Using Context Clues to Improve Reading Skills and Vocabulary

You’ve probably heard that learning how to use context clues will greatly increase your reading ability. Each time you run across a word you don’t know and can’t figure out, you run the risk of not being able to understand the whole sentence. Sometimes this is no big deal, but other times it means you lose your ability to understand a whole paragraph.

Through using context clues well, you can also increase your vocabulary which positively impacts your writing and speaking skills as well as your reading skills. Thus, while we work on improving your use of context clues, we’ll also be adding some words to your vocabularies. First, however, you need to fully understand how the clues work.

The easiest context clue to recognize and use is a DEFINITION / RESTATEMENT clue. If the writer thinks the reader won’t know a word he is using, he may provide a definition. Here’s an example:

Our teacher received a small stipend, or payment, for giving travel lectures to local clubs.

In such cases the definition is usually not lengthy (which means it may not be as specific as what you would find in a dictionary), but it gives you enough information to understand the sentence such as in the example above. To fully understand when to use the word “stipend” (since it doesn’t refer to every kind of payment), you would check the dictionary where you would find this definition: “a payment made from an allotment of money set aside for a particular purpose, most often for services beyond a person’s regular job duties.”

This limitation in terms of defining a word is true for all context clues. Still, the meaning you get from a context clue is usually enough to help you understand the sentence so learning how to use context clues well is a valuable skill to have.

In addition to actual definitions, a writer sometimes indirectly provides words or phrases that lead you to conclude a definition. This is called a restatement. Here’s an example:

The company did a lucrative business last year; sales and profits doubled.

In the last part of the sentence, the writer has restated what “lucrative” means because “sales and profits doubled” is another way of saying “profitable,” which is what “lucrative” means.

Let’s look at a few more examples of definition/restatement clues with the aid of four choices to see if you understand how this works.

1. To stay in operation, private colleges must have a sizable endowment; that is, they must receive money from private donations as well as from payments for fees. a. government grants. b. building c. outside contributions d. lotteries
2. Lindsay was an adept student because she learned easily and had a good memory. a. poor b. happy c. cautious d. skillful
3. The petulant child sulked and whined when he couldn’t get his own way. a. mad b. small c. calm d. ill-tempered
4. My aunt is so parsimonious that she counts every penny and never buys anything that isn’t absolute necessary. a. mean b. cheap c. unhappy d. rude

Now let’s test your skills with sentences without choices from which to select. On your paper write your idea of the definition of the italicized word:

5. The boys declared the long climb up the steep cliff a grueling experience, one that left them utterly exhausted.
6. Howard Hughes spent the last few years of his life secluded in well-guarded hotel suites, shut off from personal contact with even his closest associates.
An example is another type of context clue that can be easy to use and recognize. By looking at the examples that the writer provides in the sentence, you can determine the category to which they belong or what they are examples of. Here's an example:

**The governor asked that farmers make use of all arable land such as corn and wheat fields.**

To use the clue, ask yourself: What do the examples “corn” and “wheat” have in common? They are both crops that are raised in fields. “Arable land” probably then means “land that can grow crops.” From that, you can determine that “arable” means “capable of growing crops.”

Example clues are often signaled by words or phrases like the phrase “such as” above. If you notice the signal, you can then easily recognize that you are getting an example clue. Here are typical “example” clue signals:

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

Let’s look at a few more examples of example clues with the aid of four choices to see if you understand how this works.

7. Brad tried to *quell* his fears by whistling a happy tune and breathing deeply while counting to ten.
   a. calm       b. increase       c. enjoy       d. annoy

8. His *nefarious* behavior included a history of tricking elderly women into investing in fake businesses to get their savings.
   a. wicked       b. outstanding       c. careful       d. international

9. My uncle’s diet is *constrained*; for example, he cannot eat fatty foods or chocolate.
   a. unfair       b. generous       c. limited       d. rare

10. Most of the women thought Mrs. Baxter was being *ostentatious* when she wore a mink coat and an expensive diamond ring to the Wednesday night supper.
    a. modest       b. flirtatious       c. showy       d. cruel

Now let’s test your skills with sentences without choices from which to select. On your paper write your idea of the definition of the italicized word:

11. A small museum near Vicksburg, Mississippi, contains some excellent examples of Civil War *memorabilia* such as flags, cannons, guns and Union uniforms.

12. Nature’s laws are *immutable*; for instance, no human can change the force of gravity or the length of the seasons.

Making a comparison is another way that writers can give you clues as to what words mean. The key to using a comparison clue is determining what the writer wants you to understand through the comparison. Comparison clues may not be as obvious as the first types, so you need to follow these steps to be able to use them:

A. First recognize that the writer is comparing persons/ things in a sentence. There are signals that can help you notice a comparison:
   - as
   - like
   - similar to
   - also
   - related to
   - likewise
   - in the same way

B. Then, think about the person/ thing in the sentence that you do understand, looking for a characteristic or characteristics that the writer is pointing out.

C. Next, look at the unknown word and decide which characteristic(s) must also true about it because it is being compared to person/thing you already understand.

D. Finally, use the characteristic(s) to come up with a definition for the unknown word.

Here’s an example: **The tawny dog, as golden as a lion, startled us.**

Let’s use the four steps above to figure out the meaning of the word “tawny.”

A. The writer is comparing a dog to a lion. (The signal is the word “as.”)
B. The dog’s color must also be gold.
C. The lion’s color is gold.
D. “Tawny” means “golden.”
Let’s look at a few more examples of comparison clues with the aid of four choices to see if you understand how this works.

