Vocabulary

Context Clues

No matter what course or program you are taking, you will have new vocabulary and terminology to learn. While many people turn quickly to their dictionaries for the meanings of new words, this is not always a necessary strategy. Instead, it can be more meaningful to try to reason out the meaning of the word, based on what we already know about it.

When authors write, they often give **context clues** to readers to suggest the meanings of new or difficult words. Context clues usually give you a sense of a word's meaning, so you can continue reading without referring to a dictionary. There are five main types of context clues that may be embedded in sentences.

1. **Definitions or Restatements**
   - The author directly defines the new word within the sentence. This strategy is commonly used in textbook material.
   - e.g. "When people contravene – break or violate – a law in Canada, they can expect to face legal consequences."
   - *Explanation:* "Break or violate" is the definition of the word "contravene".
2. **Synonyms**
   - The author uses a word or phrase with a similar meaning to suggest the meaning of the new word.
   - e.g. "Following his death by accidental drug overdose, actor Heath Ledger posthumously received an Oscar for best supporting actor for his portrayal of The Joker in The Dark Knight."
   - *Explanation:* "Following his death" has a similar meaning to the word "posthumously."
3. **Antonyms**
   - The author uses a word or phrase with an opposite meaning to suggest the meaning of the new word.
   - e.g. "I really don't appreciate your duplicity. I expect you to give me an honest response from now on."
   - *Explanation:* "Honest response" has the opposite meaning of "duplicity" since the speaker expects a different behaviour from the other person from that point on.
4. **Examples**
   - The author provides examples or illustrations of the new word to suggest its meaning.
   - e.g. "Bats, owls, raccoons, and crickets are chiefly nocturnal creatures."
   - *Explanation:* "Bats, owls, raccoons, and crickets" are examples of "nocturnal creatures" (creatures of the night).
5. **General Inference**
   - The author provides enough information in a sentence that the word's meaning can be inferred.

- e.g. "It would be an egregious mistake to wear a dirty t-shirt and shabby blue jeans to a funeral."
- *Explanation:* Although "egregious" is not specifically defined, most people would infer that it is inappropriate or offensive to wear worn out clothing at a funeral.

Structural Analysis

Structural analysis is the process of breaking words down into their basic parts to determine word meaning. Structural analysis is a powerful vocabulary tool since knowledge of a few word parts can give you clues to the meanings of a large number of words. Although the meaning suggested by the word parts may not be exact, this process can often help you understand the word well enough that you can continue reading without significant interruption.

When using structural analysis, the reader breaks words down into their basic parts:

- **Prefixes** – word parts located at the beginning of a word to change meaning
- **Roots** – the basic meaningful part of a word
- **Suffixes** – word parts attached to the end of a word; suffixes often alter the part of speech of the word

For example, the word bicyclist can be broken down as follows:

- bi – prefix meaning two
- cycle – root meaning wheel
- ist – a noun suffix meaning 'a person who'

Therefore, structural analysis suggests that a bicyclist is a person on two wheels – a meaning which is close to the word's formal definition.

Consider the word part –cide. Though it cannot stand as a word by itself, it does have meaning: *to kill*. Think about the many words in our language that include the word part –cide. Knowing this one word part gives us knowledge about many words.

Infixes

In English, there are really only suffixes and prefixes (part of a larger class called affixes). Other languages have things called infixes. They go *in* the middles of the word. *Piano*, *pianisimo*, *pianisisimo,* etc.

English only has one infix:

- "abso-friggin-lutely"
- "get it to-freaking-gether"

To further develop this skill, refer to the convenient reference sheet [Structural Analysis: Common Word Parts (Links to an external site.)](), for a list of some common prefixes, roots, and suffixes along with their meanings and examples of words that use them.