How to Use Context Clues to Define Words

0:00 Owl: Welcome to How to Use Context Clues to Define Words, an instructional video on reading comprehension brought to you by the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab.

0:19 Unfamiliar words can pose a serious problem for reading comprehension.

0:24 Therefore, in order to improve your ability to understand what you read, you will need to expand your vocabulary.

0:30 There are a couple of things you can do when you encounter a word you don’t understand.

0:34 You can look it up!

0:36 Sometimes a text will provide definitions for key words, either in the text or in a sidebar or glossary.

0:43 Otherwise, you can look up unfamiliar words in a paper or electronic dictionary.

0:49 Another thing you can do is look for clues in the word or text that can help you decipher its meaning.

0:55 There are two types of clues you can look for: context clues and word-part clues.

1:01 In this video, I’ll explain how to look for and use context clues to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words.

1:07 This will help you grow your vocabulary and improve your reading comprehension.

1:11 I’ll discuss word-part clues in another video.

1:16 What is a context clue?

1:18 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.

1:27 There are different kinds of context clues.

1:29 I’ll discuss each type and give some tips for how to identify them.

1:33 I’ll also share an example in which the unfamiliar word is in bold and the clue is in italics.

1:40 Let’s get started!

1:42 The first type is called a Definition Clue.

1:45 A definition clue is a word or phrase that defines the unfamiliar word.

1:50 Look for words or phrases that introduce a definition for the unfamiliar word, such as is defined as, means, and refers to.

2:00 Also, look for punctuation marks that set off a definition, such as quotation marks, parentheses, and brackets.

2:08 Here’s an 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.”

The second type is called 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.

Here’s an 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.”

The third type is called 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.

Here’s an 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.”

The fourth type is called 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.

Here’s an 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.”

The fifth type is called an Experience Clue.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4:43</td>
<td>An experience clue draws upon personal experience or background knowledge to help you infer the meaning of the unfamiliar word.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:51</td>
<td>Look for a word, phrase, or sentence that includes a familiar experience or information you already know.</td>
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<td>4:58</td>
<td>Here’s an example:</td>
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<td>4:59</td>
<td>Television audiences are familiar with <strong>disingenuous</strong> ads that make <strong>grand promises</strong>.</td>
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<td>5:05</td>
<td>In this sentence, you can interpret the word “disingenuous” by drawing upon your experience as a television viewer.</td>
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<td>5:11</td>
<td>If disingenuous ads make grand promises, then “disingenuous” must mean something like “insincere” or “false.”</td>
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<td>5:19</td>
<td>Finally, the sixth type is called an Adjacent Clue.</td>
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<td>5:23</td>
<td>An adjacent clue is a word or phrase in a nearby sentence that explains the meaning of the unfamiliar word.</td>
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<td>5:29</td>
<td>Here’s an example:</td>
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<td>5:30</td>
<td><strong>Nanotechnology</strong> is becoming more widespread in society. As <strong>computer chips continue to shrink</strong>, manufacturers are placing them in everything from clothing, to building materials, to even the human body.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:42</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>5:51</td>
<td>Therefore, “nanotechnology” has to do with technology that is very small in size.</td>
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<td>5:58</td>
<td>With one or more of these clues, you should be able to deduce the meaning of many unfamiliar words as you read.</td>
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<td>6:04</td>
<td>And be sure to check your definition with a dictionary afterward to make sure your deduction is correct.</td>
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<td>6:12</td>
<td>Thanks for listening to this instructional video on How to Use Context Clues to Define Words!</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:18</td>
<td>Visit the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab for more support with reading and writing skills.</td>
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