

Guessing Meanings of Words from Context

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Context	is a word, a group of words, or sentences that surround unknown words.
A Context Clue	is a hint from the rest of the sentence or paragraph that helps you to understand the meaning of the unknown word.

Types of **Context Clues**

- § Definition
- § Restatement
- § Example
- § Contrast
- § Cause and Effect
- § Inference

Definition

A writer may help readers understand an unfamiliar word by giving the definition of a word directly. It may be signaled by one of these expressions:

is/are	is/ are called
is/are defined as	is/are described as
is/are known as	mean/which mean

For example,

- Semantics is the study of meaning in language while pragmatics is the study of how people use language in social situations.
- A highly refined extract of seaweed is called carrageenan.

In addition to the expressions above, some punctuation can be used as a definition clue too. For example,

- Comma (,)
⇒ Many heavy smokers develop emphysema, a serious lung disease which makes breathing very difficult.
- Parentheses ()

⇒ Paella (a Spanish fried rice mixed with small pieces of vegetables, fish, and chicken) is better served hot as breakfast.

- Dash (-)
⇒ Carbon dating - a scientific method to determine the age of old objects - is generally accepted to be accurate.

Restatement

Some unknown words are probably restated by using another word which is more familiar to us. The signal words are as follows:

or	in other words
that is (to say)	i.e.

For example,

- A pseudonym or a penname is used to hide the identity of a writer.
- Most members of the camel family are found in arid habitats; in other words, they are found in dry areas.

Example

Some examples are given to help readers understand the meaning of the unknown words. The examples usually follow the expressions like:

such/such as	like	especially
for example	for instance	including

For example,

- At night we sometimes saw some nocturnal animals, such as owls and bats.
- Fabrics, like cotton, silk or polyester, can be bought at many stores.

Contrast

Writers often clarify their discussion by showing how one thing differs from another or by telling what something is not. The signals that help locate contrasting expressions are:

but	however	although	whereas
not	on the other hand	yet	

For example,

- Charlotte loves reading novels but Bridget despises it.
- My sister thought the rock concert was scintillating, but I thought it was very dull.

Cause and Effect

Writers may also use cause and effect relationships to help readers find the meaning of unknown words even though the meaning is not directly given. The expressions which indicate cause and effect relationships of situations or events are:

because	consequently
so	therefore

For example,

- After a year in Scotland, she ran out of money; therefore, she had to look for a job.
- At the party, I saw Susan sitting by herself. Probably it was because she did not feel like mingling with the other guests.

Inference

Sometimes context clues are not so clearly recognizable because they do not have clear signals. We must infer to determine the meaning of an unknown word by its relationship to familiar words.

For example,

- My neighbour is so affluent that he can afford an expensive sports car every year.

Here the “so + adjective + that clause” is a reason + result. So affluent must mean rich.

Selected Bibliography

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