

Context Clues (Example)

A good way to make sense of an unfamiliar word is to look at the **context**: the other words in the sentence and other sentences in the paragraph that might give clues to the meaning of the word. There are a number of ways you can use context clues to help you determine a word's meaning.

Sometimes a sentence will provide an **example** that will help you understand the meaning of the word. Examples are often signaled by words or phrases such as

like	for instance	this	such as	especially
these	for example	other	includes	

Here's How Using Examples in Context to Figure Out an Unfamiliar Word

The *cacophony* of band practice sounded like a cross between the wheezing of a broken bagpipe and the clanging of falling pots and pans.

1. Identify the unfamiliar word.

(I'm not sure what the word *cacophony* means.)

2. Read to see if there is a word that signals that an example may follow.

(I see the words *sounded like*. Those words probably lead to an example.)

3. Find the example or examples.

(The words *sounded like* are followed by two examples: a broken bagpipe and clanging pots and pans. These sounds must be examples of *cacophony*.)

4. Ask yourself how the example or examples relate to the unfamiliar word.

(The examples are both unpleasant noises.)

5. Use this information to figure out what the word means.

(Since the examples are unpleasant noises, *cacophony* must mean "an unpleasant noise.")

6. Now, look the unfamiliar word up in the dictionary and jot the word and definition down in your personal word list.

cacophony: harsh, unpleasant sound

Context Clues (Comparison or Contrast)

A good way to make sense of an unfamiliar word is to look at the **context**: the other words in the sentence and other sentences in the paragraph that might give clues to the meaning of the word. There are a number of ways you can use context clues to help you determine a word's meaning.

Sometimes a sentence will provide a **comparison** or a **contrast** that will help you understand the meaning of the word. Certain words or phrases signal comparison or contrast.

Some Comparison Signals

like	similar to
as	also
related	resembling

Some Contrast Signals

but	although
unlike	however
rather than	on the other hand

Here's How Using Comparison or Contrast to Figure Out an Unfamiliar Word

I've tried to adopt *salubrious* habits similar to those of athletes in training, but I still crave unhealthy junk food.

1. Identify the unfamiliar word.

(I'm not sure what the word *salubrious* means.)

2. Read to see if there is a word or phrase that signals that a comparison or a contrast may follow.

(I see the words *similar to* and *but*. *Similar to* could signal a comparison; *but* could signal a contrast.)

3. Identify the comparison or contrast.

(The sentence compares *salubrious* habits with habits of athletes, while it contrasts the habits the writer wants to have with a craving for unhealthy food.)

4. Use this information to figure out what the unfamiliar word means.

(Since the comparison is with athletes who must be healthy to succeed, and the contrast is with unhealthy food, I think *salubrious* means "healthy.")

5. Find word in the dictionary and record it in your personal word list.

salubrious: favorable to health or well-being

6. A sentence may contain only comparison or only contrast as a context clue. You can still use the strategy above to find the meaning.

Context Clues (Restatement)

A good way to make sense of an unfamiliar word is to look at the **context**: the other words in the sentence and other sentences in the paragraph that might give clues to the meaning of the word. There are a number of ways you can use context clues to help you determine a word's meaning.

Sometimes a writer will **restate** the meaning of a difficult word within a sentence, defining it for you. Restatements or definitions are often signaled by words or phrases such as

or	which is	that is
also called	also known as	in other words

Here's How Using Restatement in Context to Figure Out an Unfamiliar Word

The war hero was asked to serve as *plenipotentiary*, or ambassador, to the newly formed government.

1. Identify the unfamiliar word.

(I'm not sure what the word *plenipotentiary* means.)

2. Read to see if there is a word that signals that a restatement may follow.

(I see the word *or*. What follows may include a restatement or definition.)

3. Find the restated information.

(The word *or* is followed by the word *ambassador*.)

4. Use this information to figure out what the unfamiliar word means.

(Because the word *plenipotentiary* is followed by the words *or ambassador*, I think that *plenipotentiary* means "ambassador.")

5. Now, look the unfamiliar word up in the dictionary and jot the word and definition down in your personal word list.

plenipotentiary: a diplomatic agent, such as an ambassador, fully authorized to represent his or her government

Roots

Many English words, especially long ones, can be broken into smaller parts. A **root** is the core of a word, or the part that contains the most important element of the word's meaning.

Many words in English have their roots in other languages, particularly Greek and Latin. Knowing the meaning of Greek and Latin roots can help you to understand unfamiliar words.

Here's How Using Word Roots to Determine Meaning

1. When you first encounter an unfamiliar word, try to determine the word's root.

agrarian

(The root might be *agr-* or *-arian*. Since *-arian* appears at the end of so many words, it is probably not the root. The root must be *agr-*.)

2. If you recognize the root from a word you do know, make an educated guess about the word's meaning.

(I know that *agriculture* is the practice of farming, so maybe *agrarian* also has something to do with farming.)

3. Look up the word's definition in the dictionary and compare it with your guess.

agrarian *adj.* Relating to the cultivation of land and rural matters

(*Agrarian* does have to do with farming; my guess was correct.)

4. Read the word's etymology at the end of the dictionary entry.

[From Latin *agrarius*, from *ager*, *agr-*, field; also Greek *agros*, field.]

(Basically, *agr-* has to do with fields or farms.)

5. Try to think of other words with the same root. (Hint: for words without prefixes, try looking at nearby words in the dictionary.)

agriculture, agronomy, agribusiness, agricide

Prefixes

A **prefix** is a word part attached to the beginning of a base word or root. The meaning of a prefix combines with the meaning of the base word or root. For example, the prefix *in-* often means “not,” as in *indirect*, which means “not direct.”

Like roots, many prefixes come from Latin or Greek. One way to figure out the meaning of new words is to consider the meaning of their prefixes. Consider how the meaning of the prefixes relates to the meaning of the English words in the chart below. Can you think of other words with these prefixes?

Prefix	Meaning	Words
Negation		
<i>il-</i>	not	illegal, illiterate, illegible
<i>in-</i>	not	inaccurate, inactive, inalienable
<i>irr-</i>	not	irrational, irreconcilable, irreverent
<i>ne-</i>	not	nefarious, never
Location		
<i>em-</i>	in, into	embalm, embed, embezzle, embrace
<i>para-</i>	beside	paraphrase, paralegal, parallel
<i>retro-</i>	back	retrograde, retroactive, retrogress
<i>tele-</i>	distant	television, telephone, telegram, telekinesis
Amount or Extent		
<i>is-</i>	equal	isometric, isosceles, isotope
<i>olig-</i>	few	oligarchy, oligopoly
<i>pene-</i>	almost	peninsula, penultimate
<i>super-</i>	more than	superhuman, supernatural, superfluous
Miscellaneous Prefixes		
<i>ambi-</i>	both, around	ambidextrous, ambiguous, ambiance
<i>auto-</i>	self	autobiography, autocratic, automobile
<i>hetero-</i>	different	heteronym, heterogeneous, heterosexual
<i>meta-</i>	change	metamorphosis, metaphor, metabolism

Suffixes

A **suffix** is a word part attached to the end of a base word or root. The meaning of a suffix combines with the meaning of the base word or root. For example, the suffix *-ive* means “inclined to,” as in *active* (“inclined to act”). Many suffixes, when added to a base word or root, change its meaning. They can also be used to change a word’s part of speech.

One way to figure out the meaning of new words is to consider the meaning of their suffixes. How does the meaning of the suffixes relate to the meaning of the words in this chart? Can you think of other words with these suffixes?

