



Vocabulary – Using Context

Introduction

Context clues give students an idea, or hint, of what an unfamiliar word might mean. Such clues are found in both the text and/or illustrations surrounding the unknown word. Contexts vary in their helpfulness of how much information they provide a reader. Sometimes the context provides a direct explanation of the meaning of a new word. Sometimes the context provides some information about a new word, but not enough for the student to be certain of its meaning. Finally, sometimes the context can actually lead to a misunderstanding, referred to as a “misdirective” (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002). Students can benefit from explicit instruction in a strategy for finding and using context clues.

The five different types of context clues that can be used to infer a word’s meaning are:

- definition - the author explains the meaning of the word in the sentence or selection.
- synonym - the author uses a word similar in meaning.
- antonym - the author uses a word nearly opposite in meaning.
- example - the author provides one or more example words or ideas.
- general - the author provides several words or statements that give clues to the word’s meaning.

The following teaching steps are adapted from Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. & Vaughn, S. (2007). *Effective instruction for middle school students with reading difficulties: The reading teacher’s sourcebook*. University of Texas:Austin.

Purpose

Students will:

- learn to find and interpret context clues to help figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- be able to recognise and interpret five types of context clues: definition, synonym, antonym, example, and general.

Materials

- Chart, whiteboard or interactive white board (IWB)
- Types of Context Clues chart.
- Transparency of sample sentences.
- Student copies of sentences.
- Context Clue Strategy chart.
- Using Context Clues chart.

Teaching steps

1. State objective/purpose

Today I am going to teach you how to find clues in the words and phrases that come before and after a particular word. These clues are called context clues because they are found in the context, the words and phrases, around the unfamiliar word. Learning to recognise and analyse context clues will help you work out the meaning of words on your own.

2. Model and teach to the whole class

- Show the *Types of Context Clues* chart which lists the different types of clues.

Types of Context Clues

Type of context clue	What to look for	Signal words	Sample sentence
Definition	A definition in the sentence	<i>Is, are, is called, means, or</i> Signal punctuation: Set off by commas	Physical activity is any bodily movement produced by muscles that uses energy. You can exercise in your leisure time , or your <i>free time</i> , to stay physically active.
Synonym	A word with a similar meaning to the unknown word	<i>Also, as, like, same, similarly, too</i>	Many people do not play sport but do activities such as skateboarding and dancing. You can also be physically active bike riding with friends.
Antonym	A word or phrase with the opposite meaning of the unknown word	<i>But, however, in contrast, on the other hand, though, unlike</i>	Many people like to do one physical activity, <i>but</i> doing different activities provides variety .
Example	Several examples in a list	<i>Such as, for example, for instance, like, including</i>	Vigorous activities <i>such as</i> football, netball, soccer, running and swimming can improve your fitness.
General	General or inexact clues		More than two hours

Adapted from Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. & Vaughn, S. (2007)

- Display the entire chart but focus on the *Definition* section. Students can see the all the context clues, but also focus on the type of context clue being taught.
- Use the chart to explain definition context clue.

*A definition clue provides the meaning of the word right in the sentence. If you see any of the signal words—**is, are, is called, or means**—be on the lookout for a definition. You can also look for signal punctuation to help to find definition clues. If you see the signal word **or** and a phrase set apart by commas, be on the lookout for a definition.*

- Place sample sentences on the board/overhead/IWB and use Think Aloud to model how to use definition as a context clue.

Sample Sentences Using Definition Context Clues.

Physical activity is any bodily movement produced by muscles that uses energy.

You can exercise in your **leisure time**, and make good use of your *free time*, to stay physically active.

I do not know what leisure time is. Circle the words “leisure time”.

First I am going to reread the sentence. Reread the sentence.

*I see the signal word **or**, and I also see two commas. Underline the word “or” and circle the two commas.*

I am going to read the phrase between the two commas.

Read the phrase.

Leisure time must be free time. If I insert my definition into the sentence it would read: “You can exercise in your free time to stay physically active.” That makes sense.

In both of these sentences, the definition was right in the sentence. This kind of context clue is called a definition context clue.

3. Provide Guided Practice with whole class/small groups/partners

- Place 4–6 more sentences on the board/overhead/IWB. These sentences can easily be taken directly from your students’ texts, or write sentences using any content that is relevant to students’ curriculum. Underline the target word in each sentence.
- Review the context clue strategy steps.

Context Clue Strategy

1. Reread the sentence that contains the unknown word. Be on the lookout for signal words or punctuation.
2. Reread the sentences before and after the sentence that contains the unknown word.
3. Based on the clues, try to figure out the meaning of the word.
4. Insert your meaning in the original sentence to see whether it makes sense.

- Lead the students through finding the meaning of the underlined word in the first sentence by looking for definition context clues.
- Allow partners 3 to 4 minutes to find the meaning of the underlined word in the second sentence by looking for definition context clues. Circulate around the room and be available for guidance. After 3 to 4 minutes, work through the sentence on the overhead with the class. Follow the same procedure for the other sentences.

4. Provide Independent Practice

- Provide partners with a short passage that you create or take directly from a text. Tell students that they are going to practice using definition context clues to find the meaning of the underlined words.
- Give students a *Using Context Clues* chart to guide their work.
- Monitor student progress and provide support where necessary.

5. Generalisation

- Discuss with students why and when they could use this strategy to work out unknown words in this and other KLAs.

6. Review and follow up

- Use the same procedure to teach the use of the other context clues.
- Ensure students have the opportunity to practise previously learned context clues.
- Once context clues have been introduced teach students how to identify which clue to use.

References

Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G. & Kucan, L.K. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*, Guilford Press: New York.

Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. & Vaughn, S. (2007). *Effective instruction for middle school students with reading difficulties: The reading teacher's sourcebook*. University of Texas: Austin.

Appendix 1 – Types of Context Clues

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