

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The context is the setting – the sentence and paragraph – in which a word or phrase appears. The meaning of a word or phrase in **context** is its meaning in the particular sentence and paragraph in which it is used. A single English word can have many different meanings. Its precise meaning always depends on the context in which it is used.

Use both **context clues** and **word parts** (part of speech) to help you understand the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases.

Identify the meaning of the following words:

*dromedary*

*garrulous*

*sedentary*

*sycophant*

**Context clues** are words and phrases in a sentence which help you reason out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Oftentimes you can figure out the meanings of new or unfamiliar vocabulary by paying attention to the surrounding language. The chart below gives the types of clues, signals and examples of each clue.

Types of Context Clue	Definition	Signals	Examples
<b>Restatement or Synonym clue</b>	Another word or phrase with the same or a similar meaning is used.	<b>in other word, that is, also known as, sometimes called, or</b>	The <i>dromedary</i> , commonly called a camel, stores fat in its hump.
<b>Antonym or contrast clue</b>	Phrases or words that indicate opposite	<b>but, in contrast, however, instead of, unlike, yet</b>	Unlike his quiet and low key family, Brad is <i>garrulous</i> .
<b>Definition or example clue</b>	Phrases or words that define or explain	<b>is defined as, means, the term, [a term in boldface or italics] set off with commas</b>	<i>Sedentary</i> individuals, people who are not very active, often have diminished health.
<b>General knowledge</b>	The meaning is derived from the experience and background knowledge of the reader; “common sense” and logic.	<b>The information may be something basically familiar to you</b>	Lourdes is always sucking up to the boss, even in front of others. That <i>sycophant</i> just doesn’t care what others think of her behavior.

In addition to context clues are word parts: prefixes, roots and suffixes. These come into the English language from several other languages, but many of the oldest are Greek or Latin in origin.

**Exercise 1: Use context clues to answer vocabulary-in-context questions involving words with multiple definitions. Choose the correct answer.**

1. Every atlas has its own **legend**.
  - a) Mythical story
  - b) Famous person
  - c) Explanation of symbols
2. The planet Mercury is visible to the **naked** eye but is not the easiest planet to spot.
  - a) Unclothed
  - b) Unaided
  - c) Unarmed
3. Above the snow line, any mountain hollow is permanently **occupied** with snow.
  - a) Filled
  - b) Busy
4. The glass factories of Toledo, Ohio, **boomed** after Michael Owens invented a process that turned out bottles by the thousands.
  - a) Exploded
  - b) Resounded
  - c) Prospered
5. Dr. Rene Dubos, a French physician who came to the US in 1924, searched for substances that would **check** the growth of bacteria.
  - a) Restrict
  - b) Investigate
6. The root of the horseradish plant has a **biting** taste.
  - a) Chewing
  - b) Sharp
  - c) Sarcastic
7. The double-bass is shaped like a viola and has a **deep**, rich tone.
  - a) Valuable
  - b) Resonant
  - c) Abundant
8. A public library is a resource the entire community can **draw on**.
  - a) Illustrate
  - b) Approach
  - c) Utilize
9. A business **concerns** with two or more owners is referred to as a partnership.
  - a) Firm
  - b) Worry
10. Table salt is **finer** than rock salt.
  - a) Made up of smaller particles
  - b) Of better quality
  - c) Freer of impurities



## TECHNIQUES TO GUESS MEANING FROM CONTEXT

You do not need to look up the meanings of all new words in a dictionary when you encounter new vocabulary. You can often guess the meanings of many words from the context.

### What is the context?

Suppose someone were to ask you the meaning of “*bear*”. You wouldn’t be able to tell him because “*bear*”, as presented to you, has no context. But if he were to say “*polar bear*”, you would immediately know he is talking about animal. If, on the other hand, he were to say, “*Please stop that smoking – I can’t bear it*”, you would know that in the context “*bear*” means *endure* or *stand*.

### Why is the context important?

An important point for those of us who want to enlarge our vocabularies is this: the context can give us the meaning not only of familiar words like “*bear*”, but also of strange words.

Suppose, for example, you were asked for the meaning of “*valiant*”. You might not know it, unless, of course, you already have a fine vocabulary. But if you were to meet “*valiant*” in the following context, you would have a very good chance of discovering its meanings:

*“Cowards die many times before their deaths*

*The valiant never taste of death but once”.*

*(William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar)*

From the above context you can tell the author is contrasting two ideas “*cowards*” and “*the valiant*”. Therefore, “*the valiant*” means the opposite of “*cowards*”, namely “*brave men*”. “*Valiant*” means “*brave*”.

## TECHNIQUE 1: USING THE VERB “TO BE”

The object following the verb “to be” is frequently used to identify the subject.

1. A *salmon* is a fish.
2. *Hypoxia* is an illness caused by a deficiency of oxygen in the tissues of the body.
3. The *atom* is the smallest part of a chemical element that can exist and still have the properties on the element.
4. A *meteorite* is a falling star that reaches the Earth without burning up.
5. A *drone* is a male bee.

## TECHNIQUE 2: USING APPOSITIVES

A noun or noun group which follows a noun and is set off by commas is an appositive. It identifies the noun it follows.

1. *Mercury*, the silver-colored metal used in the thermometers, is usually in a liquid form.
2. *Pacemakers*, small electrical devices that stimulate the heart muscle, have saved many lives.
3. *Morse code*, a system of telegraphic signals composed of dots and dashes, was invented by Samuel F.B. Morse.
4. *Studying supernovas*, the catastrophic explosions of dying stars, may give answers to questions of modern cosmology.
5. Many young couples likes to spend their honey moon in a *resort area*, a beautiful area.

