

## 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. The context is simply the words or ideas around your unknown word. Using context clues as you read is important for two reasons.

1. 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.

2. In Section III on using the dictionary, 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.

### Four 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. How many examples are given in the paragraph?

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 number of examples given is \_\_\_\_\_.

Look for words like for example, for instance, such as , like that signal examples are coming.

DEFINITIONS. Sometimes the writer will save you the trouble of looking up a word by defining it for you. Underline the words in the following sentences that signal you 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. 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.

Circle the appositive in the sentence below.

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 underlined word. Now which words in the following description help you understand the meaning of the underlined word?

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.

PRACTICE 21: DEFINITIONS

DIRECTIONS:

Watch for examples, definitions, and descriptive words to help you determine the meaning of the underlined words. Write your definition on the lines following.

1. The governor visited the zoo and found to his surprise that he had a friend there in one on the zoo's pet snakes. The reptile wrapped itself chummily around the governor's shoulders.

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2. The Indians taught the Europeans to preserve meat by making pemmican, cakes prepared from dried lean mean mixed with fat, a skill which saved many a trapper's life.

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3. Company representatives are usually reimbursed for their expenses when they make business trips; that is, they are repaid for money they have spent for the company.

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4. Meteorites are not easy to find, and those shooting stars that do survive the long journey to earth are usually pitted and oddly shaped.

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5. Much copra comes from the Malay Peninsula. This dried coconut meat is used for making coconut oil.

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6. You could see how repugnant the bitter medicine was by the way she shuddered and made a face as she swallowed it.

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7. The initial training period, the first six weeks, is the hardest.

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8. Many octogenarians, that is, people in their eighties, are still spry and healthy.

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9. Many things we use as condiments in our food, such as pepper, curry powder, and paprika, cannot be grown in this country.

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10. I could tell that he considered himself a gourmet, not only by the way he enjoyed his food, but in the way he studied the menu before he ordered.

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Check your answers.

Number correct \_\_\_\_\_

Percent correct \_\_\_\_\_

**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.

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.

Sometimes the way a sentence is put together will tell you what you are looking for the opposite of a word or idea that is found in one half of the sentence.

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 opposite to praise. It means to condemn or criticize.

PRACTICE 22: MORE DEFINITIONS

DIRECTIONS:

Define the underlined words in these sentences.

1. His brother had been an A student, but Howard was just a mediocre student.

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2. Unlike the desert tortoise, which is most active in summer, the box turtle may be dormant in that season.

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3. I know it is safe to go up in the Gateway Arch, but if you are dubious about it, stay home.

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4. Although the chairman took twenty minutes just to introduce the main speaker, we were relieved to find that the speaker was concise.

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5. I don't know how those suave and courteous parents could have two such crude and rude children.

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6. That boy certainly eats heartily. In fact, he eats as though he were expecting a famine next year.

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7. If she would just get out and jog, she might cancel out the bad effects of a sedentary job.

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8. If you want to save gas, trade in your big car and get a compact car.

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9. The homes on the north side of the tracks were poor and shabby, but those on the south side were obviously affluent.

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10. You don't have to concur with what I say, but at least listen with an open mind.

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Check your answers.

Number correct \_\_\_\_\_

Percent correct \_\_\_\_\_

## PRACTICE 23: CONTEXT CLUES

### DIRECTIONS:

In each of the selections below, the word to be learned from context is seen in several sentences. Try to define the word clearly. Then look up the word in the dictionary and see how close you came.

1. Before 1916 grocery shoppers were served by clerks. When the first serve-yourself market, Piggly-Wiggly, was opened, grocery store owners laughed and said the public would boycott the store. But the daring man who thought of the idea, Clarence Saunders, believed he could save money by having customers serve themselves from open shelves. “They’ll put you out of business; they’ll boycott you,” and some of his competitors. “They’ll steal you blind,” said others. As it turned out, Saunders was tight. By getting rid of the clerks and cutting out their salaries, he saved the customers money on their groceries, and far from boycotting him, they supported him and his merchandizing idea enthusiastically.

Guess \_\_\_\_\_

Dictionary definition \_\_\_\_\_

2. Recently a well-known entertainer said that we need a publicly subsidized TV network for out-of-work comedians. This plan would benefit the public as well as the comedians. Just because the rating systems and the sponsors cause a show to be canceled, many top comedians are out of work. A subsidized channel could be the answer to the problem. If there were either a government fund or a privately endowed fund to subsidize a comedian whose show is dropped for a season, these talented entertainers would not have to drop out of sight. We could continue to enjoy them if the general public would chip in a few cents a week to subsidize shows that we all enjoy.

Guess \_\_\_\_\_

Dictionary definition \_\_\_\_\_

Check your answers.

Number correct \_\_\_\_\_

Percent correct \_\_\_\_\_

## Context Cues and Special Fields

Many common words are used in several different areas -- law, science, sports -- and so have different meanings. The context of the sentences below tells you the area, and it probably also tells you the general meaning of the word that fits the sentence.

- I. The word cast, for example, can be used in different fields. There's  
A. theater B. fishing C. medicine D. biology E. general use

Mark each of these sentences with the letter designating the field involved.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Roger had a cast on his arm for months.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The cast of the play gave a party for the director.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ We cast our bait near the lily pads close to shore.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The snake cast its skin in this sunny spot.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Who will cast the first stone?

- II. Stock can be either a noun or a verb, and in such varied fields as  
A. Genealogy (human ancestry) B. botany (the study of plants)  
C. cooking D. guns E. business F. farming  
G. finance and investments

Mark each sentence with the letter for the field involved.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Stock is a plant of the mustard family.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Mary comes of good Irish stock.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ This delicious soup has a special stock as its base.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The Adams store carries a big stock of men's shoes.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The stock of this expensive rifle is of polished teak.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ A farmer must see that all his stock eat well and regularly.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ He has all his money invested in common stock.

How does a word acquire so many meanings? Well, for one reason, it has been in the language for a long time. In Middle English it was spelled stocke, and way back on Old English times it was spelled stoccc.



III. Now it's your turn. Read each sentence and decide what the topic is – what field the sentence is talking about. The word line is the key. Your answer might be just a simple, everyday word.

1. The Minnesota team has a good quarterback and a strong line.

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2. The line in this store is mostly leather goods.

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3. Drop me a line when you get to Paris.

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4. Would you please hold the line for just a minute?

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5. The FBI took the case because he had crossed the state line.

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6. Only the Reading line runs to that city; the fare is a dollar.

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7. Memorize the first fifty lines by Friday.

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8. Since he lost that big fish, he uses a 30-pound test line.

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9. He was stage-struck, terrified, and he forgot his lines.

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10. A general is seldom found in the front lines.

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The word line also has been in the language for a long time.

