

# WORD LEARNING **SAMPLE LESSON**

## Using Context Clues

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Baumann, J. F., Font, G., Edwards, E. C., & Boland, E. (2005). Strategies for teaching middle-grade students to use word-part and context clues. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamil (Eds.), *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; and Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2006). *Vocabulary handbook*. Berkeley, CA: Consortium on Reading Excellence.

### INTRODUCTION

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Context clues give students an idea, or hint, of what an unfamiliar word might mean. Such clues are found in both the text and/or illustrations surrounding the unknown word. The different types of context clues that can be used to infer a word's meaning are listed in Figure 87, along with examples of how those clues might appear in text. Students benefit from explicit instruction in a strategy for finding and using context clues, such as the one below.

FIGURE 86. CONTEXT CLUE STRATEGY.

1. Reread the sentence that contains the unknown word. Be on the lookout for signal words or punctuation.
2. Reread the sentences before and after the sentence that contains the unknown word.
3. Based on the clues, try to figure out the meaning of the word.
4. Insert your meaning in the original sentence to see whether it makes sense.

FIGURE 87. TYPES OF CONTEXT CLUES TO BE DIRECTLY TAUGHT.

TYPE OF CONTEXT CLUE	EXAMPLE*
<p><b>Definition:</b> The author explains the meaning of the word in the sentence or selection.</p>	<p>When Sara was hiking, she accidentally walked through a patch of <b>brambles</b>, <i>prickly vines and shrubs</i>, which resulted in many scratches to her legs.</p>
<p><b>Synonym:</b> The author uses a word similar in meaning.</p>	<p>Josh walked into the living room and accidentally tripped over the <b>ottoman</b>. He then mumbled, “I wish people would not leave the <i>footstool</i> right in the middle of the room. That’s dangerous!”</p>
<p><b>Antonym:</b> The author uses a word nearly opposite in meaning.</p>	<p>The supermarket manager complained, “Why do we have such a <b>plethora</b> of boxes of cereal on the shelves? <i>In contrast</i>, we have a real <i>shortage</i> of pancake and waffle mix. We’ve got to do a better job ordering.”</p>
<p><b>Example:</b> The author provides one or more example words or ideas.</p>	<p>There are many members of the <b>canine</b> family. <i>For example</i>, <i>wolves</i>, <i>foxes</i>, <i>coyotes</i>, and pets such as <i>collies</i>, <i>beagles</i>, and <i>golden retrievers</i> are all canines.</p>
<p><b>General:</b> The author provides several words or statements that give clues to the word’s meaning.</p>	<p>It was a <b>sultry</b> day. The day was <i>very hot and humid</i>. If you moved at all, you would <i>break out in a sweat</i>. It was one of those days to <i>drink water</i> and <i>stay in the shade</i>.</p>

\***Note:** In Example column, words in italics provide context clues for bold words.

*Reprinted with permission. Baumann, J. F., Font, G., Edwards, E. C., & Boland, E. (2005). Strategies for teaching middle-grade students to use word-part and context clues. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamil (Eds.), Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.*

Explain to students that finding and interpreting context clues is not a formula; it is a tool to be tried alongside other tools such as word part clues. Some context clues can be misleading, and students must realize that word-learning strategies involve thinking, not just plugging words into a formula. The following lesson is an introductory context clue lesson that teaches the first type of clue, the definition clue. This lesson can be used as a guide to teach the other four types of context clues: synonym, antonym, example, and general clues.

## OBJECTIVE

Students will learn to find and interpret context clues to help figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. Students will be able to recognize and interpret five types of context clues: definition, synonym, antonym, example, and general.

## MATERIALS

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- Types of Context Clues chart (see Appendix).
- Transparency of sample sentences.
- Student copies of sentences.
- Context Clue Strategy chart (see Appendix).
- Using Context Clues chart (see Appendix).

## DAILY REVIEW

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**Teacher:**

Yesterday we looked for word part clues to help us figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words. Raise your hand if you can tell me one type of word part that will give us a clue, or hint, to a word's meaning. Billy? Yes, a prefix may help us determine a word's meaning. Sheila? Yes, if we can find a root word and know what it means, that will help us determine the meaning of the unknown word.

## STATE OBJECTIVE/PURPOSE

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**Genre:** Expository (or narrative)

**Teacher:**

As you read—whether it is your textbook, a newspaper, a magazine, or a story—there will be words that are not familiar to you. Since you will not always have someone nearby to help you, and I can't teach you every word you need to know, I want to teach you several ways to figure out unfamiliar words on your own. One way to figure out a word is to look for word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Another strategy is to look at the sentences and illustrations around the unknown word. Today I am going to teach you how to find clues in the words and phrases that come before and after a particular word. These clues are called *context clues* because they are found in the context, or words and phrases, around the unfamiliar word. Learning to recognize and analyze context clues will help you discover the meaning of words on your own.

## MODEL AND TEACH

**Grouping:** Whole class

**Teacher:**

There are several types of context clues. Over the next few weeks, I am going to teach you five different types of context clues to look for.

