

Be a Vocabulary Detective!

Whether you're looking ahead to the SATs or just trying to increase your power to express yourself, you can build your vocabulary painlessly by using context clues. Here's how.

Do you know the meaning of the word *ubiquitous*? If you don't, you're probably in the majority. It's a relatively uncommon word.

Here's *ubiquitous* in the context of a brief passage:

The ubiquitous Martha Stewart appears to have cloned herself. She's in magazines and newspapers, television and radio features and ads, and on the bookstore shelves. She's here, she's there, she's everywhere....

Now do you know what *ubiquitous* means? Deducing meaning from context, you can probably come close to its dictionary definition: "present, or seeming to be present, everywhere at the same time."

When you were a baby or toddler, you learned the meanings of most words from the context in which they occurred. If your father sank into the sofa, yawned, and said, "I'm exhausted," you learned what *exhausted* means. No one had to define it for you, and you didn't need to know its Latin roots.

That learning process continues throughout our lives. All of us learn new words from the contexts in which we hear or read them. By being aware of those words, and by making a conscious effort to commit them to memory as they come up, we can increase our vocabulary painlessly.

Clue Yourself In: Four Kinds of Context

Four types of context clues help readers to understand the meaning of a piece of writing even when some of the words are unfamiliar. The four include: (1) illustrations or examples, (2) contrasts, (3) situations, and (4) definitions.

• *Illustration or example*

Sometimes writers follow the introduction of an unusual word with examples that give hints about its meaning. That was the case in the Martha Stewart passage quoted above. The word *ubiquitous* was followed by examples of the many places in which the busy Stewart seems to pop up. Here's another example:

Rich was a *precocious* child. By the age of two, he was able to read. By three, he was able to solve complex mathematical problems.

By giving examples of behavior that is beyond the ability of most toddlers, the writer indicates that *precocious* means "developing early in knowledge or skill."

• *Contrast*

Sometimes writers reveal the meaning of a word by constructing the sentence in a way that contrasts it with a more familiar word:

The *malodorous* scent coming from the attic was a shocking change from the sweet-smelling flowers in the yard.

Some of the animals had backbones, but the others were *invertebrates*.

Malodorous has to mean the opposite of "sweet-smelling." *Invertebrates* must be animals that do not have backbones.

• Situation

Just as you inferred the meaning of *exhausted* from the situation in which your father used the word, you can infer the meanings of words in print from situations. Two examples:

Philanthropic agencies provide food, money, and clothing to needy people around the world.

Visiting the center for *phobias*, we discovered that people have a variety of fears, including the fear of heights, water, closed spaces, and fire.

The sentences do not tell exactly what the italicized words mean. But the situations they describe suggest that *philanthropic* means "charitable" and that *phobias* are "fears."

• Definition

In some cases, particularly when a genuinely unfamiliar word is being introduced, the writer defines it directly within the sentence:

The scholar sat hunched over her writing desk, deep within her *lucubration*, or intense study, of ancient Greek.

The old automobile sat behind the barn in a state of *desuetude*—the condition of not being in use.

A Context-Clues Action Plan

The key to making the best use of context clues is simple: Look for them aggressively. Read, read, read—and take full advantage of the vocabulary-building possibilities that reading will give you. Here are a few hints that will help you form an action plan for building your vocabulary by being aware of context clues.

While reading:

- Look closely at any unfamiliar word—and at the several words that come before and after it.
- Think about what you already know from the passage in which the word appears.
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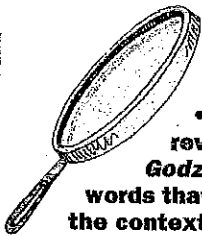
After reading:

- Use your newly acquired words in writing and everyday speech. See if others can learn their meanings from the contexts you create.