13. No smell is as tantalizing as the smell of freshly baked bread.
   a. tempting       b. bad       c. irritating       d. funny

14. The irate author was like a caged bull when he read the critic’s nasty review of his new book.
   a. unhappy       b. delighted   c. furious       d. interesting

15. The articulate speaker influenced his audience in the same way that a popular advertisement convinces people to buy a product through powerful statements about the product.
   a. important     b. handsome    c. well-spoken   d. admired

16. Samuel was exhausted after the interrogation by the Senate committee, which he said was similar to being in a boat on rough seas.  a. presentation  b. introduction  c. voting   d. questioning

Now let’s test your skills with sentences without choices from which to select. On your paper write your idea of the definition of the italicized word:

17. The dromedary, like all desert animals, can go for long periods with water.

18. The audience was overjoyed when he won; likewise, I was ecstatic.

Showing a CONTRAST is another way that writers can give you clues as to what words mean. The way it works is similar to a comparison clue. Here are the steps to figuring out a contrast clue.

A. You first recognize that the writer is contrasting persons/ things in a sentence. Just as with the other context clues, there are signals that can help you recognize a contrast. Here are the typical “contrast” clue signals:
   but         unlike         although            on the contrary in contrast even though
   not         though       however            nevertheless      rather than  on the other hand

B. Then, you think about the person/ thing in the sentence that you do understand, looking for a characteristic or characteristics that the writer is pointing out.

C. Next, you look at the unknown word and decide which characteristic(s) must not be true for it.

D. Finally, you come up with a definition for the unknown word based on using words that are the opposite of the characteristic(s) of the known person/thing.

Here’s an example:
The judge was unwilling to give a harsh punishment to the defendant since he was so young; however, he was hesitant to give a punishment that showed too much clemency in the case.

Let’s use the four steps above to figure out the meaning of the word “clemency.”
A. The writer is contrasting two punishments.  C. A punishment showing clemency must not be harsh.
   The signal is the word “however.”
B. The first punishment mentioned is harsh.  D. “Clemency” must mean “mildness” or “compassion.”

Let’s look at a few more examples of contrast clues with the aid of four choices to see if you understand how this works.

19. The three children were rather rambunctious as they played in the pool. Their parents, on the other hand, sat peacefully beside the pool.  a. obnoxious     b. inconsiderate and messy 
   c. noisy and rowdy     d. cheerful

20. The team was jubilant after their victory, in contrast to their depression after the last two defeats.
   a. rejoicing     b. tired      c. restless     d. frustrated

21. J.T. had not expected to be asked to speak; as a result, his speech was extemporaneous.
   a. well planned   b. excellent   c. terrible     d. unprepared

22. The senator had been thought of as having lived a life of rectitude until his biographer uncovered some private wrongdoings.  a. luxury     b. triumph     c. correctness   d. difficulty
Now let's test your skills with sentences without choices from which to select. On your paper write your idea of the definition of the italicized word:

23. He was a **stalwart** fellow, not at all cowardly.
24. The man showed no sign of dishonesty when he gave a **fabricated** name for his last employer; nevertheless, the manager did not believe that the man was being truthful.

Sometimes writers combine comparison and contrast clues as in the following example:

The ibex, unlike other wild goats, has never been tamed.

The word “other” (a comparison clue) tells you that the “ibex” is a wild goat. The word “unlike” (a contrast clue) tells you that the “ibex” is a wild, untamable goat.

The last type of clue we’re going to work with is an **INFERENCE** clue. Anytime you figure something out that isn’t directly stated, you’re using inference. For example, if a character in a story is alone late at night and weakly asks “Is anybody there?” when he hears a strange noise, you know he’s scared even though the writer never directly states this. Vocabulary inference clues work the same way. You add up all the details and draw a conclusion as to the meaning of the word. Here’s an example:

**While exploring the ancient pyramids in Egypt, the scientist discovered the mummy of a king buried in a sarcophagus with elaborate designs.**

Let’s look at the details: Sarcophagus is a noun because the noun determiner “a” comes before it. It’s probably a thing since a king was buried in it and because it has elaborate designs on it. Now, it was found in the ancient pyramids in Egypt with a mummy in it. That means it’s old.

Now let’s add up the details: a sarcophagus must be a coffin used in ancient times for burying the dead.

Let’s look at a few more examples of inference clues with the aid of four choices to see if you understand how this works.

25. Because Mark is **perpetually** late, we told him the party started at seven instead of eight which was the real time. **a. sometimes** **b. rarely** **c. constantly** **d. very**
26. The young child’s **pallid** complexion was a result of an illness that kept her indoors. **a. rosy** **b. cheerful** **c. colorless** **d. colorful**
27. The cheerleaders maintained their usual **exuberance** while the crowd mourned the team’s third consecutive loss. **a. high spirits** **b. embarrassment** **c. appearance** **d. routine**
28. The victim **obstinately** stated over and over that the robber had blond hair even though all the witnesses in the area saw no person with that color hair. **a. recklessly** **b. stubbornly** **c. carefully** **d. triumphantly**

Now let’s test your skills with sentences without choices from which to select. On your paper write your idea of the definition of the italicized word:

29. To enter the contest, you must mail in an original receipt or a **facsimile** that can be clearly read.
30. The old man’s face was so **wizened** that it was easy to believe that he was almost 100 years old and had spent his life working outdoors in harsh conditions.