



## Learning Words from Context Clues

You know that a large vocabulary is very useful. It helps you talk more interestingly and makes a good impression on other people. It helps you read faster and with more understanding. And it has also been found that your power to think clearly grows as your knowledge of words grows.

Does that mean that you should keep a dictionary chained to your wrist to look up new words you hear or read? It's one way. But there is another way to learn new words. You have used it all your life. Here it is. Listen for words you don't know. Suppose someone calls you *diabolical*, for example. You want to know whether that's good or bad. What do you do? You could say What's that? And let the other person feel superior. You could say How do you spell it? And whisk out your pocket dictionary. You could ask How diabolical am I, so that you can get another clue to the meaning.

If you choose the last method, you are trying to learn from context clues. Each time you hear or read a word in a different sentence, you get more information about what it means. Finally, you have an idea in your mind about what the word means. You have learned from the context of the word.

**Context clues are simply the words or ideas around your unknown word.**

**Using context clues as you read is important for two reasons.**

If you skip over the meaning of unfamiliar words, you may come to the end of the passage you are reading with a very fuzzy idea of what you have read. On the other hand, if you stop and look up every word you don't know, you may become irritated at the slow rate of your reading and stop altogether. So, if you can be alert to context clues and figure out meanings as you read, you will help your speed as well as your comprehension.

You learned that even when you use the dictionary it is often necessary to read several definitions of a word before you can find the one that fits the meaning of the sentence. So you will have to be alert to context clues even when you use the dictionary.

**Below are Four types of Context Clues** Examples, Definitions, Descriptive Words, Opposites)

### EXAMPLES

The context of a word will sometimes give examples that will give you a pretty clear idea of meaning. Suppose you want to know the meaning of the word *gestures* in the paragraph below. Many examples are given in the paragraph. Look for words like: for example, for instance, such as, like that signal examples are coming.

Some dogs can be trained to respond to gestures instead of sounds; for example, a hand pointing in a certain direction, an open hand, palm down, or arms outstretched can be used to mean go sit or come to a well-trained dog

The examples of *gestures* are underlined in the passage).  
Therefore *gesture* means: a movement of the arm, hand, or body

## DEFINITIONS

Sometimes the writer will save you the trouble of looking up a word by defining it for you. Let's define *capital*. The underlined words in the following sentences signal that some sort of a definition is going to follow. Often this kind of definition will not sound much like a dictionary definition.

It is a fact that a large number of small businesses fail because the owner hasn't enough *capital* to tide him over slack periods and emergencies that is, it takes a certain amount of working money to keep a business going.

When you see expressions like that is or means, you will know to watch for a definition of some kind. Therefore *capital* = a certain amount of working money.

A second kind of definition is what is called an appositive. An appositive is just a phrase that follows a word and explains it. But instead of being introduced by one of the definition-type expressions, this kind of phrase is set off on both sides by commas. Let's define *scavenger fish* in the passage below. The appositive in the sentence below is underlined. It is a definition of a *scavenger fish*. (*a swimming garbage collector*)

An aquarium needs *scavenger fish*, swimming garbage collectors, to keep the tank clean.

## DESCRIPTIVE WORDS

You can sometimes piece together the meaning of a word by a little straight detective work. Look at the word *obese*. The underlined words in the following description help you understand the meaning of *obese*. By this description, we can see that *obese* means very overweight.

The first impression that crossed my mind was that the woman was *obese*. Her clothing was stretched across her vast surface of skin like a lumpy balloon stretched to the bursting point.

## OPPOSITES

One further way to pick up the meaning of a new word or expression is by looking for clues that tell you what the word does not mean. Words like but, except, and however, tell you that you are now going to read an opposite or a contrasting idea. Let's figure out the meaning of *somber*.

He tried to smile because the mood of the party was not *somber*, but happy.

You know that *somber* must mean something that is the opposite of happy. In fact, it means sad or dreary (dark, seriously not pleased)

Sometimes the way a sentence is put together will tell you that you are looking for the opposite of a word or idea that is found in one half of the sentence. Let's figure out the meaning of the word *denounce*.

If you can't find anything to praise in the class, at least don't *denounce* it.

You know here that *denounce* must mean something like the opposite of praise. Therefore, it means to condemn or criticize (the opposite of praise).