Keep Your Vocabulary Active

According to experts, most people actively use only about one-third of the words they know. Context clues can add muscle to your vocabulary. And that is a key goal for writers. As the writer Wilfred Funk once explained, "The more words you know, the more clearly and powerfully you will think, and the more ideas you will invite into your mind."

—Mark Rafenstein



write now

• The numbered excerpts come from a review by Roger Ebert of last summer's movie *Godzilla*. Each excerpt contains one or more words that may be unfamiliar to you. By examining the context in which those italicized words appear, make an educated guess about their meanings.

1. It rains all through "Godzilla," and it's usually night. Well, of course it is. That makes the special effects easier to *obscure*. If you never get a clear look at the monster, you can't see how *shoddy* it is....
2. The makers of the film...follow the timeless outlines of many other movies about Godzilla....There are *ominous* attacks on ships at sea, alarming blips on radar screens, and a scientist who *speculates* that nuclear tests may have *spawned* a mutant creature.
3. A cast of *stereotyped* stock characters is introduced

and made to say lines like, "I don't understand—how could something so big just disappear?"

4. Most monster movies have at least one *bleeding-heart* environmentalist to argue the case of the monstrous beast....It is he who *intuits* that Godzilla is a female.

5. One must carefully *repress* intelligent thought while watching such a film. The movie makes no sense at all except as a careless *pastiche* of its betters.

6. "Godzilla"...offers nothing but soulless *technique*: A big lizard is created by special effects, wreaks havoc and is destroyed. What a cold-hearted, *mechanistic* vision, so starved for emotion or wit.

It's clear that Ebert's opinion is *unequivocal*; he finds no good points in the movie to balance what he sees as its flaws. What do you think *unequivocal* means?

Taken from a Roger Ebert movie review column. © 1998 Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

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Context Clues

You can sometimes tell the meaning of an unfamiliar word by looking closely at nearby words and phrases. Read the following sentence:

He was so brazen that he would come late to class noisily, winking and grinning at all his friends.

You can infer from the context phrases - "late to class noisily" and "winking and grinning" - that *brazen* means "bold" or "shameless."

A. Context Clues in Action

In each sentence below, underline any context clues that help you figure out the meaning of the word in *italics*. Then write the meaning of the word.

1. Taking a slow, deep breath, I fought back an *impulse* to say something nasty to the rude official.
meaning: _____
2. Using his *intuition* rather than his reason, the detective located the suspect.
meaning: _____
3. Dr. Wu fears that the weak and seriously ill patient might *lapse* into a coma.
meaning: _____
4. Sitting all alone I fell into a *reverie*, imagining all the things I wanted to do someday.
meaning: _____
5. The shortstop *deftly* caught the fly ball and zipped it to first base.
meaning: _____
6. Can you imagine anything more *tedious* than doing the same dull job over and over?
meaning: _____
7. The more I stretch and exercise, the more *flexible* my joints become.
meaning: _____
8. When we saw a blinking red light and a man waving a flag, we realized there was some kind of *hazard* ahead.
meaning: _____
9. If that tree falls across the road, it will *obstruct* traffic in and out of the area.
meaning: _____
10. There was something *sinister* about the dark castle, with the wolves howling in the distance.
meaning: _____

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Name _____

Date _____

Lesson
1

Context Clues

More Practice

impulse *intuition* *lapse* *reverie* *obstruct*
deftly *tedious* *flexible* *hazard* *sinister*

B. Vocabulary Words in Action

Review the meanings of the words in the list above. Then insert in each sentence the word that correctly fits the meaning.

1. The archer made a curved bow from a _____ piece of sapling.
2. My _____ told me that the cat would not like the new puppy.
3. Several cars skidded on the ice past the _____ lights.
4. Acting on _____, the spy leaped away from the car as it exploded.
5. Carl thought mowing the lawn was the most _____ chore ever.
6. In court the defendant would start to explain and then _____ into silence.
7. The weaver _____ worked the colorful threads through the loom.
8. Don't interrupt Grandpa in his _____ about playing major league ball.
9. Loss of important evidence will _____ the progress of the investigation.
10. There were warnings of a _____ plot to take over the government of the tiny republic.

