Teaching Students
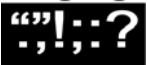# to Use Context Clues
to Understand the Meanings of Words
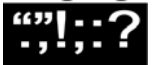
Dos and Don'ts of Vocabulary Instruction

Dos…

- Use varied and interesting texts.

- Teach vocabulary in the context of real reading.

- Model vocabulary strategies all the way through grade 12.

- Connect vocabulary to core concepts and to related words.

- Increase opportunities for students to use new words in and out of class.

- Create opportunities to make inferences about words and talk about them.

- Teach common prefixes, suffixes, and roots.

- Provide mini-lessons on how to extend meanings of words from concrete to abstract.

- Connect new words to students' background knowledge.

- Provide narrative and expository reading options that relate to the curriculum and match the reading levels of the students.

- Provide multi-modal/multiple intelligences ways of understanding and remembering words (drawings, symbols, movement, music, social).

- Teach important academic terms from your grade level standards.

- **Provide time for lots of reading!**

Don'ts…

- Teach isolated vocabulary out of context.

- Use word lists that are unconnected to a text.

- Overdo the pre-teaching of vocabulary.

- Encourage rote memorization of definitions.

- Teach students to rely solely on context to figure out words—nor to rely solely on decoding.

- Teach that all words need to be figured out to understand a text.

- Encourage looking up definitions as the primary way of figuring out word meanings.

- Use vocabulary assessments that are not connected to real reading.

- Ask students to write original sentences using new words and concepts that they are just beginning to learn.

Building Vocabulary:
Using Context Clues to Learn Word Meaning

When authors write, they often include context clues to the meaning of words they use but think that some of their readers may not know. The context clue is usually presented in the sentence or paragraph in which the word occurs. Sometimes a visual such as a picture is provided.

Here are six types of context clues used by authors to help the reader understand the meanings of words. An example is provided for each.

1. Definition context clue

The author includes a definition to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, "tainted" is defined as having a disease.

EXAMPLE:
The people of the town were warned not to eat the tainted fish. The local newspaper published a bulletin in which readers were clearly told that eating fish that had a disease could be very dangerous. This was especially true for fish caught in Lake Jean.
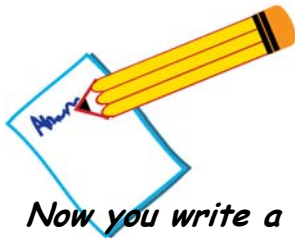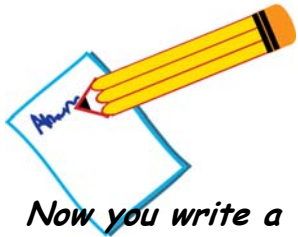
Now you write a sentence using a "definition" context clue…

2. Synonym context clue

The author includes a synonym to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. A synonym is a word that means the same as or nearly the same as another word. In the following example, the synonym "pity" helps the reader understand the meaning of "compassion."

EXAMPLE:
After seeing the picture of the starving children, we all felt compassion or pity for their suffering.

Now you write a sentence using a "synonym" context clue…

3. Antonym context clue

The author includes an antonym to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. An antonym is a word that means the opposite of another word. In the following example, the antonym "eager" helps the reader understand the meaning of "reluctant."

EXAMPLE:
Joe was reluctant to take on the position of captain of the basketball team. He was afraid that the time it would take would hurt his grades. On the other hand, Billy was eager for the chance to be captain. He thought that being captain of the team would make him very popular in school.
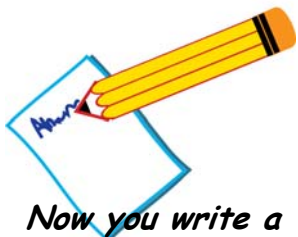
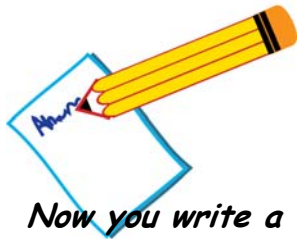*Now you write a sentence using a "antonym" context clue…*
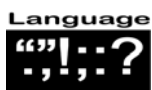
4. Description context clue

The author includes one or more descriptions to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, descriptions of President Kennedy as having charm, enthusiasm, and a magnetic personality help the reader understand the meaning of "charismatic."

EXAMPLE:
John Fitzgerald Kennedy, our 35th president, improved human rights and equal rights for all people. He was a very charismatic president. People were attracted to his charm and enthusiasm. His personality was described as magnetic.
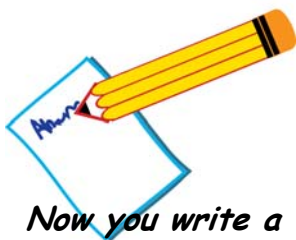
Now you write a sentence using a "description" context clue…

5. Summary context clue

The author makes a number of statements that help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, statements about being rude, showing no respect, having poor manners, and being impolite help the reader understand the meaning of "impertinent."

