequisite* student-teaching assignment.

a. required b. optional c. preferred d. advisable

10. Charles, aware of his susceptibility to gum disease, is *diligent* about flossing.

a. uncomfortable b. excited c. thorough d. ambivalent

11. Even though she'd read her supervisor's memo four or five times, she still found his rambling message *ambiguous*.

a. profound b. inspiring c. ridiculous d. unclear

12. Excited about winning the award, Marcia walked up to the podium and delivered an *animated* acceptance speech.

a. abbreviated b. courteous c. reserved d. lively

13. The *intermittent* rain soaked the garden many different times during the day.

a. protracted b. periodic c. incredulous d. light

14. I got a *vicarious* thrill watching you on the diving board.

a. shared b. unpleasant c. adventurous d. evil

15. After several small brushfires at the campground, officials felt the need to *augment* the rules pertaining to campfires.

a. criticize b. retract c. consider d. expand

16. As soon as the details of the election were released to the media, the newspaper was *inundated* with calls—far too many to be handled effectively.

a. provided b. bothered c. rewarded d. flooded

17. The doctor got to the *crux* of the issue.

a. outline b. opposite c. crucial point d. unhealthy

18. When people heard that timid Bob had taken up skydiving, they were *incredulous*.
- a. fearful b. outraged c. convinced d. disbelieving
19. The technical department enthusiastically hired Ms. Long because she was *proficient* in the use of computers.
- a. sincere b. adequate c. competent d. skilled
20. Even under tremendous public pressure, the planning committee would not commit itself wholeheartedly to the proposal and gave only *tentative* approval to the waterfront development plan.
- a. provisional b. ambiguous c. unnecessary d. total
21. The preacher used a *euphemism* for an unpleasant subject.
- a. ugly picture b. substituted word c. homeless person d. visual aid
22. That perfume always *evokes* pleasant memories.
- a. angers b. erases c. calls up d. confuses

II- Word Parts

Learning the strategy of analyzing the parts of a word for information about its meaning is very important for building a strong vocabulary. Many words in English can be broken down into several parts. When you know the meaning and function of some common word parts, you can

- guess the meaning of some new words;
- remember the meaning of new words better;
- increase the number of words you know.

Words in English can have three parts: a root, a prefix, and a suffix.

- The root of a word contains the basic meaning.

Example: *happy*

- A prefix is a letter or group of letters that is added before the root to change its meaning.

Example: *un* (not) + *happy* = *unhappy* (not happy)

- A suffix is a letter or group of letters that is added after the root to change its grammatical function. (Note that when suffixes are added, the spelling of the root may change.)

Example: *happy* (adjective) + *ness* = *happiness* (noun)

1-Roots of English Words

Knowing the meanings of some common roots can help you understand the words that are made from those roots. The words built around a single root are called related words. There are two types of roots:

- **Roots that can stand alone as words in English.**

Examples: *cheer, happy, usual, break*

• **Roots that cannot stand alone in English.** These include many of the roots that come from Latin, Greek, and other languages. Note that the spelling of the roots from other languages is often changed when they are part of an English word.

Example: *philos* (from the Greek word for love) is contained in: *philosopher* (lover of knowledge) and *bibliophile* (lover of books).

Greek roots

bios = life logos = word, speak, reason
chronos = time metron = measure
genos = race, kind pathos = suffering, feeling
geo = earth

2- Prefixes

Since each prefix has a meaning, adding a prefix creates a word with a new meaning. The following meanings are often added with prefixes:

• Negative or opposite

Example: *un* + *happy* = *not happy*

• Number or quantity

Example: *bi* + *cycle* = *two-wheeled vehicle*

• Time

Example: *pre* + *view* = *to look at something before or earlier*

• Space

Example: *inter* + *national* = *between two or more nations*

Sometimes a prefix can function like a root.

Examples: *uni* (one) + *ify* (make) = *unify*

du (two) + *et* = *a piece of music for two performers*

The Prefixes with Meaning Related to Time:

post- = after, behind posterity = generations of your family that come after you

pre- = before predecease = to die before someone else

prime- = first primitive = belonging to an early or very simple society

re- = again reread = to read something again

The Prefixes that Show Relationships:

corn-, con- = with, together committee = a group of people who work together

contra- = against contradict = to express the opposite of a statement

ex- = out, from exhale = to breathe out

inter- = between interpret = to translate one language to another

sub- = under subterranean = underground

super- = above, over superstructure = the part of a building above ground

sym-, syn- = same, together synagogue = meeting place for Jewish religious services

tele- = distant teleconference = a conference at which people are in different places and communicate by phone or video

The Prefixes with a Numerical Meaning:

bi- = two

cent- = hundred

du- = two

mono- = one

quad- = four

tri- = three

uni- = one

***Words with a numerical meaning**

bicycle = a vehicle with two by wheels

century = a hundred years

duplex = a house that is divided to have two homes in it

monogamy = marriage with only one person

quadrangle = a shape that has four sides

triangle = a shape with three sides

unique = the only one of a type

3- Suffixes

Since most suffixes are related to grammar, adding a suffix to the end of a word usually changes the word's part of speech. Notice that when a suffix is added to the end of a root, the spelling of the root often changes.

