

Using Context Clues to Determine Definitions

Ways to Figure Out the Meaning (when you can't use a dictionary): pages 12 to 15 in *10 Steps to Advanced Reading*

What is a clue?

- The word “clue” means a guide to a solution.
- Therefore, a context clue refers to information in a reading passage that allow the reader to figure out the meaning of an unknown word.

Try these:

1. The homecoming celebration was raucous, people wildly shouting and cheering, blowing whistles, and pounding on drums.
 - ***Raucous*** means
 - A. boring
 - B. noisy
 - C. dangerous

1. Cell phones have become ubiquitous; you can see them and hear them—everywhere.

1) ***Ubiquitous*** means

- a. Unaffordable
- b. Complicated
- c. widespread

1. Those who advocate capital punishment often argue that it prevents crime, but those who oppose it say it has no such effect.

1) **Advocate** means

- a. Support
- b. Disregard
- c. resist

4 kinds of context clues

1. Synonyms or explicit definitions (also called restatements)
2. examples
3. antonyms or contrasting words, phrases, or clauses
4. the general sense or logic of the passage (also referred to as general knowledge clues)

Synonyms or Explicit Definitions

- Textbooks nearly always provide definitions and/or synonyms of new terminology.
- The terms are usually in **bold print, underline, and/or italicized** and then followed by the definition or synonym.
- The definition may then be followed by further explanation and/or examples.
- Also, definitions may appear in the margins to further draw your attention to them.

7 Common Context Signals that the writer is providing a definition of a term

1. **Word or Term** + “is” + definition
2. **Word or Term** followed definition enclosed by dashes
3. **Word or Term** + definition enclosed by commas
4. **Word or Term** + definition enclosed by parentheses
5. **Word or Term** followed by “that is or “or”
6. **Word or Term** defined in a second sentence
7. Definition before the **Word or Term**

1. Word or term + is* + definition:

- A ***bar code*** is a series of dark bars and light spaces that represent characters.

*other verbs can be used to signal definitions, for example,
means, refers to, is related to,

- *Shochu*, a Japanese word, refers to a distilled spirit made from rice, barley, sweet potatoes, cane sugar, buckwheat or even chestnuts.

- In Florida, **cohabitation**, which means to live together without being married, is a crime punishable by a \$500 fine and up to 60 days in jail.

2. Word followed definition enclosed by dashes:

- *Revenues*—the money the business takes in
—must be greater than expenses over the long run for the business to maintain itself and profit its owners.

3. Word + definition enclosed by commas:

- For every *aphorism*, a statement of wisdom or a saying, you can usually find another one that presents the opposite point of view.

4. **Word + definition enclosed by parentheses:**

- In ancient Greek mathematics, the atoms of the earth were supposed to have the shape of hexahedrons (cubes).

5. Word followed by “that is or “or”:

- The children were asked to resolve a major dilemma, or difficult choice, between two alternatives.

6. Word defined in a second sentence:

- Athletes who play many sports usually work on their *aerobic conditioning*. Improving the efficiency of the heart and lungs is important, no matter what the level of play.

7. Definition before the word:

- When a sound is used, it is typically a short word or a religious phrase that is mentally repeated, called a ***mantra***.

Sometimes, writers will provide a synonym rather than a definition.

- Her intransigence infuriated everyone, especially her boss because such stubbornness made every decision take much longer than necessary.

Synonyms can be signaled by parentheses, dashes, commas

- It is a good idea to buy medications from a reputable pharmacy to avoid ***adulterated*** (impure) medications that can cause serious illnesses.
- Many people ***yearn*** –desire-- to emigrate to the United States yearned.
- Sidra's cruel comment ***appalled***, shocked, even her best friend.

Practice: Circle the words being defined and underline the definition.

1. Boone and Blowing Rock, North Carolina cities, have lots of artists and craftsmen.
2. In this book, we shall use the term *rhythm* primarily with regard to sounds, and more especially to those pertaining to human speech.

Practice: Underline the definition.

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2. In this book, we shall use the term *rhythm* primarily to mean sounds, especially to those pertaining to human speech.

3. Concreteness—the image of person, scene, action, or object—is, as we have earlier insisted, at the very heart of poetry.
4. When we are angry at someone, we want to let the person know our feelings, “to tell him off.”

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4. The concentration of disorder produced along the trajectory—the path something takes as it moves along—depends upon its energy, charge, and mass.
5. President Bush’s “Terrorist Surveillance Program,” that is his authorization of the CIA to spy on Americans without a warrant, is receiving harsh criticism from many Republicans and Democrats.

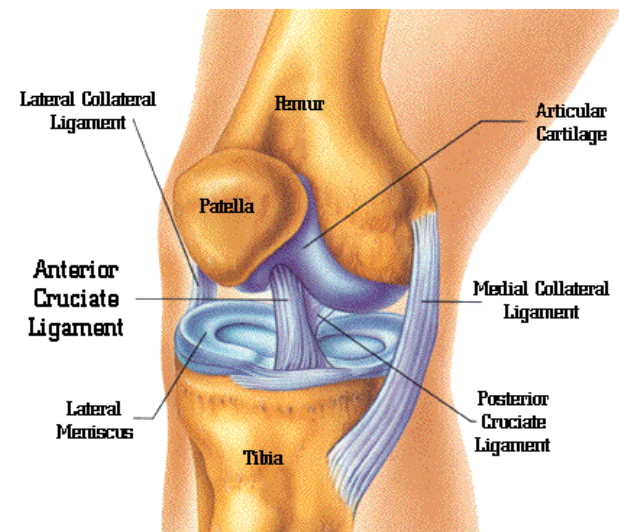
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Example Clues

- Sometimes the best way for a writer to help the reader understand the meaning of a word is to give an actual picture of a term, such the picture below which accompanies a discussion of the parts of the knee.



- When pictures are not possible, writers often provide examples to illustrate and clarify the meaning of an unfamiliar word.
- These are known as example context clues.

- Look for words or phrases like "such as," "for instance," "for example," "including," or "consists of."

Words and phrases that signal examples

- The river was full of **noxious** materials such as cleaning agents from factories and **pesticides** from the nearby farms.
 - What are **noxious** materials if examples are cleaning agents and pesticides?
 - Pleasant materials?
 - Unpleasant materials?

- This third grade was full of **precocious** children. One child, for instance, had learned to read at two and another could do algebra at age 6.
 - What kind of children are precocious children if the examples are a child who learned to read at 2 and another who learned algebra at 6?
 - Slow?
 - Advanced?

- When going to an office party you should show your best **decorum**; for example, dress your best, drink and eat moderately, and be sure to thank the host.
 - What is decorum at an office party if examples are dressing your best, drinking and eating moderately, and thanking the host?
 - Good behavior
 - Bad behavior

- The floors of the restaurant were extremely **scuzzy**. They were covered with spilled grease, crumbs of food, and cigarette butts.
- In this sentence there is no signal, so the reader must infer that the second sentence is giving specific examples of “**scuzzy** floors.”
 - What does **scuzzy** mean?
 - Clean?
 - Dirty?

- Percussionists, including those who play kettledrums, bass drums, cymbals, and triangles, usually have their own section in an orchestra.
- If musicians who play drums, cymbals, and triangles are examples of percussionists, then percussionists are musicians who make music by doing what?

Punctuation Signals for Example Clues

- Also, some marks of punctuation can signal an example
 - Colons (:)
 - dashes (-)
 - Parentheses ()

Punctuation that signals examples

- Dashes to indicate an example clue:
 - Legumes—green or snap beans, lima beans, green peas, chickpeas, navy beans, and so on—are valuable, although incomplete source of protein.
- Colons to indicate example clue:
 - John is garrulous: every night, he spends hours on the phone with his friends and family.

Example Clues in New Sentences

- **Examples in new sentences:**
 - In the Old Testament, God is described as an anthropomorphic being. He walks in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, talks with Moses in the desert, and becomes so angry with the human race that he kicks them out of Eden and then destroys nearly everyone y flooding the earth.

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Stringent means

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- b. severe
- c. expensive

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Distraught means

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- b. unhealthy
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Contrast Clues

- Sometimes it is possible to determine the meaning of an unknown word from a nearby word or phrase that has an opposite meaning.
- Sentence connectors that signal contrast can sometimes help detect contrast clues.

- Writers use contrast—that is, opposite meanings—to indicate differences. By knowing differences readers can better understand similarity.

Contrast Signal Words

- although
- nevertheless
- in contrast
- but
- on the other hand
- however
- rather than
- instead
- unlike

Some contrast signals: *but*, *however*, and *although*

- One of the dinner guests **succumbed** to the temptation to have a second piece of cake, but the others resisted.
- One of the dinner guests **succumbed** to the temptation to have a second piece of cake; however, the others resisted.
- One of the dinner guests **succumbed** to the temptation to have a second piece of cake. However, the others resisted.
- Although one of the dinner guests **succumbed** to the temptation to have a second piece of cake, the others resisted.

- If *resisted* is the opposite of **succumbed**, what is the meaning of **succumbed**?
 - Resisted
 - Yielded

- When confronted with danger, she becomes **skittish**; her sister, however, behaves boldly.
 - What is the meaning of **skittish**?
 - Bold?
 - Nervous?

- Fred is a **congenial** boss, yet his assistant is unpleasant to deal with.
 - If congenial is the opposite of unpleasant, congenial means
 - Agreeable?
 - Disagreeable?

- Although we needed time to read the document carefully, we were given time to make only a **cursory** examination.
 - If **cursory** means the opposite of **carefully**, then cursory means
 - Hasty?
 - Thorough?

Practice: Define the italicized word and underline the context clue.

1. Although the senator is usually talkative, he has been *taciturn* in recent weeks.
2. His *loquaciousness* sharply contrasted with her silence.
3. Unlike President Bush, who will talk to anyone about anything, Mrs. Santos is *reticent*.

4. While “global” and “just-in-time” are the hottest words in economics, “local” and “sustainable” are the new culinary buzzwords.
5. My dog is an omnivore, but my cat eats just one thing.
6. Although his ideas meander, he usually returns to one idea.

7. Many were planning the Willard Hotel's demise in 1968; however, others were planning on the 200-year-old hotel's restoration.
8. My brother spent many hours trolling the Internet for research for his Comp II paper, yet his searches found little helpful information.

Logic of the Passage Clues

- Sometimes unfamiliar words will appear without restatement, example, or contrast context clues.
- However, you may be able to figure out the meaning of the words based on your general knowledge of the context. Here is an example:
 - It seemed *incongruous* to serve a dinner of hotdogs and hamburgers to the President of the United States.
 - George's doctor was concerned. When George got excited, he could feel his heart making irregular *palpitations*.

- We had to leave the car and walk up because the **incline** was too steep to drive.
- Since Reginald was nervous, he brought his rabbit's foot **talisman** with him to the exam for good luck .

SUMMING IT UP:

- Tips for recognizing the presence of definitions: Look for words (e.g., *is*, *means*) that announce that meanings are to follow; look for parentheses, dashes, or commas that set apart synonyms or brief definitions.
 - Psychologists often wonder whether stereotypes—the assumptions we make about what people are like—might be self-fulfilling.

- Tips for recognizing the presence of an example clue: Figure out what the examples have in common; also look for words or phrases that signal an example: *for example, for instance, such as, like*
 - Most condiments, *such as* pepper, mustard, and catsup, are used to improve the flavor of foods.

- Tips for recognizing the presence of a contrast clue: Look for a word or phrase that signals the writer is setting up a contrast:
 - Before their classes in manners, the children were disorderly; however, after graduation, they acted with much decorum.

- Tips on recognizing the how the logical of a passage can help define a word: Use the rest of the sentences to help you. Pretend the word is a blank line and fill in the blank with a word that makes sense.
 - On hot, humid afternoons, I often feel languid.
 - On hot humid afternoons, I often feel _____. (How do I feel on hot humid afternoons?)

Example of how this skill is tested

- On late-evening constitutionals along streets less traveled by, I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune.
- Which of the following most nearly means the same as “constitutionals” as it is used in the passage above?
 - a. Songsc. Walks
 - b. Composersd. Measures

Practice: Identify the type of context clue and the meaning of the bold-printed word.

1. **Paleoanthropology**, the study of human origins and evolution, focuses on this tiny fraction of geological time during which humans and chimpanzees diverged from a common ancestor.
2. In many species, mating is **promiscuous**, with no strong pair-bonds or lasting relationships.

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1. **Paleoanthropology**, the study of human origins and evolution, focuses on this tiny fraction of geological time during which humans and chimpanzees diverged from a common ancestor.
 1. definition
2. In many species, mating is **promiscuous**, with no strong pair-bonds or lasting relationships.
 1. Definition and general meaning

3. Animals do behave in ways that reduce their individual fitness and increase the fitness of the recipient of the behavior; this is our functional definition of **altruism**. Consider the example of the Belding ground squirrel, which lies in some mountainous regions of the western United States and is vulnerable to predators such as coyotes and hawks. If a predator approaches, one of the squirrels often gives a high-pitched alarm call. This alerts unaware individuals, who then retreat to their burrows. Careful observations have confirmed that the conspicuous alarm behavior increases the risk of being killed, because it identifies the caller's location.