## TECHNIQUE 3: USING “OR”

A word is sometimes identified by a synonym following the word “or”.

1. The *husky*, or sled dog, of the North is hardy breed.
2. *Altitude*, or the height above sea level, is a factor that determines climate.
3. In some American Indian tribes, the *squaw*, or woman, was the owner of all property.
4. The central nervous system of grasshoppers, fruit flies, and other insects includes both the brain and a chain of simpler segmental *ganglia*, or groups of nerve cells.
5. *Claustrophobia*, or the fear of being enclosed, is more common than many people realize.

## TECHNIQUE 4: USING PUNCTUATION

Punctuation marks are sometimes used to set off a word which is being used to identify another word. Some of the common punctuation marks are:

commas	,	brackets	[]
dashes	-	single quotation marks	' '
parentheses	()	double quotation marks	“ ”

1. In laser printing, the greater the number of *dpi* (dots per inch), the higher the quality of the image produced.
2. *Intensity* – loudness of softness – depends on the extent or amplitude of vibrations.
3. A children’s art lesson produced a room full of *unique* pictures, each one completely different from the others.
4. If you are *ectomorphic* (the slender type), you are likely to be good in such sports as track, tennis, and basketball.
5. *Oral history* – the use of the tape recorder to capture memories of the past in private interviews – has become increasingly popular among professional historians.
6. In many western societies, people highly value *individualism* – the differences among people, but most Asian societies value *discipline*, self-control.
7. Modern medicine and new methods of food production allow adults to live longer and babies to *survive*, not die soon after birth.
8. Students often do badly on exams in the *hot months* of the year (March and April).

## TECHNIQUE 5: USING EXAMPLES

A word is sometimes identified by examples. These terms often include examples:

*as*      *like*      *such as*      *for example*      *for instance*

1. *Creatures such as* the camel and penguin are so highly specialized that they can only live in certain areas of the world.
2. Camping *paraphernalia as* tents, sleeping bags, and cooking equipment can range from very simple to quite complex.
3. Much can be done to halt the process of *desertification*. *For example*, an asphalt like petroleum can be sprayed onto sand dunes, and seeds of trees and shrubs can then be planted. The oil stabilizers the sand and retains moisture, allowing vegetation to become established.

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4. In Japan, people use *landmarks* in their directions. **For example**, the Japanese will say, “To straight down to the corner. Turn left at the big hotel and go past the fruit market. The post office is across from the bus stop.”

## TECHNIQUE 6: USING CLAUSES

Adjective clauses sometimes identify words. They are introduced by the words:

**that**            **where**            **who**            **when**            **which**            **whom**

1. Recent tests show that silver *sulfadiazine*, **which** is a compound used in the treatment of burns, can cure the most serious types of African sleeping sickness.
2. The *kiva*, **where** Pueblo Indians hold their secret ceremonies, is entered by an opening in the roof.
3. *Melody*, **which** is the succession of sounds, takes on new interest when fit into a rhythmic pattern.
4. *Non-lethal* techniques, those that do not kill coyotes, are being developed to protect sheep and other livestock.

## TECHNIQUE 7: CONTEXT WITH CONTRARY WORDS

Sometimes another word or words in another sentence or sentence part has the opposite meaning from a new vocabulary item.

**But**            **In contrast**            **However**            **Unlike**

1. Don't *digress*. Stick to the topic.
2. Failure is common in regular classes, **but** in honors classes it's *rarity*.
3. I tried reading Lou's notes but I found them *illegible*. **However**, your notes were easy to read.
4. I do not *shrink* from this responsibility; I welcome it.
5. Dad is an experienced driver, **but** Mother is a *novice*; she began taking lessons just last month.
6. When we got to the beach, my sister and I were *impatient* to get into the water, **but** Dad was not in a hurry.
7. The dealer is giving up his newsstand because the profit is too small. He hopes to go into a more *lucrative* business.
8. When you lead a discussion, it is unfair to call only on your friends. To be *equitable*, you should call on everyone who raises his hand.
9. Parking on our side of the street is *prohibited* on weekdays between 4pm and 7pm **but** permitted at all other times.

## TECHNIQUE 8: CONTEXT WITH SIMILAR WORDS

Sometimes you may discover the meaning of a new word or expression from a similar word or expression in the context.

1. The Empire State **building**, which has more than a hundred stories, is the world's tallest *edifice*.
2. I **understand** the first problem, but the second is beyond my *comprehension*.
3. Jane's little brother has discovered the *cache* where she keeps her toys. She has to find another **hiding place**.
4. Why are you so *timorous*? I tell you there is nothing to **be afraid of**.
5. Some children who are *reserved* with strangers are not at all **uncommunicative** with friends.
6. I thought the uniforms were of the 1914-1918 **period**, but I was told they belong to an earlier *era*.
7. Why should I *retract* my statement? It is a perfectly true remark, and I see no reason to **withdraw** it.
8. Students attending private schools pay *tuition*. In the public schools, however, there is no **charge for instruction**.

## TECHNIQUE 9: USING REFERENTS

Referents are words that refer back or forward to other words in the sentences or paragraph.

**this/that**

**these/those**

**such/such a (an)**

**the**

1. The groom struggled with his *tuxedo*. He wondered why he had to wear **these** kinds of clothes to get married.
2. At least 50 weed species fight off competition by emitting *toxins* from their roots, leaves, or seeds. **These** poisons do their work in a dozen ways such as inhibiting germination of seeds and destroying photosynthesis abilities.
3. Emma was told to put the sheets in the *hamper*, but she found **the** basket too full of soiled clothes to fit the sheets in.