

Vocabulary in Context

"To acquire word knowledge from reading requires adequate decoding skills, the ability to recognize that a word is unknown, and the competency of being able to extract meaningful information about the word from the context."

from Bringing Words to Life: Beck, Mckeown, Kucan, 2002

Context Clues

Context clues are words or phrases in a sentence which help you reason out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Oftentimes you can figure out the meanings of new or unfamiliar vocabulary by paying attention to the surrounding language. Types of context clues include: synonyms, antonyms, definitions, and general knowledge clues.

Types of Context Clues

Synonym or restatement clue

The author includes a synonym to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. A synonym is a word that means the same as or nearly the same as another word.

Signal words: *or, in other words, that is, also known as, sometimes called*

Example: After seeing the picture of the starving children, we all felt compassion, or pity, for their suffering.

The synonym "pity," set off by commas with the word "or," helps the reader understand that the meaning of "compassion" is the same as or related to "pity."

Antonym or contrast clue

The author can also include an antonym or help the reader understand the meaning of a word. An antonym is a word that means the opposite of another word.

Signal words: *but, in contrast, however, instead of, unlike, yet, no, on the other hand*

Example: My mother's book keeping is meticulous. No inaccuracy or carelessness ever slips into her records.

The antonyms "inaccuracy" and "carelessness" in combination with the signal word "no" helps the reader understand the word "meticulous" has an opposite meaning.

Definition or example clue

The author includes a definition to help the reader understand the meaning of a word.

Signal words: *is defined as, means, the term, [a phrase in boldface or italics] set off with comas.*

Example: Sedentary individuals, people who are not very active, often have poor health.

The definition "people who are not very active" is set off by commas and gives the reader the meaning of the word "sedentary."

General knowledge clue

The meaning is derived from the experience and background knowledge of the reader; “common sense” and logic.

Signal: the information may be familiar to you within the passage or sentence.

Example: Lourdes is always sucking up to the boss, even in front of others. That sycophant just doesn't care what others think of her behavior.

The general knowledge in the context helps the reader understand that a “sycophant” may be someone who sucks up, or influences others to get their way.

Decoding Vocabulary: Word Parts

Many roots in the English language come from ancient Latin and Greek words. One of the best strategies in vocabulary building, then, is to become familiar with some word parts because learning the prefixes often gives clues to dozens or hundreds of words.

For example, if you learn that SYN (SYM, SYL) means together or with, you have a clue to more than 450 words, for that many words beginning with SYN (SYM, SYL) are listed in Webster's Third New International Dictionary. Below is a list of only a few of the hundreds of prefixes in the English language.

Vocabulary Word Parts: Prefixes

Below three tables show key prefixes that assist with decoding word meaning.

Prefix Meaning Not	Base Word/Root	Example
Un-	Healthy	Unhealthy: not healthy
In-	Capable	Incapable: not capable
Im-*	Proper	Improper: not proper
Il-	Legitimate	Illegitimate: not legitimate
Ir-	Responsible	Irresponsible: not responsible
Non-	Productive	Nonproductive: not productive

*Note: the prefixes il-, im-, and in- can also mean in. Illuminate, for example, means toward or in light. Imprison means to put a person in prison, and the word inborn means born in (nature).

Prefix that Show Time	Meaning	Example	Definition
Ante-	Before	Antedate	To date before
Pre-	Before	Prepare	To make ready before
Post-	After	Postpone	To put off until after

Number Prefix	Meaning	Example	Definition
Uni-	One (1)	Uniform	Clothing of one form
Mono-	One (1)	Monotone	One tone
Bi-	Two (2)	Bicycle	Two wheels
Du-	Two (2)	Duplex duet	Residence for two families. Musical number played or sung by two performers
Tri-	Three (3)	Trio	Three people
Qua-, quad	Four (4)	Quarter	One of four parts
Dec-, deca	Ten (10)	Decade Decathlon	A period of ten years A ten-event athletic contest