*Briefly show the following chart and simply list the different types of clues.*

FIGURE 88. TYPES OF CONTEXT CLUES.

TYPE OF CONTEXT CLUE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	SIGNAL WORDS	SAMPLE SENTENCE
Definition	A definition in the sentence	<i>Is, are, is called, means, or</i>	Brick made of sun-dried clay <i>is called</i> <b>adobe</b> .
		Signal punctuation: Set off by commas	The Native Americans used <b>adobe</b> , <i>or</i> bricks made of sun-dried clay, to build their homes.
Synonym	A word with a similar meaning to the unknown word	<i>Also, as, like, same, similarly, too</i>	The Zuni built their homes with brick made of sun-dried clay. The Hopi <i>also</i> used <b>adobe</b> to build their homes.
Antonym	A word or phrase with the opposite meaning of the unknown word	<i>But, however, in contrast, on the other hand, though, unlike</i>	The Hopi lived in single-family houses, <i>but</i> the Iroquois lived in <b>longhouses</b> .
Example	Several examples in a list	<i>Such as, for example, for instance, like, including</i>	The Pueblo people grew many <b>crops</b> <i>such as</i> corn, beans, and squash.
General	General or inexact clues		After 1700, the Pueblos got sheep from the Spanish, and wool replaced cotton as the most important <b>textile</b> .

*Based on Baumann, J. F., Font, G., Edwards, E. C., & Boland, E. (2005). Strategies for teaching middle-grade students to use word-part and context clues. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamil (Eds.), Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.*

A copy of Figure 88 is found in the Appendix. It may be distributed to students as a handout, but you

may consider developing sample sentences with content matter that is familiar to the grade level of your students.

**Teacher:**

Today we are going to concentrate on just one type of context clue—the definition.

*Display the entire chart in Figure 88, but place a large, laminated arrow pointing to the Definition section. Students can see the big picture, but also focus on the type of context clue being taught.*

**Teacher:**

A definition clue provides the meaning of the word right in the sentence. If you see any of the signal words—*is, are, is called, or means*—be on the lookout for a definition. You can also look for signal punctuation to help to find definition clues. If you see the signal word *or* and a phrase set apart by commas, be on the lookout for a definition. Look at the following sentences:

*Place sample sentences on the overhead.*

FIGURE 89. SAMPLE SENTENCES USING DEFINITION CONTEXT CLUES.

Brick made of sun-dried clay is called **adobe**.

The Navajo lived in **hogans**, or dome-shaped houses that were made of logs and mud.

*Cover sentences on the transparency so that only the first sentence is visible. Think aloud.*

**Teacher:**

The first sentence says, “Brick made of sun-dried clay is called adobe.” I don’t know what adobe is.

*Circle the word “adobe”.*

So I’m going to look at the words and phrases around the word, or context clues, to help me figure out the meaning. First I am going to reread the sentence.

*Reread the sentence.*

I see the signal words *is called*.

*Underline “is called” on the transparency.*

OK, what is called *adobe*?

*Point to the beginning of the sentence.*

Brick made of sun-dried clay is called adobe. So, adobe is brick made of clay that is dried in the sun. This type of context clue is simple. I just have to be on the lookout for the signal words—like a detective searching for clues.

Now I’m going to look at the next sentence.

*Read the sentence.*

I do not know what hogans are.

*Circle the word “hogans”.*

First I am going to reread the sentence.

*Reread the sentence.*

I see the signal word *or*, and I also see two commas.

*Underline the word “or” and circle the two commas.*

I am going to read the phrase between the two commas.

*Read the phrase.*

Hogans must be dome-shaped houses. If I insert my definition into the sentence it would read: “The Navajo lived in dome-shaped houses made of logs and mud.” That makes sense.

In both of these sentences, the definition was right in the sentence. This kind of context clue is called a definition context clue.

## GUIDED PRACTICE

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**Grouping:** Whole class/partners

1. Place 4–6 more sentences on the overhead. These sentences can easily be taken directly from your students’ science or social studies texts, or you can write sentences using any content that is relevant to your students’ curriculum.

FIGURE 90. MORE SAMPLE SENTENCES USING DEFINITION CONTEXT CLUES.

Everyone has different physical characteristics, or traits. Some of us are tall, while others are short. Some of us have brown eyes, while others have green.

Heredity is the passing of traits from parents to their children.

The things that control such traits are called genes.

Gregor Mendel founded genetics, or the study of heredity and genes, in the 19th century.

2. Give students a copy of the sentences.
3. Review the following chart. A copy is provided in the Appendix.

FIGURE 9I. CONTEXT CLUE STRATEGY.

1. Reread the sentence that contains the unknown word. Be on the lookout for signal words or punctuation.
2. Reread the sentences before and after the sentence that contains the unknown word.
3. Based on the clues, try to figure out the meaning of the word.
4. Insert your meaning in the original sentence to see whether it makes sense.

*Based on Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2006). Vocabulary handbook. Berkeley, CA: Consortium on Reading Excellence.*

4. Lead the students through finding the meaning of the underlined word in the first sentence by looking for definition context clues.

