

Vocabulary Skills

A dictionary is the best way to get the meaning of new words, but a careful reader can sometimes figure out definitions without turning to one, by using context clues and word parts.

Context Clues

Context clues are parts of sentences that can help a reader understand strange words. There are several types of context clues, including:

- **Definition Clues:** authors will sometimes directly define a newly introduced word. Definitions sometimes follow the word, either in parentheses or commas, or after a dash.

Ex: The doctor was afraid it might have been a lymphoma, a type of cancer, but it wasn't.

- **Example Clues:** an author may give examples to help clarify the meaning of a word.

Ex: Following writing style guides, such as APA or MLA, can be frustrating.

- **Contrast Clues:** a contrasting word with the opposite meaning of a strange word can help the reader to understand the meaning of it.

Ex: The girl was acting histrionically, but her mother responded calmly.

- **Logical Clues:** sometimes the overall meaning of a sentence can help the reader to understand a new word.

Ex: The lawyer was a fast-talker and a master of specious arguments. (The lawyer used misleading arguments to win cases.)

Word Parts

Many English words are made of smaller parts called roots, prefixes, and suffixes. A root word carries the main meaning of a larger word. A prefix is attached to the front of the root and a suffix is attached to the end.

Ex: If you know that “un” is a prefix that means “not,” and “able” can be a suffix that means “possible,” then you can figure out that “unsustainable” means “not possible to sustain.”

Look carefully at words to see if you can spot similar patterns of word parts.

Adapted from McWhorter, Kathleen T. Reading Across the Disciplines. 2nd Ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.