

Knowledge Article

Reading Strategies

One of the easiest and most enjoyable ways to increase your vocabulary is through frequent and observant reading. Chances are—whether you read a lot or a little—you will not know the exact meaning of every word you read. Instead of being bothered by these unknown words, you can look at them as opportunities to increase your vocabulary.

Confronting Unknown Words

There are three basic ways to deal with unfamiliar words.

Skip It

The "skip it" method is probably the easiest way to deal with words you do not know; although it does not actually help you build your vocabulary. You may not need to know a word's meaning to understand a passage. If you can put your finger over a word and still understand the meaning of the sentence or paragraph, simply skip it. It's acceptable to skip over an unknown word once in a while. This technique should not be employed too often, though. Your comprehension is bound to be affected if there are too many holes in your reading.

Look It Up

The second approach is to turn to a reference book and look up the unfamiliar word. While this is a perfectly good strategy, it is also time-consuming and can disrupt your reading. It's also more appropriate for certain types of reading than others. For example, in textbooks, important words are usually bolded to signify that they are in the glossary. If you've forgotten what they mean, you can simply turn to the back of the book for a quick refresher.

However, when reading a magazine article for information or a novel for pleasure people rarely stop in the middle to look up a word.

Use Context Clues

The third method is to try to determine the word's meaning based on the context in which it occurs. When you read an unknown word, study the words that surround it. Look for clues within the sentence or paragraph that might reveal the meaning. That allows you to figure out the meaning without stopping to look up the word. Authors, especially textbook authors, are often aware of words that students might not know. These writers deliberately build explanations of new terms into their writing. These explanations are called context clues. By recognizing the techniques used to provide

context clues, you'll be able to make sound guesses about what the author means when you see terms you don't know.

The chart below describes different types of context clues.

Context Clues	
Technique	Explanation
synonym or comparison	<p>The author combines the unfamiliar word with other words or phrases of similar meaning:</p> <p>The <i>arduous</i>, exhausting, and seemingly endless research project drained Joe's enthusiasm for science.</p> <p>From the accompanying adjectives <i>exhausting</i> and <i>seemingly endless</i>, the reader could conclude that <i>arduous</i> means something difficult that tests a person's endurance.</p> <p>Some key words that will help you recognize a synonym or a comparison context clue are <i>like</i>, <i>same as</i>, <i>just as</i>, <i>as does</i>, <i>both</i>, <i>as well as</i>, <i>similar</i>, and <i>similarly</i>.</p>
definition	<p>The author directly defines the word:</p> <p>Benjamin Franklin was the <i>paragon</i>—that is, the perfect example—of the inventive mind.</p> <p>Some key words to look for in this context clue are words such as <i>is</i>, <i>is called</i>, or <i>means something else</i>, or the past tense of these terms. Also look out for punctuation marks such as hyphens or parentheses.</p>
example	<p>The author illustrates the term by citing a model or instance:</p> <p>1. My little brother is very <i>precocious</i>. He could read the newspaper at age three and could</p>

	<p>recite the names of all of the presidents by the time he was four. This year in kindergarten, he has been helping his classmates learn about dinosaurs.</p> <p>Based on the context clues, the brother must be both extremely intelligent and mature for his young age. <i>Precocious</i> means showing unusually early development, especially in mental ability.</p> <p>2. The salary offer was less than Mary expected, but she was excited by the job <i>perquisites</i> such as five weeks of vacation, full medical care, membership to a health club, and paid college tuition.</p> <p>The list of examples here are all benefits that accompany this job. <i>Perquisite</i> means extra compensation for employment in addition to what a person is paid. You might also notice that the term resembles the word <i>perk</i>, a shortened version of the word that is more commonly used to refer to job benefits.</p>
contrast	<p>The author provides words that are the opposite of the unfamiliar term:</p> <p>Unlike his friendly and outgoing brother, John is <i>aloof</i> when he first meets people.</p> <p>The opening word <i>unlike</i> alerts the reader to the idea that <i>aloof</i> must mean the opposite of friendly or outgoing. The dictionary defines it as distant or keeping to oneself.</p> <p>Other key words to look for are <i>in contrast to</i>, <i>however</i>, <i>but</i>, <i>on the other hand</i>, and <i>as opposed to</i>.</p>
experience	<p>The author relies on the general experiences of the reader to reveal the sense of the word:</p>

	<p>The ecologists studying the impact of the landfill on the nearby stream had to contend with the <i>putrid</i> remains of the mounds of food and plants that existed on the spot.</p> <p>We have all seen what happens to food left in the refrigerator for too long or have come across garbage lying in a gutter. So we can imagine what happens to the food and plants if they are piled up over a long period of time. They rot and develop foul odors. <i>Putrid</i> means a state of decay or the odor associated with decomposition.</p>
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If none of the above techniques appear to be in use, there's still another way to use context to find the meaning of an unknown word. Replace the word with a blank as you read it in the sentence. Often, you can still comprehend the meaning of the sentence from the context clues. You can then fill in the blank with a word that reasonably completes the thought. That word will probably be a good synonym for the word you did not know. This practice allows you to understand the author's intent without slowing down your reading.

Substitute a blank for the unfamiliar word *largesse* in the sentence below. Then fill in that blank with a word or phrase that would make sense in the context of the remainder of the sentence.

His *largesse* provided the university with the funds to build a new gymnasium and offer three scholarships to deserving students.

His _____ provided the university with the funds to build a new gymnasium and offer three scholarships to deserving students.

You probably came up with words like *gift*, *generosity*, or *donation*, which are all correct. Considering the abundance in which the university could utilize that gift, you might want to add an adjective such as *great* to your noun. *Largesse* implies something that is an extraordinarily large gift.

If you find that none of the context clue strategies explain the word well enough, you should certainly refer to a dictionary.