*Ask for a volunteer to read the sentence.*

**Teacher:**

I don't know what traits are.

*Circle the word "traits" and ask students to do the same on their paper.*

What is the first thing I need to do when I come to a word that is unfamiliar to me?

*Accept student responses.*

That's right, I need to reread the sentence. What do I need to look for, like a detective?

*Accept student responses.*

Yes, I need to look for signal words or punctuation.

*Point to the Types of Context Clues chart and ask a student to read the signal words and punctuation for a definition context clue. Ask a volunteer to reread the sentence and ask the class to be on the lookout for signal words and punctuation. After the volunteer has reread the sentence, ask students to turn to their partners and point to any signal words or punctuation they see.*

Did anyone see any signal words or punctuation?

*Accept student responses.*

*On the overhead, underline the word "or" and circle the comma. Ask students to do the same.*

In this case, the unfamiliar word is set apart by the comma and the signal word *or*.

Where should I look, then, to find the definition?

*Accept student responses.*

That's right. The words right before the signal word are *physical characteristics*. So *traits* must mean "physical characteristics".

Let's try it in the sentence: "Everyone has different traits." Everyone has different physical characteristics. Does that definition make sense? Yes. Raise your hand if you can tell me the definition of *traits*. Yes, traits are physical characteristics. Let's look at the following sentence to see whether we can find some examples of traits.

5. Allow partners 3 to 4 minutes to find the meaning of the underlined word in the second sentence by looking for definition context clues. Circulate around the room and be available for guidance. After 3 to 4 minutes, work through the sentence on the overhead with the class. Follow the same procedure for the last two sentences.

## INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

**Grouping:** Partners

1. Provide partners with a short passage that you create or take directly from a student textbook.  
Sample text:

FIGURE 92. SAMPLE PASSAGE FOR PRACTICE USING DEFINITION CONTEXT CLUES.

When someone who is not very well known unexpectedly wins a nomination for public office, they are called a dark horse candidate. James A. Polk, a dark horse candidate, won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1844. Polk was in favor of the annexation, or the adding of a territory to another country, of both Texas and Oregon. Henry Clay, Polk's opponent, was also in favor of annexation.

2. Tell students that they are going to practice using definition context clues to find the meaning of the underlined words.
3. Give students a chart like the one below to guide their work:

FIGURE 93. SAMPLE CONTEXT CLUES CHART.

Unfamiliar Word	Signal Word or Punctuation	Our Definition
Dark horse candidate		
Annexation		

*Based on Baumann, J. F., Font, G., Edwards, E. C., & Boland, E. (2005). Strategies for teaching middle-grade students to use word-part and context clues. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamil (Eds.), Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Adapted from Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2006). Vocabulary handbook. Berkeley, CA: Consortium on Reading Excellence.*

4. Circulate around the room and be available for guidance.

FIGURE 94. SAMPLE CONTEXT CLUES CHART: COMPLETED

Unfamiliar Word	Signal Word or Punctuation	Our Definition
Dark horse candidate	Are called	When someone who is not famous wins a political nomination unexpectedly
Annexation	Commas, or	Adding a territory to another country

*Based on Baumann, J. F., Font, G., Edwards, E. C., & Boland, E. (2005). Strategies for teaching middle-grade students to use word-part and context clues. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamil (Eds.), Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Adapted from Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2006). Vocabulary handbook. Berkeley, CA: Consortium on Reading Excellence.*

## GENERALIZATION

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**Teacher:**

Think about your other classes. Do you think using context clues might help you with any of your reading outside of this class?

**Student:**

I think I've seen definition context clues in our science book.

**Teacher:**

I'm sure you have. Textbook authors want you to understand what you are reading and will help you by planting clues in the text to help you understand new words. Raise your hand if you can tell me what signal words or punctuation marks you can look for to help you find definition context clues.

**Student:**

We can look for the signal words *is called* or for phrases set apart by commas.

**Teacher:**

That's right. Be on the lookout for context clues in your other classes.

## MONITOR STUDENT LEARNING

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Check Figure 94, above, for appropriate responses, including:

- Correct identification of signal words and punctuation.
- Correct definitions derived from the context clues.

## PERIODIC REVIEW/MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE

Periodically give students a passage that you either create or take directly from students' textbooks. Underline words that may be unfamiliar to students, and have them work either independently or with partners to find the meaning of the underlined words.

Once you have taught other types of context clues, modify the guide so that students must identify and use the different kinds of context clues.

FIGURE 95. USING CONTEXT CLUES CHART.

Unfamiliar Word	Signal Word or Punctuation	TYPE OF CONTEXT CLUE Definition, Synonym, Antonym, Example, or General	My Definition

*Based on Baumann, J. F., Font, G., Edwards, E. C., & Boland, E. (2005). Strategies for teaching middle-grade students to use word-part and context clues. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamil (Eds.), Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Adapted from Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2006). Vocabulary handbook. Berkeley, CA: Consortium on Reading Excellence.*