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3. definition

4. The concept of the ecological niche is almost inseparable from the concept of interspecific competition, so it is difficult to define rigorously. The **ecological niche** is the sum total of the organism's use of the biotic and abiotic resources in its environment. One way to grasp the concept is through an analogy: if an organism's habitat is its address, the niche is its occupation. The niche of a population of tropical tree lizards, for example, consists of, among many other variables, the temperature range it tolerates, the size of trees upon which it perches, the time of day in which it is active and the size and type of insects it eats.

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4. Definition and example

5. As they watched, the brown cloud took on a reddish cast. The cloud's particular shade of red reminded him of a red Crayola crayon.
6. Fred insulted his teacher when he asked how old she was. I guess he didn't know that questions about age, weight, and income are taboo in the U.S.
7. After many attempts to attract the attention of the harried server, Mary shouted, "I know you're busy, but I need some butter."

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8. Many convicted criminals accept their mortification while others believe their punishment is undeserved.
9. The jeremiads of immigrants (some traveling thousands of miles and enduring great danger) coming from looking for better lives in America show what people will endure to have the change to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

More practice: Identify the part of speech of the boldfaced word, the type of clue given, and the meaning of the word?

- Reality shows have **proliferated** over the past five years. Today, reality shows constitute 13% of broadcast programming, up from 4% in 1999, according to a recent analysis by media negotiator Magna Global. (p. 201, RAD)
- **Proliferated** means
 1. Polluted
 2. Declined
 3. Increased

More practice: Identify the part of speech of the boldfaced word, the type of clue given, and the meaning of the word?

- Reality programs thrive on **one-upmanship**. ABC's *The Bachelor* lets a man pick a bride out of a group of single, attractive women hand-picked by the producers. Fox's *Married by America* lets the audience pick the bride.
1. Men
 2. Competition
 3. Audience

More practice: Identify the part of speech of the boldfaced word, the type of clue given, and the meaning of the word?

- There are **legitimate** concerns about the messages inherent in many of these reality show competitions. Television serves as a model for social behavior and interaction, especially for young viewers, many of whom pick up social cues from how they see their favorite TV personalities behave. (201, RAD)
- **Legitimate** means
 1. Reasonable
 2. Legal
 3. Excusable

More practice: Identify the part of speech of the boldfaced word, the type of clue given, and the meaning of the word?

- The contestants go into it with a certain amount of ambition but an awful lot of **naivete**. They are probably not as extroverted as they perceive themselves to be. They are more vulnerable than they think they are. (202, RAD)
- **Naivete** means
 1. Apathy
 2. Inexperience
 3. Wisdom

More practice: Identify the part of speech of the boldfaced word, the type of clue given, and the meaning of the word?

- We are all fragile creatures entwined in a cobweb of social constraints,” social psychologist Stanley Milgram once said. The cobweb he referred to consists of social **norms**, rules about how we are supposed to act.
- **Norms** means
 - Rules
 - Society
 - Actions

- A change in behavior may also lead to a change in attitudes because of cognitive **dissonance**—the uncomfortable feelings that occurs when two attitudes, or an attitude and behavior are in conflict (are dissonant).
- **Dissonance** means
 1. Behaviors
 2. Feelings
 3. Conflict

- Ethnocentrism, the belief that your own culture or ethnic group is superior to all others, is even **embedded** in some languages: The Chinese word for China means “the center of the world” and the Navajo and the Inuit call themselves simply “The People.”
- **Embedded** means
 1. embarrassed
 2. destroyed
 3. Part of

More practice: Identify the part of speech of the boldfaced word, the type of clue given, and the meaning of the word?

- In the absence of water, a condition known as **desiccation**, microorganisms cannot grow or reproduce but can remain viable for years.
- Desiccation means
 - Being without water
 - Unable to grow
 - viable

- The science that studies when and where diseases occur and how they are transmitted in populations is called **epidemiology**. (425, *Intro to Microbiology*, 7th ed., Tortora et al)
- Epidemiology means the study of
 1. science
 2. disease origins
 3. populations