C. Vocabulary Challenge

Look at the following words and their meanings. Then for each word write a sentence that uses the word and includes a context clue to its meaning.

1. **console** give comfort to; express sympathy for

2. **munitions** weapons and ammunition

3. **elated** proud and joyful

4. **prosperous** successful; well-to-do

5. **minimal** small in amount; only barely adequate

Restatement and Example Clues

A writer may provide context clues by restating a term in easier language. Commas, dashes, or other punctuation can point to a restatement clue, along with expressions such as *that is*, *in other words*, and *or*.

My father is a podiatrist, **or foot doctor**.

The **restatement clue**, "or foot doctor," tells you the meaning of *podiatrist*.

Another way writers can suggest the meanings of words is to give one or two **examples**, as in the following sentence:

Fred showed some very **belligerent** traits, such as shouting at other drivers and constantly getting into fights.

The examples suggest that *belligerent* means something like "hostile" or "bad-tempered."

A. Restatement and Example Clues in Action

In each sentence below, first look at the italicized word, then look for clues to its meaning. Circle either *restatement* or *example*. Then write a meaning for the italicized word.

1. Mano had such a *longing* for the horse that he knew he would never want anything so much again.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
2. The burning of our home was a *calamity*—a real disaster.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
3. *Impediments* to his getting the job included his youth and inexperience and his lack of language skills.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
4. When using power tools you should take *precautions*, such as wearing safety goggles and treating the equipment properly.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
5. We feared lightning would *ignite* the dry grass and burn up the fields.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
6. The legend told of a *pauper*, or person without wealth, who dreamed of owning a horse.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
7. The *precipitation* we expect this weekend may come in the form of rain, sleet, or snow.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
8. The judge's sentence was *punitive*; that is, it was meant to punish the offender.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
9. Unfortunately, this diamond has some *flaws*, including a yellow color and a cloudy appearance.
restatement/example
meaning: _____
10. The man was *infuriated*; he simply flew into a rage.
restatement/example
meaning: _____

LESSON
2

Restatement and Example Clues

More Practice

- longing* *calamity* *punitive* *precautions* *impediment*
ignite *pauper* *infuriated* *flaws* *precipitation*

B. Vocabulary Words in Action

Review the meanings of the words in the list above. Then insert in each sentence the word that correctly fits the meaning.

1. Your argument is fairly good, but there are some _____ in it.
2. All day I had a strong _____, or desire, for a piece of chocolate cake.
3. The crop should be in good shape this year if we get enough _____.
4. Stored gasoline and a stray match helped _____ the warehouse, which was soon in flames.
5. Jason felt it was a _____—a disaster—when he got B's on his two tests.
6. The fantasy was about a _____ who became rich through a magic fish.
7. Bad study habits can be an _____ to your success.
8. In dealing with the uprising, the government was forced to take _____ measures.
9. Take extra _____ if the roads are slippery.
10. When she discovered the broken vase, Alice became _____.

C. Vocabulary Challenge

Look at the following words and their meanings. Then for each word write a sentence that uses the word and includes a context clue to its meaning.

1. **taunted** teased

2. **ailment** illness

3. **clamor** loud noise

4. **consequence** result

5. **impartial** fair, unbiased

Definition and Example Clues

Two forms of context clues are example(s) and definition of an unfamiliar word. Read the sentences below.

We collected **kindling**, such as dry twigs and branches, to start the fire.

The **examples**, "such as dry twigs and branches" tell you that *kindling* means "easily burned materials used to start a fire." The terms *like, such as, for example,* and *other* often signal an example format.

A **dirigible** is an aircraft that is lighter than air.

A **definition clue** is usually signaled by a form of the verb *to be* (*am, is, are, was, were*) or by commas or dashes. Often a definition clue tells what class the item is in (aircraft) and then tells how it is different from other members of that class (lighter than air).

A. Definition and Example Clues in Action

In each sentence below, first look at the italicized word, then look for clues to its meaning. Circle either **example** or **definition**. Then write a meaning for the italicized word.

1. The prisoner was in a state of *wrath*—a feeling of intense anger.
example/definition

meaning: _____

2. I liked his *blunt* manner—for example, he always told me the truth.
example/definition

meaning: _____

3. To *shun* someone is to have nothing to do with that person.
example/definition

meaning: _____

4. The rain was *consistent*—that is, it kept the same rhythm and intensity for more than an hour.
example/definition

meaning: _____

5. Afterward Jerry showed some signs of *remorse*, such as apologizing to everyone and paying back the money he had lost.
example/definition

meaning: _____

6. She had a *gaudy* wardrobe—for example, pink shoes, bright hats, and sweaters with rhinestones.
example/definition

meaning: _____

7. I think you should be *skeptical* about those claims. That is, you should doubt or question them first.
example/definition

meaning: _____

8. As spring approached we began to see new *hues* in the landscape, such as various shades of green, yellow, and gold.
example/definition

meaning: _____

9. One kind of *phobia* is a fear of flying. There are other kinds, such as a fear of insects and a fear of high places.
example/definition

meaning: _____

10. He seemed to be ill, but it was merely a *ruse*, that is, a clever trick to deceive us.
example/definition

meaning: _____

Definition and Example Clues

More Practice

ruse blunt phobia consistent shun
wrath gaudy remorse skeptical hues

B. Vocabulary Words in Action

Review the meanings of the words in the list above. Then insert in each sentence the word that correctly fits the meaning.

1. Tim was really embarrassed; his face showed _____ from pink to scarlet.
2. His _____ clothes were out of place at the funeral.
3. The suspect's story was not _____ with what the evidence showed.
4. The teacher was quite _____ about Ed's story. She didn't see how it could be true.
5. The mayor has a _____ manner—rather plain-spoken and abrupt.
6. He refused to enter that small, enclosed space. He must have had some kind of _____ about it.
7. The tiger was in quite a state of _____—snarling, snapping, and lunging at the keeper.
8. Fortunately, the general thought of a clever _____ that completely fooled the enemy.
9. _____ is an emotion we don't always see in convicted criminals, but Jones seemed to be really sorry.
10. My friends all began to _____ me until they realized I had never given away the secret.

C. Vocabulary Challenge

Look at the following words and their meanings. Then for each word write a sentence that uses the word and includes a context clue to its meaning.

1. **morsel** small bite or portion of food
- _____

2. **jovial** full of hearty good humor
- _____

3. **languish** become weak; fail in health
- _____

4. **wary** cautious; on one's guard
- _____

5. **allege** declare, especially without proof
- _____

Comparison and Contrast Clues

Sometime you can tell the meaning of an unfamiliar word when it is compared or contrasted to something familiar. Context clues that show **comparison** include *like, as, similar, and in the same way*. **Contrasts** may be signaled by words such as *but, although, however, and on the other hand*.

Kari's happy face was *luminous*, **like** the rays of the sun.

The clue word *like* in this sentence tells you that *luminous* means "shining" or "giving off light."

I assumed a rhino would move in a *lumbering* manner, **but** it raced across the screen like an attacking army tank.

The clue word **but** in this sentence suggests that *lumbering* means "moving in a heavy, slow manner."

A. Comparison and Contrast Clues in Action

Read the following sentences and underline each word or phrase that signals a comparison or contrast clue. Circle **comparison** or **contrast**, depending on the clue. Then write the meaning of each italicized word.

- The sink was *clogged*, like a ball stuck in the vacuum cleaner.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- The meeting was held in the main house, but refreshments were served in the *annex*.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- We thought we were seeing the real painting, but it turned out to be a *fraud*.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- Although we had expected a *multitude* to come to the rally, only ten or fifteen people showed up.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- That faucet is *faulty*, just like all the other things in this house that don't work.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- The summer was *sultry*; on the other hand, the fall was cool and dry.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- The moon will *diminish* in size at the end of the month; however, it will grow during the first part of the month.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- When the winner was announced, there was *pandemonium* in the hall, something like what happens in the final seconds of a close basketball game.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- The coach's *empathy* for her team was like that of a mother for her children.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____
- I like foods that are hot and spicy, but my brother's diet is much more *bland*.
comparison/contrast
meaning: _____

Lesson 4 Comparison and Contrast Clues

More Practice

clogged *annex* *bland* *fraud* *multitude*
faulty *empathy* *sultry* *diminish* *pandemonium*

B. Vocabulary Words in Action

Review the meanings of the words in the list above. Then insert in each sentence the word that correctly fits the meaning.

- The toaster is still working, even though the microwave is _____.
- The next morning a quiet mood settled over the city, unlike the _____ of the night before.
- The _____ weather made me feel like I was swimming in warm water.
- Although only a few flowers were growing in the valley, we could see a _____ of them on the hill.
- The bathroom pipe was _____; however, the kitchen drain was open and clear.
- This soup is just as _____ as some of the other unexciting dishes we've been having lately.
- We had hoped for _____, but we were treated mostly with hostility and distrust.
- The building has an _____ that reminds me of the new bedroom over the garage.
- _____ is regarded as a crime in the same way as other dishonest business deals are.
- I was afraid of snowboarding at first, but once I tried it, my fears began to _____.

C. Vocabulary Challenge

Look at the following words and their meanings. Then for each word write a sentence that uses the word and includes a context clue to its meaning:

- hilarious** very funny; noisily merry

- ordeal** a difficult or painful experience

- serene** calm, tranquil, peaceful

- renovate** repair; restore to an earlier condition

- malice** a desire to hurt others; ill will

The *malodorous* scent coming from the attic was a shocking change from the sweet-smelling flowers in the yard.

Some of the animals had backbones, but the others were *invertebrates*.

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Situation
Just as you inferred the meaning of *exhausted* from the situation in which your father used the word, you can infer the meanings of words in print from situations. Two examples:

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Lesson 5 General Context Clues

You can often tell the meaning of an unfamiliar word by looking closely at words and phrases in the same sentence or nearby sentences. Read the following passage:

Listeners were shocked by the speaker's **diatribe**. They hadn't expected such harsh words against the mayor.

You can infer from the context words and phrases "Listeners were shocked," and "harsh words against the mayor" that *diatribe* means a strongly worded, even abusive, criticism.

A. Using General Context Clues in Action

Read the following sentences and underline any word or phrase that signals a context clue for each italicized word. Then write the meaning for each italicized word.

1. The odor *pervaded* the building. After awhile no resident on any floor could escape it.
meaning: _____
2. The dog crept slowly closer, doing it so *surreptitiously* that the cat got quite a surprise.
meaning: _____
3. I'd like to *collaborate* with you on the science project. I think we each would have something to contribute.
meaning: _____
4. I always thought he was my friend. I realized I was wrong when he started making those *derogatory* comments about me.
meaning: _____
5. My father respects hard work. I know he will *commend* me for painting the entire garage.
meaning: _____
6. The *impudent* child ran into the room. The first thing he did was stick out his tongue at the teacher.
meaning: _____
7. The week-old fruit really wasn't *palatable*. I had to spit it out.
meaning: _____
8. The *ransom* note came in the mail. It demanded three million dollars for the return of the jewels.
meaning: _____
9. Your offer of money was very *liberal*. I must say it was much more than I expected.
meaning: _____
10. The new neighbors must be pretty *affluent*. They own three expensive cars and a boat.
meaning: _____

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Malodorous has to mean the opposite of "sweet-smelling." *Invertebrates* must be animals that do not have backbones.

Situation

Just as you inferred the meaning of *exhausted* from the situation in which your father used the word, you can infer the meanings of words in print from situations. Two examples:

Philanthropic agencies provide food, money, and clothing to needy people around the world.

Visiting the center for *phobias*, we discovered that people have a variety of fears, including the fear of heights, water, closed spaces, and fire.

The sentences do not tell exactly what the italicized words mean. But the situations they describe suggest that *philanthropic* means "charitable" and that *phobias* are "fears."

Definition

In some cases, particularly when a genuinely unfamiliar word is being introduced, the writer defines it directly within the sentence:

The scholar sat hunched over her writing desk, deep within her *lucubration*, or intense study, of ancient Greek.

Lesson 5 General Context Clues

More Practice

- pervaded* *surreptitiously* *collaborate* *commend* *impudent*
- palatable* *ransom* *liberal* *derogatory* *affluent*

B. Vocabulary Words in Action

Review the meanings of the words in the list above. Then insert in each sentence the word that correctly fits the meaning.

1. The _____ demand told the detectives where to drop the money.
2. The meal was barely _____. By that time, though, I was so hungry that I ate it anyway.
3. You spoke really rudely to her. Don't you think you were being a little _____?
4. We may not be as _____ as some. On the other hand, we've always made do.
5. Sasha and I want to give a surprise party and _____ on the arrangements.
6. Dad poured a _____ amount of barbecue sauce on the steaks. I guess he knows how much we like the stuff!
7. A sense of menace _____ the house. We could feel it everywhere we went.
8. I don't mean this in any _____ way, but I think you should be a little more careful about what you say.
9. I want to _____ you on your report about whales in class. It was the best you've done all year.
10. The spy inched _____ along the prison wall. He was afraid he'd be seen in the floodlights.

C. Vocabulary Challenge

Look at the following words and their meanings. Then for each word write a sentence that uses the word and includes a context clue to its meaning.

1. **stealthy** acting in a quiet, cautious way

2. **elude** escape from

3. **deleterious** having a harmful effect; injurious

4. **apparition** a ghostly figure; a specter

5. **gregarious** seeking and enjoying the company of others

The *malodorous* scent coming from the attic was a shocking change from the sweet-smelling flowers in the yard.

Some of the animals had backbones, but the others were *invertebrates*.

Malodorous has to mean the opposite of "sweet-smelling." *Invertebrates* must be animals that do not have backbones.

Situation
Just as you inferred the meaning of *exhausted* from the situation in which your father used the word, you can infer the meanings of words in print from situations. Two examples:

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Definition
In some cases, particularly when a genuinely unfamiliar word is being introduced, the writer defines it directly within the sentence:

The scholar sat hunched over her writing desk, deep within her *lucubration*, or intense study, of ancient Greek.

The old automobile sat behind the barn in a state of *desuetude*—the condition of not being in use.

A Context-Clues Action Plan

The key to making the best use of context clues is simple: Look for them aggressively. Read, read, read—and take full advantage of the vocabulary-building possibilities that reading will give you. Here are a few hints that will help you form an action plan for building your vocabulary by being aware of context clues.

- While reading:**
- Look closely at any unfamiliar word—and at the several words that come before and after it.
 - Think about what you already know from the passage in which the word appears.
 - Think of some possible meanings for the unfamiliar word. Ask yourself, what makes me think it means that?
 - Try the above steps again if you are still unsure, or turn to a dictionary.
- After reading:**
- Use your newly acquired words in writing and everyday speech. See if others can learn their meanings from the contexts you create.

Keep Your Vocabulary Active

According to experts, most people actively use only about one-third of the words they know. Context clues can add muscle to your vocabulary. And that is a key goal for writers. As the writer Wilfred Funk once explained, "The more words you know, the more clearly and powerfully you will think, and the more ideas you will invite into your mind."

—Mark Rafenstein

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