Type of Suffix	Meaning	English Words
Noun		
<i>-dom</i>	state or quality of	fiefdom, boredom, freedom
<i>-ia</i>	things belonging or related to	millennia, militia, criteria
<i>-ic</i>	one relating to or characterized by	critic, medic
<i>-ity</i>	state or quality of	locality, equity, amity, parity
Adjective		
<i>-istic</i>	of, relating to, or characterized by	antagonistic, simplistic
<i>-ative</i>	of, relating to, or associated with	contemplative, talkative
<i>-ist</i>	one who promotes a particular theory or school or thought	racist, purist, idealist
<i>-ile</i>	of, relating to, or capable of	versatile, mobile
Verb		
<i>-ize</i>	to make or do	ravage, pillage, rummage
<i>-ate</i>	to make or do	perforate, dilate
<i>-ish</i>	to make or do	flourish, nourish, polish
Adverb		
<i>-ly</i>	in what way	ridiculously, fashionably
<i>-ward</i>	in the direction of	backward, homeward
<i>-wise</i>	showing how	clockwise, lengthwise

Word Families

Words that contain the same root are called **word families**. Whether that shared root is from Greek, Latin, or some other language, the words in the family have similar meanings. Knowing one word's **etymology**—that is, its history and origin—can help you determine its meaning; it can also lead you to the meanings of other words in the family.

For example, look at the word *malevolent*, which comes from Latin roots:

male + volent

mal = Latin for “bad” + **vol** = Latin for “wish”

So, at its most basic, *malevolent* means “bad wishing.” If you look the word up in the dictionary, you’ll find that the word means “having or exhibiting ill will; wishing harm to others.”

This chart shows some common Greek and Latin roots and their meanings. Look in the dictionary to find the definitions and etymologies of the English words in the chart.

Greek Root	Meaning	English Words
<i>chron</i>	time	anachronism, <u>chron</u> ology, syn <u>chron</u> ize
<i>cosm</i>	universe	<u>cosm</u> ic, <u>cosm</u> os, micro <u>cosm</u>
<i>phon</i>	sound	cac <u>ophon</u> y, eup <u>hony</u> , tele <u>phon</u> e
<i>pod</i>	foot	chiro <u>pod</u> ist, <u>pod</u> iatrist, tri <u>pod</u>
<i>scope</i>	see	hor <u>scope</u> , micro <u>scope</u> , peri <u>scope</u>
Latin Root		
<i>ced, ceed, cede</i>	yield, surrender, go	con <u>cede</u> , pre <u>ced</u> ent, pro <u>ceed</u>
<i>cred</i>	believe	<u>cre</u> do, <u>cred</u> it, in <u>cred</u> ulity
<i>magna</i>	great	<u>magna</u> te, <u>magna</u> ificent, <u>magna</u> fy
<i>mal</i>	bad, abnormal	<u>mal</u> ady, <u>mal</u> content, <u>mal</u> ediction
<i>vol</i>	wish	bene <u>vol</u> ent, male <u>vol</u> ent, <u>vol</u> unteer

Words with Multiple Meanings

Because language constantly changes to meet the needs of those who use it, many words in English have more than one meaning. These **multiple meanings** may lead to confusion, causing readers to misinterpret a writer's message.

Here's How Selecting the Appropriate Meaning of a Word

1. When you are not sure which definition of a word applies in a particular sentence, look for clues in the surrounding context.

The history teacher cautioned his students to look out for *bias* in the materials they use for their final projects.

(My sewing instructor told us to cut our fabric on the *bias* for our final project, but I'm not sure fabric is applicable in this situation.)

2. If the meaning you know does not make sense in the context of the sentence and you don't have enough clues to help you figure out the meaning, look up the word in a dictionary. Look for the definition that makes sense in the sentence.

(I see that *bias* does not only relate to fabric going diagonally across the grain. It can also mean a prejudice that interferes with impartial judgment.)

3. Decide which dictionary definition works best in the sentence you are examining.

(The teacher probably wants to make sure his students use impartial and objective sources for their information.)