• Some suffixes form nouns.

Examples: *understand* (verb) + *ing* = *understanding*

comprehend (verb) + *ion* = *comprehension*

happy (adjective) + *ness* = *happiness*

• Some suffixes form adjectives.

Examples: *understand* (verb) + *able* = *understandable*

success (noun) + = *successful*

Suffixes

Adjectives

-able	adore + able = adorable
-al	spine + al = spinal
-ful	beauty + ful = beautiful
-ic	specify + ic = specific
-ious	space + ious = spacious
-ive	create + ive = creative
-less	care + less = careless
-ous	fame + ous = famous
-y	stick + y = sticky

• Some suffixes form adverbs.

Examples: *understand* (verb) + *ably* = *understandably*

happy (adjective) + *ly* = *happily*

* Suffixes

-ate l
-ify
-ize

Verbs

liberty + ate = liberate
significant + ify = signify
final + ize = finaliz.'

EXERCISE 1

Latin roots

annus = year manus = hand
dictus = say, speak versum = turn
locatum = place visus = see

A. Working with another student, write the word, the root, and the definition if you know it or can

guess it. Then look it up in the dictionary to check your definition.

Example: Because of problems with his vision, Sanjay can no longer drive a car.

Word: *vision*

Root: *visus*

Your definition: *being able to see*

Dictionary definition: *ability to see*

1. Manual workers with no special training are unlikely to find a job that pays well.

Word:

Root:

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

2. If you reverse the flow of water in the experiment, you will get the opposite results as well.

Word:

Root:

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

3. Historically, the earliest churches in this region were located outside the city walls.

Word:

Root:

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

4. It was difficult to predict whether the injury would result in death.

Word:

Root:

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

5. The bank's annual report gave details of the growth of its activities over the past twelve months.

Word:

Root:

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

6. The dictator ruled his country with an iron hand.

Word:

Root:

Your definition:

Dictionary definition:

EXERCISE 2

A. Study the prefixes that give words a negative meaning. In the items below, all of the words except one have a prefix with a negative meaning. Working with another student, cross out the word that does not have a prefix. If necessary, you may use a dictionary.

Prefixes

dis- = not,

Words with a negative meaning

opposite of dissatisfied = not satisfied

in-, im- = not
 non- = not
 un- = not, opposite of

incorrect = not correct
 nonalcoholic = not containing alcohol
 unsympathetic = not sympathetic

Example:

im- impossible \ imagine imperfect impersonal impatient

1. un- unaware; uncle; unspoken; unable; unbearable.
2. non- nonsense; nonverbal; nonsmoking; nonfiction; normal.
3. in- inaccurate; inspire; inactive; incomplete; infinite.
4. dis- disapprove ; diskette; discontent ; displace ; disfavor.

EXERCISE 3

A. Study the suffixes that change words into nouns. Working with another student, create nouns by adding an appropriate suffix to each word below. Write the noun and the meaning if you know it or can guess it. If necessary, you may use a dictionary.

Suffixes

Nouns

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| -ance, -ancy | Insure + ance = insurance; truant + ancy = truancy |
| -ence | differ + ence = difference |
| -er, -or | teach + er = teacher; act + or = actor |
| -ion, -tion | confuse + ion = confusion; compete + tion = competition |
| -ism | real + ism = realism |
| -ment | refresh + ment = refreshment |
| -ness | ready + ness = readiness |

Suffix

Word

Noun

Example:

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|------------------|
| -ion | digest | <i>digestion</i> |
| 1. -ance | endure | ..... |
| 2. -ence | competent | ..... |
| 3. -er | organize | ..... |
| 4. -or | conquer | ..... |
| 5. -ion | discuss | ..... |
| 6. -tion | delete | ..... |
| 7. -ism | mystic | ..... |
| 8. -ment | commit | ..... |
| 9. -ness | effective | ..... |
| 10. -ion | restrict | ..... |

EXERCISE 4

A. Underline the word and write it again, divided into its parts. Then look for the definition in the dictionary.

Example: The supervisor of the factory expects all the employees to arrive on time every morning.

Word: *supervisor*

Parts: *super + or*

Definition: *someone who oversees a person or activity*

1. It was necessary to revise the plan numerous times before everyone could agree.

Word:

Parts:.....

Definition:

2. The magic show included a woman who claimed she could perform mental telepathy.

Word:

Parts:.....

Definition:

3. In any language it is possible to generate an endless number of new sentences.

Word:

Parts:.....

Definition:

4. The young Swiss tennis player has demonstrated his total dominance of the game by winning ten major tournaments.

Word: Parts:.....

Definition:

5. When James Joyce published his novel *Ulysses*, many critics did not appreciate the unconventional style of his writing.

Word: Parts:.....

Definition:

References:

<https://owl.excelsior.edu/orc/what-to-do-while-reading/vocabulary-strategies/context-clues/>

Mikulecky, Beatrice S., and Linda Jeffries. *Advanced Reading Power*. Pearson Education, 2007.