

Activity Type

Reading and writing exercises

Focus

Context clues

Aim

To learn and practice how to use five common context clues to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Preparation

Make one copy of the two-page worksheet for each student.

Level

Intermediate (B1)

Time

25 minutes

Introduction

In this context clues worksheet, students learn and practice how to use five common context clues to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Procedure

Give each student a copy of the two-page worksheet.

To begin, students read an introduction that explains context clues and their importance.

Students then read about five common context clue types and examine example sentences that demonstrate how each clue type works.

Finally, students complete an exercise that requires them to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. For each word, the students underline the context clue surrounding the word, name the type of context clue, and write their own definition of the word.

Exercise A - Answer key

1. Clue type: Antonym
Definition: something considered stupid or unreasonable
2. Clue type: Synonym
Definition: an inexperienced or unskilled worker
3. Clue type: Explanation
Definition: no longer having money
4. Clue type: Definition
Definition: the ability for a man-made product to become natural again
5. Clue type: Example
Definition: something which destroys and is dangerous.
6. Clue type: Explanation
Definition: something that is no longer useful and is replaceable
7. Clue type: Explanation
Definition: something that is important and highly valued
8. Clue type: Antonym
Definition: lacking energy

Using context clues to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words is a useful skill for language learners. Infer means to guess based on the information that is presented, and context means the situation in which the word is found. There are many situations where being able to guess the meaning of a word from context may help you, such as in an exam. Many language learning experts also consider context as the way most successful vocabulary acquisition occurs. To infer the meaning of unfamiliar words, there are five common types of context clues to look for:

1. Synonym - a word or phrase that means the same as another word or phrase.

Look for the word or phrase within the sentence, or within the previous or following sentence that could be a synonym for the unknown word.

The venom of the inland taipan, a snake found in Australia, is very **fatal**. In fact, it is so deadly that the poison from a single bite can kill 100 fully grown adults.

The word 'deadly' in the second sentence indicates the meaning of the unfamiliar word 'fatal'.

2. Antonym - a word or phrase that means the opposite of another word or phrase.

Look for the word or phrase within the sentence, or within the previous or following sentence that indicates an opposite meaning.

Rome is a city that is characterised by older style architecture rather than by more **contemporary** buildings.

The word 'older' in the first sentence indicates the meaning of the unfamiliar word 'contemporary'.

3. Example - a clue that uses examples to help unlock the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

The weather in Chicago can **fluctuate** significantly on a given day. For instance, it could be cloudy and cold in the morning, clear and sunny by midday, and rainy in the afternoon.

Here the phrase 'for instance' indicates an example which can often offer a clue to the meaning of a word. The example shows how the weather changes many times, so we can guess that 'fluctuate' means to keep changing.

4. Explanation - a clue that explains or describes a situation or experience to help you understand the meaning of an unknown word.

A healthy environment is **integral** to human survival as without it, we risk not having enough food and water to sustain us all.

These clues are a little more difficult, but if we look at the second part of the sentence, we can guess that 'integral', in this case, means important or necessary.

5. Definition - this type of clue is often found in text books. The definition is usually in the same sentence as the unfamiliar word and can often come immediately after it.

The English **lexis**, or total number of words in a language, is the largest of all languages and contains approximately 176,000 words.

Here the writer anticipates that the reader may be unfamiliar with the word so gives a clear definition, which in this case is all the words in a language.

A. For each of the words in bold below, underline the context clue, name the type of context clue, and write your own definition of the word.

1. I thought his idea for the new marketing plan was **absurd**. In fact, it was so dumb that many people in the meeting couldn't hold back their laughter.

Clue type:

Definition:

2. The new bakery is doing so well that they are going to hire an **apprentice**. This will be the first trainee employed by the business.

Clue type:

Definition:

3. Due to the pandemic, many local businesses are now **bankrupt**. With little to no sales, they are not able to pay their bills or debts.

Clue type:

Definition:

4. Because they are not **biodegradable**, or able to change back to a natural form, some countries are banning single use plastics.

Clue type:

Definition:

5. Many natural phenomena such as earthquakes, forest fires, and tornadoes are **catastrophic**.

Clue type:

Definition:

6. Many experts predict that petrol fueled cars will soon be **obsolete**. They say that by the end of the decade, electric vehicles will have replaced petrol vehicles.

Clue type:

Definition:

7. Many students insist that they must get accepted into a **prestigious** university. For this reason, universities such as Cambridge and Harvard have extremely competitive entry requirements.

Clue type:

Definition:

8. On hot humid days, I tend to feel quite **lethargic**, but on cooler days, I feel much more energetic.

Clue type:

Definition: