



UNDERSTANDING VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

If English is your second language, when you read, you may find many words you don't understand. It is not good to look up every new word in the dictionary. If you look up every word, your reading is interrupted. You lose track of the ideas. Also, you do not remember the new words. When you read them again, you often just have to look them up again in the dictionary.

A better way to read is to guess what most of the new words mean. This is a natural way to learn language. You may not guess the exact meaning the first time you see a new word, but you can get a general meaning. When you see the word again in other situations (contexts), you can improve your understanding of the word. When you guess the meaning of the word, you think actively. This helps you to remember the word.

When you want to guess a word's meaning, it helps if you know what part of speech it is. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb? You need to know the word's function in the sentence. If you find that difficult, you should do the Learning Centre Handout VS6.10 Word Forms – Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs before you work on this handout.

This handout gives you some strategies for guessing the meaning of words from their contexts. When you guess the meanings of words, you are like a detective. You need clues to help you solve the mystery. This handout shows you how to use the following kinds of clues:

- Your knowledge of the world
- Punctuation clues
- Definition clues
- Example clues
- Comparison clues
- Contrast clues
- Referent clues

As you work through the exercises in this handout, do not use a dictionary. Guess the meanings from the contexts.

Using Your Knowledge of the World

Often you can guess the meaning of a word just by using your own knowledge of the world and how things work. For example, look at this sentence:

I didn't sleep well because my neighbour's dog was yapping all night.

You can guess the meaning of *yapping* by thinking about your knowledge of dogs and your knowledge of sleep. How can dogs wake you up? They can jump on you or make a noise. Because this is the neighbour's dog, not yours, it must make a noise. So, you can guess that *yapping* is some kind of noise, probably like barking. In most situations, this is enough information for you to continue reading. It doesn't matter if you know exactly what kind of noise it is.

Exercise 1: Using your Knowledge of the World

Use your knowledge of the world to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. Some vegetarians believe that killing animals is wrong. Others are vegetarian because they think meat is bad for people.

A vegetarian is probably _____

2. The driver swerved to miss the little boy who stepped out into the road.

To swerve is probably _____

3. The podiatrist told the woman to take the medicine for 5 days and call him if she didn't feel better.

A podiatrist is probably _____

4. She picked the irises and arranged them in a vase to put on the coffee table.

An iris is probably _____

5. Her tea was tepid, so she put it in the microwave.

Tepid probably means _____

Punctuation Clues

Punctuation clues are one of the easiest kinds of context clues. With punctuation clues, the meaning of a word is explained immediately after the word between brackets, commas or dashes. This type of clue is very common, especially in college textbooks. Look at the following examples:

Brackets:

A tornado (a violent storm of twisting wind) struck Edmonton and caused a lot of damage.

Commas:

A tornado, a violent storm of twisting wind, struck Edmonton and caused a lot of damage.

Dashes:

A tornado – a violent storm of twisting wind – struck Edmonton and caused a lot of damage.

Notice that the punctuation is around an explanation of the word.

Exercise 2: Punctuation Clues

Use the punctuation clues to find the meaning of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. The deluge, a flood of rain, threatened to drown the little town.

A deluge is _____

2. Sleet (half rain and half snow) can be very difficult to drive in due to poor visibility.

Sleet is _____

3. Freezing rain – rain which freezes when it hits the earth – also causes many accidents.

Freezing rain is _____

4. People have gotten lost 10 meters from their homes in blizzards – snowfalls that come down very thickly.

A blizzard is _____

5. Another dangerous form of weather is hail (falling balls of ice) which has been known to get so big that it can break a car windshield.

Hail is _____

Definition Clues

A word's meaning is often given by including its definition in the sentence. The definition is linked to the word with a linking word, usually a verb. Here are some examples of linking words: *is, was, are, means, i.e. (that is), involves, is called, that is* and *resembles*. This type of clue is also very common in college textbooks.

Look at the following examples:

A cane *resembles* a walking stick.

Giggling *involves* laughing in a silly way.

Exercise 3: Definition Clues

Use definition clues to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. Breaking even involves making enough money to pay for business costs but no more.

Breaking even is _____

2. Many new businesses go bankrupt, which means they lose everything.

To go bankrupt is _____

3. It takes a special kind of person to give up a regular job's security, i.e. the safety of a weekly paycheque, to go into business on her own.

Security is _____

4. Small enterprises are usually defined as businesses with fewer than 50 employees and less than \$2 million in annual (yearly) revenues.

An enterprise is _____

6. Entrepreneurs are people who start their own businesses.

An entrepreneur is _____

Example Clues

Example clues give you examples of the unknown word. You must figure out what the examples have in common in order to figure out the meaning of the word. Examples are usually introduced by expressions like these: *such as*, *for instance*, *including*, *for example*, and *like*. Look at this one:

Large corporations *like* General Foods, Shell Oil, Nortel and Canadian Pacific are often less innovative than smaller ones.

This sentence gives you 4 examples of large corporations. Think about the examples. What do they have in common? They are all large companies. So, a corporation must be a company.

Exercise 4: Example Clues

Use example clues to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. A great part of Canada's economy is based on its natural resources, for instance coal, oil and wood.

A natural resource is _____

2. Despite the risks, new businesses are expanding everywhere, from natural resources, manufacturing, construction, real estate, retail trade and – especially – service industries such as consulting and tourism.

A service industry is _____

3. The reporter talked to many auto-industry executives, e.g. company presidents and vice-presidents.

An executive is _____

4. The research company said that less-established car makers such as Subaru and Isuzu could be forced out of North America.

Less-established is _____

5. The Big Three are designing radical new cars including vehicles that use radar and advanced computers.

Radical is _____

Exercise 5: Review I

Use knowledge of the world, punctuation, definition and example clues to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. The asp, a small poisonous snake, is found in Africa, Europe, and Arabia.

An asp is _____

2. Rodents such as mice, rats and beavers, can often do a lot of damage.

A rodent is _____

3. Gardeners curse the mole (a small rodent that likes to dig in soft soil).

A mole is _____

4. The hare resembles a large rabbit.

A hare is _____

5. She screamed when she saw the arachnid moving across its web.

An arachnid is _____

6. Many restaurants serve molluscs – for example, snails, oysters and clams.

A mollusc is _____

7. Cetaceans, including whales and dolphins, are thought to have high intelligence.

A cetacean is _____

8. Many people are afraid of reptiles like lizards, snakes and turtles.

A reptile is _____

9. The large dog used by the Inuit in northern Canada to pull sleds is called a husky.

A husky is _____

Comparison Clues

Comparison clues show that two or more things are alike. Words like *similar*, *as well as*, *both* and *likewise* show that comparison is possible. Look at this example:

Washing windows is a tedious job. *Similarly*, cleaning the oven is very boring.

The word *similarly* shows that there is something the same in the two sentences. Washing windows and cleaning the oven are different, so the similarity must be in the description. We can guess that *tedious* and *boring* must have similar meanings.

Exercise 6: Comparison Clues

Use comparison clues to guess the meaning of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. A soft cloth will soak up a lot of water. Likewise, a sponge is very absorbent.

Absorbent means _____

2. Spot cleaners as well as other bleach products are good at getting out stains.

A spot cleaner is _____

3. A large family seems to have an infinite amount of laundry to do. Similarly, there are always an endless number of dishes to wash.

Infinite means _____

4. Both the vacuum cleaner and the smaller portovac are useful in doing the rugs.

A portovac is _____

5. Pat finds washing dishes relaxing. In the same way, Jane finds folding laundry soothing.

Soothing means _____

Contrast Clues

With contrast clues, you use the opposite of known information to figure out the meaning of an unknown word. Connecting words like *however*, *yet*, *on the other hand*, *instead of*, *but*, *while* and *although* are used to show that meanings are opposite. Look at this example:

Although some old people abhor change, most of them enjoy new things and experiences.

In this sentence the word *although* shows that there is some opposite meaning in the two parts of the sentence. Both parts are about old people and their attitudes to change. The opposite meaning must be between *abhor* and *enjoy*. *Abhor* probably means the opposite of enjoy. So, *abhor* probably means dislike.

Exercise 7: Contrast Clues

Use contrast clues to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. Many of the elderly who go to programs at Centennial House are highly stimulated. On the other hand, old people who stay home all the time are usually bored.

