

Context Clues



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Context Clues:

are hints that the author gives to help define a difficult or unusual word.



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The clue may appear within the same sentence as the word to which it refers, or it may follow in the next sentence.

Because most of your vocabulary is gained through reading, it is important that you be able to recognize and take advantage of context clues.

Using context means to figure out what words mean by how they are used in the sentence or paragraph where they appear.

There are several different context clues you can use to help you figure out unfamiliar words.

Authors often use punctuation clues to help the reader. Punctuation clues might include commas, dashes, or parentheses.

Examples:

Mary **retained**, kept, the deed to her mother's house.

I wonder if that fruit is **edible**, able to be eaten.

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Types of context clues

There are at least four kinds of context clues that are quite common.

Synonyms

Antonyms

Explanation

Example



Authors may use word clues such as synonyms—words with almost the same meaning—or antonyms—words opposite in meaning—near the unfamiliar term.

Examples:

Reducing cholesterol has a number of **beneficial** results. One **positive** outcome is reducing the risk of heart disease.
(synonym clue)

I *despise* liver, but I *adore* steak. (antonym clue)

Synonyms (or definitions)

A synonym, is a word or phrase with the same meaning.

Most castles had high walls and were surrounded by a water-filled ditch called a *moat*.

The *harlequin*, like the circus clown, was a fool who loved to perform.



Antonym

A word or phrase with the opposite meaning.

Jerry is very clumsy, but his sister Jenny is ***adroit***.

Unlike his quiet and low key family, Brad is ***garrulous***.

Explanation

Sometimes the meaning of a word or phrase is explained immediately following its use.

Etymology, which is the study of the origin of words, finds many teachers taking the bull by its horns when unraveling the mysteries of vocabulary studies.

A ***biographer***, or one who writes about people's lives, is an example of an author.

Example

Writers use words like: “***such as***,” “**for instance**,” and “**for example**” indicate examples.

The student was suffering from ***anxiety***. For example, when he first saw the test, he began to tremble.



Old Mr.. Riley was quite **spry** for his age. Daily he walked several blocks to buy a newspaper, and I often saw him working in his garden.

Which words or phrases might help you figure out what **spry** means?

Daily he walked several blocks

working in his garden.

Wilson put on a heavy coat, a wool scarf, several pairs of socks inside his boots, and fur-lined gloves to protect himself against the **frigid** weather.

“**Frigid**” means:

(1) very dry

(2) very hot

(4) very cold

(3) very wet

(4) very cold

(5) very old

Nippers, spraggers, and mule drivers envied the miners and laborers, whose strength was measured in coal.

What do we know?

Nippers and spraggers are not like miners and laborers.

They envied them, suggesting that their position is lower and less important than the laborers and miners.

If you learn what a word does **NOT** mean, you can figure out what it means.

Low-level workers in coal mines

Acrophobia, or fear of heights, can make life difficult for tightrope walkers who suffer from it.

“fear of heights”

Bibliographies are often placed at the end of a chapter or textbook to list books in which you may find more information.

Bibliographies are:

(1) List of books

(1) List of books

(2) List of chapters

(3) List of words

(4) List of authors

Authors also use bold and/or italics to make a reader aware of an important term. Often the definition of the word in bold or italics follows.

Examples:

The **computer** is a machine that accepts input, processes data, stores information, and produces output.

Archaeology is the scientific study of prehistoric cultures by excavation of their remains.