

Finding the Meaning of Unfamiliar Words

The first strategy you should use when encountering a word you do not know the meaning of is using “context clues.” “Context” means what is going on around something. For example, if I say that I am going to give Ms. Goodman a gift, you could ask yourself in what context would you give someone a gift? It could be for a special occasion like a birthday or holiday, which lets us know possible reasons that I am giving Ms. Goodman a gift.

Similarly, context clues are using all that is happening around a word as clues to what the word might mean. With context clues, you may not know the exact definition, but you can get a pretty good idea of what a word means and use it to help you understand the word in context.

For example, in “Shrouded in Myth”, we see the following sentence:

“A long, long, long time ago, even before Perseus was born, his grandfather, Acrisios, the king of Argos, was given a **prophecy** that he would someday be killed by his grandson.”

Prophecy is bolded because it is an unfamiliar word. There are clues around the word **prophecy** that help us determine its meaning. In the text, this **prophecy** tells about what will happen “someday.” So, it must be something about telling the future. Also, **prophecy** sounds like prophet and a prophet tells the future... so a prophecy is like a prediction or a message about the future.

Word and Sentence Where It is Found	Context Clues	Meaning
Prophecy: “A long, long, long time ago, even before Perseus was born, his grandfather, Acrisios, the king of Argos, was given a prophecy that he would someday be killed by his grandson.”	This prophecy tells about what will happen “someday.” So, it must be something about telling the future. Also, prophecy sounds like prophet and a prophet tells the future	A prediction or a message about the future.
Imprisoned: “To protect himself from this fate, the terrified king imprisoned his only daughter, Danae, in an underground dungeon so that she could never marry or have children.”		
Writhing: “This hideous creature had writhing snakes for hair, elephant-like tusks for teeth, and blood-red eyes.”		