To be stimulated means _____

2. Alzheimer's disease is a common problem in old age, but many old people continue to have healthy minds.

Alzheimer's disease is _____

3. While many people live in rest homes, others still live on their own or with their families.

A rest home is _____

4. Many old people stay home in inclement weather, yet they go out walking on nice days.

Inclement weather is _____

5. Instead of vegetating at home, lots of old people are very active in the community.

To vegetate is _____

Referent Clues

Referent clues is when an unknown word is referred to (mentioned) again using a synonym or explanation of the word. Synonyms often follow words like *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, or *the*. Sometimes, however, there is no obvious clue word. The reader just sees that the meanings are probably similar from the ideas in the sentence. Look at this example:

She yelled out the window at her neighbour's dog. Then she said to her husband, "*That hound* is always waking me up at night with its barking. Tomorrow I'm going to complain."

In this example, *that* comes before the unknown word. This suggests that a hound has already been mentioned. We can guess that *that hound* refers to the dog. So, a *hound* is probably a dog.

Exercise 8: Referent Clues

Use referent clues to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. Yesterday some shysters came to my door. Those dishonest men pretended they were doing a survey and then tried to convince me to buy a magazine.

A shyster is _____

2. My neighbours have a beautifully landscaped yard. It is well arranged with beautiful shrubs, lush looking trees and bright flowers.

Landscaped means _____

3. Junk mail is a huge cause of pollution. These flyers advertising all sorts of things are put through the mail slot and usually not even looked at before they are thrown in the garbage.

Junk mail is _____

4. Cathy gave a shower for her friend Jill. Everyone gave presents to Jill for her baby at the party.

A shower is _____

5. Paul paid his rent late. The delay was caused by Paul's bank. They lost his deposit.

A delay is _____

Exercise 9: Review II

In this exercise, use all 7 types of context clues (knowledge of the world, punctuation, definition, example, comparison, contrast and referent) to guess the meanings of the underlined words. When you've finished, discuss your answers with your tutor.

1. Anne of Green Gables is a famous Canadian children's story.

Anne of Green Gables is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

2. It is the story of a young orphan (both her parents are dead).

An orphan is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

3. She gets sent to live with an elderly couple (Matthew and Marilla) who live on a farm on Prince Edward Island. They want to adopt a boy, but Anne is sent to become part of their family instead.

To adopt is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

4. They want a boy to help with the farm chores such as planting crops, chopping wood and picking apples.

A chore is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

5. However, Anne is a very engaging child. She interests Matthew and he won't send her back.

Engaging means _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

Continued from page 10

6. Marilla and Matthew live in a small town called Avonlea.

Avonlea is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

7. The people of Avonlea expect their children to be very obedient. Likewise, Marilla expects Anne to always do what she is told.

Obedient means _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

8. Although Anne tries to be obedient, she gets into lots of scrapes. These difficult situations often lead to some very funny results.

A scrape is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

9. Anne has very red hair and she's very self-conscious about it. Similarly, she's very embarrassed by her freckles – small brown spots on her nose and cheeks.

Self-conscious means _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

A freckle is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

10. One time Anne tries to dye her hair black. Unfortunately, she changes the colour to green instead.

To dye is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

Continued from page 11

11. Marilla shears off Anne's once beautiful hair, and Anne has to wear a bonnet (hat) to cover up her bald head.

To shear off is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

A bonnet is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

12. By the end of the book, Marilla adores Anne instead of disliking her as she did at the beginning.

To adore is _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

13. Anne has become an exemplary young lady. For instance, she wins a university scholarship, she saves a young child's life, and she has become truly beautiful.

Exemplary means _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

14. Unlike many of her friends who lose their imaginations as they grow up, Anne retains her vivid imagination into adulthood.

To retain means _____

What type of clue did you use? _____

Conclusion

Using context clues can help you to increase your vocabulary. It can also help you to be a better reader and make reading more enjoyable. When you read, try to use context clues as much as possible. Only use a dictionary when a word seems very important and you can't guess the meaning. When you do use a dictionary, using context clues will help you to choose the correct meaning from the choices your dictionary gives you.

Related Learning Centre Handouts:

VS6.10 Word Forms – Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs

VS2.10 Remembering New Words: Improving Your Vocabulary

For Further Practice:

Use an ESL reading text that fits your level.

Answer Key**Exercise 1: Using your Knowledge of the World**

1. Some vegetarians believe that killing animals is wrong. Others are vegetarian because they think meat is bad for people.

A vegetarian is probably **a person that does not eat meat.**

2. The driver swerved to miss the little boy who stepped out into the road.

To swerve is probably **moved out of the way.**

3. The podiatrist told the woman to take the medicine for 5 days and call him if she didn't feel better.

A podiatrist is probably **a doctor.**

4. She picked the irises and arranged them in a vase to put on the coffee table.

An iris is probably **a flower.**

5. Her tea was tepid, so she put it in the microwave.

Tepid probably means **a lukewarm a cool temperature.**

Exercise 2: Punctuation Clues

1. The deluge, a flood of rain, threatened to drown the little town.

A deluge is **a flood of rain.**

2. Sleet (half rain and half snow) can be very difficult to drive in due to poor visibility.

Sleet is **half rain and half snow.**

3. Freezing rain – rain which freezes when it hits the earth – also causes many accidents.

Freezing rain is **rain which freezes when it hits the Earth.**

4. People have gotten lost 10 meters from their homes in blizzards – snowfalls that come down very thickly.

A blizzard is **a snowfall that comes down very thickly.**

Continued from page 14.

5. Another dangerous form of weather is hail (falling balls of ice) which has been known to get so big that it can break a car windshield.

Hail is **falling balls of ice.**

Exercise 3: Definition Clues

1. Breaking even involves making enough money to pay for business costs but no more.

Breaking even is **making enough money to pay for business costs but not more.**

2. Many new businesses go bankrupt, which means they lose everything.

To go bankrupt is **to lose everything.**

3. It takes a special kind of person to give up a regular job's security, i.e. the safety of a weekly paycheque, to go into business on her own.

Security is **the safety of a weekly paycheque.**

4. Small enterprises are usually defined as businesses with fewer than 50 employees and less than \$2 million in annual (yearly) revenues.

An enterprise is **a business with few than so employees and less than \$2 million in yearly revenues.**

6. Entrepreneurs are people who start their own businesses.

An entrepreneur is **a person who starts his or he own business.**

Exercise 4: Example Clues

1. A great part of Canada's economy is based on its natural resources, for instance coal, oil and wood.

A natural resource is **a substance that comes from nature.**

2. Despite the risks, new businesses are expanding everywhere, from natural resources, manufacturing, construction, real estate, retail trade and – especially – service industries such as consulting and tourism.

A service industry is **business that provides a service.**

Continued from page 15.

3. The reporter talked to many auto-industry executives, e.g. company presidents and vice-presidents.

An executive is **one of the people in charge of a company.**

4. The research company said that less-established car makers such as Subaru and Isuzu could be forced out of North America.

Less-established is **newer and not as popular.**

5. The Big Three are designing radical new cars including vehicles that use radar and advanced computers.

Radical is **new and different.**

Exercise 5: Review I

1. The asp, a small poisonous snake, is found in Africa, Europe, and Arabia.

An asp is **a small poisonous snake.**

2. Rodents such as mice, rats and beavers, can often do a lot of damage.

A rodent is **a small mammal.**

3. Gardeners curse the mole (a small rodent that likes to dig in soft soil).

A mole is **a small rodent that likes to dig in soil.**

4. The hare resembles a large rabbit.

A hare is **a large rabbit.**

5. She screamed when she saw the arachnid moving across its web.

An arachnid is **a spider.**

6. Many restaurants serve molluscs – for example, snails, oysters and clams.

A mollusc is **an animal like a snail or clam.**

7. Cetaceans, including whales and dolphins, are thought to have high intelligence.

A cetacean is **a large sea animal, such as a whale.**

Continued from page 16.

8. Many people are afraid of reptiles like lizards, snakes and turtles.

A reptile is **an animal like a lizard, snake or turtle.**

9. The large dog used by the Inuit in northern Canada to pull sleds is called a husky.

A husky is **a large dog used to pull sleds.**

Exercise 6: Comparison Clues

1. A soft cloth will soak up a lot of water. Likewise, a sponge is very absorbent.

Absorbent means **soaks up water.**

2. Spot cleaners as well as other bleach products are good at getting out stains.

A spot cleaner is **something that cleans stains.**

3. A large family seems to have an infinite amount of laundry to do. Similarly, there are always an endless number of dishes to wash.

Infinite means **endless.**

4. Both the vacuum cleaner and the smaller portovac are useful in doing the rugs.

A portovac is **a small vacuum.**

5. Pat finds washing dishes relaxing. In the same way, Jane finds folding laundry soothing.

Soothing means **relaxing.**

Exercise 7: Contrast Clues

1. Many of the elderly who go to programs at Centennial House are highly stimulated. On the other hand, old people who stay home all the time are usually bored.

To be stimulated means **entertained.**

2. Alzheimer's disease is a common problem in old age, but many old people continue to have healthy minds.

Continued from page 17.

Alzheimer's disease is **an unhealthy mind.**

3. While many people live in rest homes, others still live on their own or with their families.

A rest home is **a place for old people to live with people who are not their families.**

4. Many old people stay home in inclement weather, yet they go out walking on nice days.

Inclement weather is **bad weather.**

5. Instead of vegetating at home, lots of old people are very active in the community.

To vegetate is **an inactive person.**

Exercise 8: Referent Clues

1. Yesterday some shysters came to my door. Those dishonest men pretended they were doing a survey and then tried to convince me to buy a magazine.

A shyster is **a dishonest person.**

2. My neighbours have a beautifully landscaped yard. It is well arranged with beautiful shrubs, lush looking trees and bright flowers.

Landscaped means **well arranged land and plants.**

3. Junk mail is a huge cause of pollution. These flyers advertising all sorts of things are put through the mail slot and usually not even looked at before they are thrown in the garbage.

Junk mail is **mail that gets thrown in the garbage before anyone looks at it.**

4. Cathy gave a shower for her friend Jill. Everyone gave presents to Jill for her baby at the party.

A shower is **a party where people give someone presents.**

5. Paul paid his rent late. The delay was caused by Paul's bank. They lost his deposit.

A delay is **doing something late.**

Exercise 9: Review II

1. Anne of Green Gables is a famous Canadian children's story.

Anne of Green Gables is **a famous Canadian children's story.**

What type of clue did you use? **Definition.**

2. It is the story of a young orphan (both her parents are dead).

An orphan is **a person whose parents are dead.**

What type of clue did you use? **Punctuation.**

3. She gets sent to live with an elderly couple (Matthew and Marilla) who live on a farm on Prince Edward Island. They want to adopt a boy, but Anne is sent to become part of their family instead.

To adopt is **to make someone else's child part of your family.**

What type of clue did you use? **Comparison.**

4. They want a boy to help with the farm chores such as planting crops, chopping wood and picking apples.

A chore is **a job that needs to be done.**

What type of clue did you use? **Example.**

5. However, Anne is a very engaging child. She interests Matthew and he won't send her back.

Engaging means **interesting.**

What type of clue did you use? **Referent.**

6. Marilla and Matthew live in a small town called Avonlea.

Avonlea is **a small town.**

What type of clue did you use? **Definition.**

7. The people of Avonlea expect their children to be very obedient. Likewise, Marilla expects Anne to always do what she is told.

Obedient means **to do what you're told.**

Continued from page 19.

What type of clue did you use? **Comparison.**

8. Although Anne tries to be obedient, she gets into lots of scrapes. These difficult situations often lead to some very funny results.

A scrape is **a difficult situation that can lead to funny results.**

What type of clue did you use? **Referent.**

9. Anne has very red hair and she's very self-conscious about it. Similarly, she's very embarrassed by her freckles – small brown spots on her nose and cheeks.

Self-conscious means **embarrassed.**

What type of clue did you use? **Comparison.**

A freckle is **a small brown spot.**

What type of clue did you use? **Punctuation.**

10. One time Anne tries to dye her hair black. Unfortunately, she changes the colour to green instead.

To dye is **to change the color of your hair.**

What type of clue did you use? **Contrast.**

11. Marilla shears off Anne's once beautiful hair, and Anne has to wear a bonnet (hat) to cover up her bald head.

To shear off is **to cut off.**

What type of clue did you use? **Referant.**

A bonnet is **a hat.**

What type of clue did you use? **Punctuation.**

12. By the end of the book, Marilla adores Anne instead of disliking her as she did at the beginning.

To adore is **to like.**

What type of clue did you use? **Contrast.**

Continued from page 20.

13. Anne has become an exemplary young lady. For instance, she wins a university scholarship, she saves a young child's life, and she has become truly beautiful.

Exemplary means **a good role model.**

What type of clue did you use? **Example.**

14. Unlike many of her friends who lose their imaginations as they grow up, Anne retains her vivid imagination into adulthood.

To retain means **to keep.**

What type of clue did you use? **Contrast.**