EXAMPLE:
Andrea was a very impertinent young lady. She was so rude that she talked while her teacher was explaining a lesson. She showed no respect for other students. Her manners were very poor. Even her parents thought that Andrea was impolite.
She was exultant.
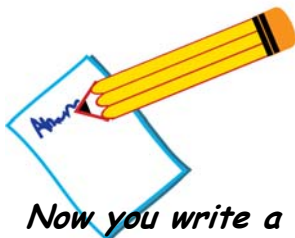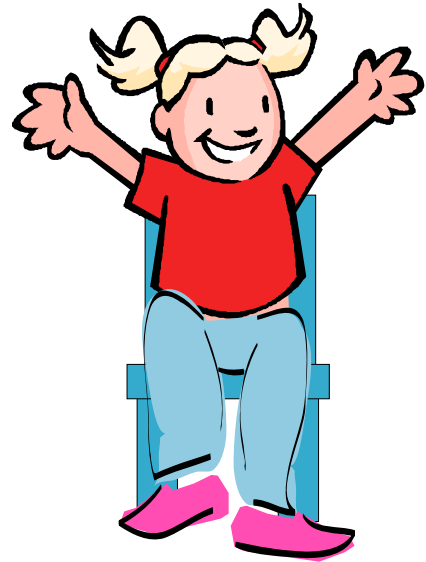
Now you write a sentence using a "summary" context clue…
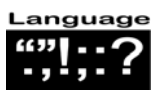
6. Visual context clue

The author includes a picture, drawing, chart, graph, or other type of visual to help the reader understand the meaning of a word. In the following example, the picture and its caption that is close to the sentence helps the reader understand that "exultant" means great joy.

EXAMPLE:
Peggy had an exultant look on her face.

Now you write a sentence using a "visual" context clue…

Adapted from:

http://www.how-to-study.com/study-skills/en/language-arts/3/building-vocabulary-using-context-clues-to-learn-word-meaning/

Teaching Students to Use Context to Get to Meaning with Unknown Words

Ideas contributed by Noah Bradley, Literacy Coach, Think College Now, Oakland, CA

Teach each aspect of word analysis for your grade level standards, for example, multiple meaning words, root words, affixes, homophones, synonyms, antonyms, idioms, figurative language, etc., separately, all under the umbrella of vocabulary development.

The essential understanding here is:

"Good readers have many strategies for determining the meaning of unfamiliar words."

Talking about using Context Clues:

Provide students with the following sentence frame

I can tell what _____(unfamiliar word) means
(definition)_____
because (context clues)_____.

Ask students to use that frame as they share orally with their classmates what they can find in context clues to support getting to meaning with unfamiliar words in a story. AS each student shares, you can show the others on an overhead or document camera where they are finding the clues in the actual text by highlighting words around the unfamiliar vocabulary.

Modeling Your Thinking during a Read Aloud:

Prior to reading a piece of literature to your students, lift a sentence from the story and write it out on an overhead or sentence strip. When you get to that sentence in the read aloud, pause, and show the students how to use the clues from the sentence and the overall meaning or tone of the story to figure out what it means. This will model an essential process for students that can lead to much greater acquisition of new words simply picked up during pleasure reading. It will show students how good readers are always noticing new words and using the context in which they occur to help them build a personal definition of the word.

Guided Practice with Monster Words:

Have students practice using context clues with sentences containing "monster words" (nonsense words) to determine meaning. For example,

 "Mark was tired, and his muscles ached from the *shemansa* climb up the mountain."

Application:

Have students record lists of unfamiliar words, context clues, and possible definitions as they read independently. This can be done with a simple matrix or on post-its using the sentence frame.

Word	Context clues	Possible definition
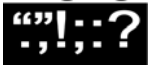
Quality Teacher Read Aloud Planning Guide

Text Selection and Preparation: Above the reading level, rich language, compelling story, high interest. **Preview book:** possible connections to background knowledge, vocabulary, prediction points.

STEP #1 - Connect to background knowledge, brief description

STEP #2 - Read the text

STOP to validate background knowledge
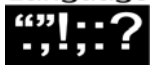
STOP to comment on interesting words or phrases.

STOP to facilitate a prediction.

STEP #3 - After reading, facilitate oral retelling (modeled/shared/independent).

STEP #4 – Words to keep (for home, class word bank, personal lists).

From Vocabulary Development Packet: Dennis Parker, Jeff Zwiers and Charlotte Knox

Vocabulary Building Strategies - Guess and Adjust

**This strategy can help students learn to use context
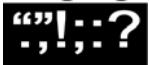as a tool for defining unfamiliar vocabulary.**

⇒ **Choose two or three words** from the text that have multiple meanings. Select words that can be clearly defined when read in context.

⇒ **Students 'Guess' the meaning** of each word.
   Ask the students to define word with prompts such as:

   • Does anyone think they know what this word means?

   • Does this word remind you of any word you know?

   • What do you think it might mean? Why?

⇒ **Review each word and the definitions** with which the students come up.

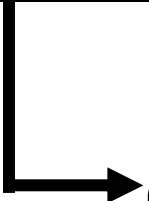⇒ **Read the text**. This can be done as a shared, guided, or independent reading.

⇒ **'Adjust' the meaning** of each word using information from its context.

   • Discuss the adjustments and why they were made.

   • Ask: What information caused you to adjust?

Guess and Adjust

New Words	Guessed Meaning	3.	4. Adjusted Meaning
			Why?
		R	*Why?*
		E	*Why?*
		A	*Why?*
		D	*Why?*

Clue Words

2. I think the text will be about: