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Vocabulary Development for Reading and Writing

Improving your vocabulary will make you a better reader and a better writer. It would be nice if there were pills available for this purpose—with each pill automatically adding, say, a hundred words to your vocabulary! But while there is no instant cure for an underdeveloped vocabulary, there are steps you can take to build word power.

Most of all, you need to **read more**. It's a proven fact that the more you read, the more words you will learn. (To choose from over a hundred interesting paperbacks that are available at a non-profit price of \$1 per book, visit www.townsendpress.com and click on "TP Library & Bluford Series.")

In addition to reading more, you should learn how to understand **vocabulary in context** to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words. This chapter will show you how to use different kinds of context clues in your reading.

Do you know the meaning of the word *savor*? Look at the following cartoon and see if the sentences underneath (spoken by the older brother) help you choose the correct answer.



_____ *Savor* (sā'vər) means

- A. enjoy.
- B. wonder about.
- C. forget.

The older brother is advising his younger brother to take enough time to appreciate the taste of the candy. The **context**—the words surrounding the unfamiliar word—tells us that *savor* means “appreciate” or “enjoy.” In this chapter, you will learn how to use the context to figure out the meanings of words.

Understanding Vocabulary in Context

Do you know the meaning of the word *vital*? How about the word *appropriate*? Or the word *passive*?

You may not know the meaning of one or more of these words. However, if you saw these words in sentences, chances are you could come up with fairly accurate definitions. For example, read each sentence below and see if you can understand the meaning of the word in *italics*. In the space provided, write the letter of the meaning you think is correct. Then read the explanation.

Do not use a dictionary for this work. Instead, in each sentence, try the word you think is the answer. For example, put *unimportant* or *necessary* or *surprising* into the sentence in place of *vital* to see which one makes the best sense.

____ 1. All animals share the same *vital* needs, such as food, water, and shelter.

Vital (vīt'1) means

- A. unimportant. B. necessary. C. surprising.

____ 2. In the United States, shaking hands is the *appropriate* way to greet someone; in China, bowing is the right way.

Appropriate (ə-prō'prē-īt) means

- A. proper. B. artificial. C. insulting.

____ 3. Winners in life take an active role in making things happen, instead of being *passive* and waiting for good luck.

Passive (pās'iv) means

- A. insincere. B. inactive. C. flexible.

In each sentence above, the context surrounding the unfamiliar word provides clues to the word's meaning. You may have guessed from the context that *vital* means “necessary,” that *appropriate* means “proper,” and that *passive* means “inactive.”

Using context clues to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words will help you in three ways:

- 1 It will save you time when reading. You will not have to stop to look up words in the dictionary. (Of course, you won't always be able to understand a word from its context, so you should have a dictionary nearby as you read.)
- 2 It will improve your “working vocabulary”—words you recognize as you read and will eventually be able to use when you speak and write. You will therefore add to your vocabulary simply by reading thoughtfully.

- 3 It will give you a good sense of how a word is actually used, including any shades of meaning it might have.

Types of Context Clues

There are four common types of context clues:

- 1 Examples
- 2 Synonyms
- 3 Antonyms
- 4 General sense of the sentence or passage

In the following sections, you will read about and practice each type. The practices will sharpen your skills in recognizing and using context clues. They will also help you add new words to your vocabulary.

Remember *not* to use a dictionary for these practices. Their purpose is to help you develop the skill of figuring out what words mean *without* using a dictionary. Pronunciations are provided in parentheses for the words, and a guide to pronunciation is on page 30.

1 Examples

An unfamiliar word may appear with **examples** that reveal what the word means. For instance, note the examples in this sentence from the previous page: “All animals share the same vital needs, such as food, water, and shelter.” The examples—food, water, and shelter—helped you figure out that the word *vital* means “necessary.”

Look at the cartoon below and see if the example helps you choose the correct meaning of the word *vague*.



_____ *Vague* (vāg) means

- A. angry. B. humorous. C. unclear.

Notice that the example of a vague answer—“Oh, sooner or later”—helps you understand that *vague* means “unclear.”



Check Your Understanding

Now read the items that follow. An *italicized* word in each sentence is followed by examples that serve as context clues for that word. These examples, which are **boldfaced**, will help you figure out the meaning of each word. On each line, write the letter of the answer you think is correct. Then read the explanation that follows.

Note that examples are often introduced with signal words and phrases like *for example*, *for instance*, *including*, and *such as*.

- _____ 1. In our house, clothes hangers have various odd *functions*. For instance, we use them to **scratch backs** and **hold up plants in the garden**.

Functions (fŭngk'shənz) are

- A. shapes. B. problems. C. uses.

Hint: Remember that in the exercises in this chapter, you can insert into each sentence the word you think is the answer. For example, substitute *shapes*, *problems*, or *uses* in sentence 1 in place of *functions* to see which one fits.

- _____ 2. Our baseball team's pitcher has a few *eccentric* habits, such as **throwing exactly thirteen pitches when warming up** and **never wearing socks**.

Eccentric (ĭk-sĕn'trĭk) means

- A. normal. B. strange. C. messy.

- _____ 3. Throughout history, humans have built a wide variety of *dwelling*s, including **simple mud huts**, **stone castles**, and **marble mansions**.

Dwellings (dwĕl'ĭngs) are

- A. homes. B. stores. C. churches.

Explanation

In each sentence, the examples probably helped you to figure out the meanings of the words in italics:

- The correct answer is C. In sentence 1, the examples of the odd functions of hangers—scratching backs and holding up plants—may have helped you to guess that *functions* means “uses.”
- The correct answer is B. In sentence 2, the examples of strange habits show that *eccentric* means “strange.”

3. The correct answer is A. The examples in sentence 3 indicate that *dwelling*s are homes.

Note that the examples in the sentences are introduced by the signal words *for instance*, *such as*, and *including*.



PRACTICE 1: Examples

Read each item below and then do two things:

1. Underline the examples that suggest the meaning of the word in italics.
2. Then write the letter of the word's meaning on the answer line.

Note that the last five sentences have been taken from college textbooks.

- _____ 1. The *debris* in the stadium stands included numerous paper cups, ticket stubs, sandwich wrappings, and cigarette butts.

Debris (də-brē') means

- A. products. B. papers. C. trash.

- _____ 2. For his weak stomach, Mario ate a *bland* diet of white bread, rice, and mashed potatoes.

Bland (bländ) means

- A. spicy. B. varied. C. mild.

- _____ 3. New York, Boston, and Philadelphia are three of the oldest *urban* areas in the United States.

Urban (ûr'bən) means

- A. empty. B. city. C. country.

- _____ 4. Many people take dietary *supplements*—for example, extra calcium or large doses of vitamin C—in the belief that they will cure or prevent disease.

Supplements (sŭp'lə-mənts) means

- A. additions. B. losses. C. suggestions.

- _____ 5. My uncle often has embarrassing *mishaps*, such as backing his car into the side of his boss's Cadillac and trying to walk through a glass door.

Mishaps (mĭs'hăps') means

- A. clever moves. B. accidents. C. projects.

- _____ 6. The death of a child and the death of a spouse are two of life's most *traumatic* experiences.
Traumatic (trou-măt'ĭk) means
A. rare. B. painful. C. interesting.
- _____ 7. A *transaction*, such as buying or selling a product, is the most basic part of an economy.
Transaction (trăn-săk'shən) means
A. profit. B. loss. C. business deal.
- _____ 8. Religious *rituals* like baptisms, church weddings, and funeral services give many people a sense of peace and comfort.
Rituals (rĭch'ōō-əls) means
A. lessons. B. ceremonies. C. prayers.
- _____ 9. When discussing the Internet, professionals often use such *jargon* as “adware,” “clickthrough rate,” and “spambot,” which others may not understand.
Jargon (jăr'gən) means
A. special language. B. clear instructions. C. mean insults.
- _____ 10. There are hundreds of different kinds of *retailers*, ranging from car dealerships and department stores to frozen-yogurt stands and online drugstores.
Retailers (rē'tāl'ərs) means
A. customers. B. businesses that sell directly to users. C. businesses that make products.

2 Synonyms

Context clues are often found in the form of **synonyms**: one or more words that mean the same or almost the same as the unknown word. Look again at the sentence on page 16: “In the United States, shaking hands is the *appropriate* way to greet someone; in China, bowing is the right way.” Here the synonym “right” tells you the meaning of *appropriate*. A synonym may appear anywhere in a sentence as a restatement of the meaning of the unknown word.

Now look at the cartoon on the following page.



Notice that the synonym for *refrain*—expressed in the dog’s words “stop myself”—helps you understand that *refrain* (rĭ-frān') means “to hold oneself back.”



Check Your Understanding

Each item below includes a word or phrase that is a synonym of the *italicized* word. Underline that synonym in each sentence. Then read the explanation that follows.

1. The cat soon found it useless to smack her paws against the front of the fish tank; her effort to catch a fish was a *futile* (fyōōt'l) one.
2. My best friend *squandered* (skwŏn'dərd) all his money; his drinking and gambling wasted his earnings.
3. Because my boss runs the toy store like a *tyrant* (tī'rənt), all of the employees call her “the little dictator.”

Explanation

In each sentence, the synonym given probably helped you understand the meaning of the word in italics:

1. In the first sentence, the synonym of *futile* is “useless.”
2. In sentence 2, the synonym of *squandered* is “wasted.”
3. In sentence 3, the synonym of *tyrant* is “dictator.”



PRACTICE 2: Synonyms

Each item below includes a synonym of the *italicized* word. Write each synonym in the space provided.

Note that the last five items have been taken from college textbooks.

_____ 1. Everyone turned to look at the *arrogant* (ă-r'ə-gənt) customer who spoke to the manager in a self-important voice.

Hint: What does the voice reveal about the customer?

_____ 2. The medicine that Nina is taking is very *potent* (pōt'nt). It is so powerful that she must not take it for more than a week.

_____ 3. After the heavy rains, the stream became *murky* (mûr'kē); in fact, the water was so cloudy you couldn't see the bottom.

_____ 4. Some overweight people are called *furtive* (fûr'tiv) eaters because they eat large quantities of food in secret.

_____ 5. A con artist was apparently very believable as he went door to door telling a *plausible* (plô'zə-bəl) story about having his wallet stolen and needing twenty dollars to get home.

_____ 6. The first step in reaching a peace agreement was to set up a *dialog* (dī'ə-lŏg') between the two sides. Without discussion, peace was impossible.

_____ 7. You cannot *coerce* (kō-ûrs') people into learning. If they are not interested, it is impossible to force them.

_____ 8. While Ved may not be *affluent* (ăf'lōō-ənt) by American standards, he is rich compared with most people in his homeland of India.

_____ 9. Several tests are necessary to *verify* (vēr'ə-fī') that a virus is present. One is never enough to prove a virus exists.

_____ 10. The *diversity* (dī-vûr'sī-tē) of the population of the United States is the result of accepting immigrants from a wide variety of cultures and nations.

3 Antonyms

Antonyms—words and phrases that mean the opposite of a word—are also useful as context clues. Antonyms are sometimes signaled by words and phrases such as *however*, *but*, *yet*, *on the other hand*, *instead of*, and *in contrast*.

Look again at the sentence on page 16: “Winners in life take an active role in making things happen, instead of being passive and waiting for good luck.” Here the words *instead of* indicate that *passive* must be the opposite of *active*.

Now look at the cartoon below.



Notice that the antonym “unreasonable” helps you figure out that *rational* (rāsh’ə-nəl) must mean “reasonable.”



Check Your Understanding

In each of the following sentences, underline the word or phrase that means the opposite of the *italicized* word. Then, on the answer line, write the letter of the meaning of the italicized word. Finally, read the explanation that follows.

- _____ 1. The coach takes every opportunity to *reprimand* his players, yet he ignores every chance to praise them.

Reprimand (rĕp’rə-mănd) means

- A. approve of. B. criticize. C. choose.

_____ 2. “I am having *acute* pains in my chest now,” said the patient, “but an hour ago, all I felt was a dull ache.”

Acute (ə-kyōōt') means

- A. sharp. B. weak. C. no.

_____ 3. Some teachers are too *lenient*. I'd rather have strict teachers who take the class seriously.

Lenient (lē'nē-ənt) means

- A. hard. B. easygoing. C. busy.

Explanation

In each sentence, the antonym given probably helped you understand the meaning of the word in italics:

1. The correct answer is B. *Reprimand* is the opposite of *praise*, so the answer to sentence 1 is *criticize*.
2. The correct answer is A. In sentence 2, the opposite of *acute* is *dull*, so *acute* must mean “sharp.”
3. The correct answer is B. In sentence 3, “lenient” teachers are the opposite of “strict” teachers, so *lenient* means “easygoing.”

Note that the antonyms of *reprimand* and *acute* are indicated by signal words: *yet* and *but*.



PRACTICE 3: Antonyms

Each item below includes a word or phrase that is an antonym of the *italicized* word. Underline each of those antonyms. Then, on the line, write the letter of the meaning of the italicized word.

Note that the last five items have been taken from college textbooks.

_____ 1. After his accident, Brad expected an in-depth examination at the hospital. Instead, a doctor gave him a quick, *superficial* checkup and said, “You’re fine.”

Hint: What would be the opposite of an in-depth examination?

Superficial (sōō'pər-fīsh'əl) means

- A. lacking depth. B. complicated. C. satisfactory.

- _____ 2. A temporary cough is nothing to worry about, but a *chronic* one can be a sign of a serious illness.
Chronic (krŏn'ĭk) means
A. continuing. B. brief. C. mild.
- _____ 3. When drinking was *prohibited* by the Nineteenth Amendment, alcohol became more popular with some people than it had been when it was allowed.
Prohibited (prŏ-hĭb'ĭt-ĭd) means
A. permitted. B. defined. C. forbidden.
- _____ 4. "What we need is an *innovative* idea!" cried the chairman. "All I've heard so far are the same old ones."
Innovative (ĭn'ə-vā'tĭv) means
A. new. B. traditional. C. loud.
- _____ 5. The class was in *turmoil* when only the substitute teacher was there, but it quickly came to order once the principal entered the room.
Turmoil (tŭr'moĭl') means
A. peace. B. confusion. C. attendance.
- _____ 6. In ordinary life, people's facial expressions are *spontaneous*. However, actors must learn to use planned ways of showing emotion.
Spontaneous (spŏn-tā'nē-əs) means
A. varied. B. unplanned. C. hidden.
- _____ 7. A computer *novice* is lucky if he or she knows someone who is an expert and is willing to offer advice.
Novice (nŏv'ĭs) means
A. a child. B. a friend. C. a beginner.
- _____ 8. Some patients drop out of drug therapy before it is completed. Instead of making progress, they may then *revert* to previous bad habits.
Revert (rĭ-vŭrt') means
A. say no. B. improve. C. go back.
- _____ 9. Our Constitution would be in danger if all Americans were *indifferent* to it. However, history has shown that concerned citizens will always come forward to defend it.
Indifferent to (ĭn-dĭf'ər-ənt tŏ) means
A. insulted by. B. aware of. C. uninterested in.

_____ 10. In warfare, as in chess, *impulsive* actions will fail. To win in either case, carefully thought-out moves are needed.

Impulsive (im-pŭl'siv) means

- A. fearful. B. unplanned. C. strong.

4 General Sense of the Sentence or Passage

Often, the context of a new word contains no examples, synonyms, or antonyms. In such cases, you must do a bit more detective work; you'll need to look at any clues provided in the information surrounding the word. Asking yourself questions about the passage may help you make a fairly accurate guess about the meaning of the unfamiliar word.

Look at the cartoon below about a job interview.



There are no examples, synonyms, or antonyms in the woman’s statement. However, the applicant’s costume—that of an executioner—and the huge axe he carries suggest that *ruthless* (rŭth'lis) means “showing no mercy.”



Check Your Understanding

Each sentence below is followed by a question. Think about each question; then write the letter of the answer you feel is the meaning of the italicized word.

- _____ 1. The newlyweds agreed to be very *frugal* in their shopping because they wanted to save enough money to buy a home.

(How would people shop if they wanted to save money?)

Frugal (frōō'gəl) means

- A. thrifty. B. wasteful. C. interested.

- _____ 2. So many customers have complained about the noise in the restaurant that the owners are trying to find ways to *mute* the noise.

(What would the restaurant owners probably want to do about noise?)

Mute (myōōt) means

- A. increase. B. quiet. C. create.

- _____ 3. Friends tried to *dissuade* ninety-year-old Mrs. Kellen from attending her son's trial, but she went anyway, to show her support.

(What would the elderly woman's friends have tried to do to her if they didn't want her to go to her son's trial?)

Dissuade (dī-swād') means

- A. question. B. describe. C. discourage.

Explanation

In each sentence, your answer to the question should have helped you figure out the meaning of the word in italics:

1. The correct answer is A. The first sentence provides enough evidence for you to guess that *frugal* means “thrifty.” The newlyweds had to be thrifty if they wanted to save money.
2. The correct answer is B. *Mute* in the second sentence means “quiet”; a restaurant owner would probably want to reduce the noise.
3. The correct answer is C. *Dissuade* means “discourage”—Mrs. Kellen went to the trial despite her friends' attempts to discourage her.

If you use context clues, you may not get the exact dictionary definition of a word, but you will often be accurate enough to make good sense of what you are reading.



PRACTICE 4: General Sense of the Sentence or Passage

Figure out the meaning of the word in *italics* by looking at clues in the rest of the sentence. First, try to answer the question in parentheses that follows each item below. Then, on the basis of your answer, write the letter of the meaning you think is correct.

Note that the last five items have been taken from college textbooks.

- _____ 1. To reach a *sound* conclusion about an issue, you must carefully consider all the facts involved.

(What kind of conclusion would you reach by carefully considering all the facts?)

Sound (sound) means

- A. early. B. obvious. C. reasonable.

- _____ 2. My mother refuses to *divulge* the secret ingredients she uses in her fried chicken recipe.

(What would someone refuse to do with ingredients that are secret?)

Divulge (dĭ-vŭlj') means

- A. reveal. B. hide. C. invent.

- _____ 3. Because the nicotine in cigarettes is harmful, many people favor *stringent* laws against their sale.

(What type of laws would be favored by people concerned about the harm of nicotine?)

Stringent (strĭn'jənt) means

- A. strict. B. weak. C. confusing.

- _____ 4. Taking the expression "raining cats and dogs" *literally*, the child looked for little animals on the ground after the storm.

(In what way did the child interpret the phrase "raining cats and dogs"?)

Literally (lĭt'ər-ə-lē) means

- A. symbolically. B. musically. C. as the real facts.

- _____ 5. It's too late to *alter* the plans for the party. The restaurant and band have been reserved, and all the invitations have been sent out.

(If the plans have all been made, what is it too late to do to the plans?)

Alter (ôl'tər) means

- A. change. B. surprise. C. repeat.

- _____ 6. Organ transplants will not succeed unless the *donor* has the same blood type as the person receiving the organ.

(Who would need to have the same kind of blood as the person receiving the transplant?)

Donor (dō'nər) means

- A. one who receives. B. one who gives. C. one who doubts.

- _____ 7. Few American officials in Iraq were *fluent* in the Iraqi language, so all communication had to be in English.

(What would an American have to be in order to communicate in the Iraqi language?)

Fluent (flōō'ənt) means

- A. able to remember. B. able to teach. C. able to speak well.

- _____ 8. The placing of a huge cable on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean in 1866 made it possible to *transmit* telegraph signals from Europe to North America.

(What did the cable allow us to do with signals between Europe and North America?)

Transmit (trăns-mīt') means

- A. check. B. send. C. lose.

- _____ 9. Over years, the movement of water in a stream will *erode* the surrounding soil and rock. As a result, the stream will be wider and deeper.

(What does water do to soil and rock to enlarge a stream?)

Erode (ĭ-rōd') means

- A. wear away. B. escape. C. build up.

- _____ 10. In the 1950s, Americans felt that the Soviet Union was a *menace* threatening their national security. As a result, Senator Joseph McCarthy was able to persuade millions of people that the Soviets had secret agents in the United States government.

(What would a country that threatened our national security be regarded as?)

Menace (mĕn'ĭs) means

- A. puzzle. B. friend. C. danger.

An Important Point about Textbook Definitions

You don't always have to use context clues or the dictionary to find definitions. Very often, textbook authors provide definitions of important terms. They usually follow a definition with one or more examples to make sure that you understand the word being defined.

Here is a short textbook passage that includes a definition and an example. Note that the term to be defined is set off in **boldface** type, and the definition then follows.

¹The changing work force has changed lifestyles and needs. ²No wonder many workers have found **flextime** a desirable choice. ³Instead of working the standard nine-to-five day, five days a week, they choose their own hours. ⁴For instance, they may decide to work four days at ten hours a day rather than five days at eight hours.

Textbook authors, then, often do more than provide context clues: they set off the terms they are defining in *italic* or **boldface** type, as above. When they take the time to define and illustrate a word, you should assume that the material is important enough to learn.

More about textbook definitions and examples appears on pages 190–191 in Chapter 8, “More Relationships in Reading.”

Pronunciation Guide

Long Vowel Sounds	Other Vowel Sounds	Consonant Sounds
ā pay	â care	j jump
ē she	ä card	k kiss
ī hi	îr here	l let
ō go	ô all	m meet
ōō cool	oi oil	n no
yōō use	ou out	p put
	ûr fur	r red
	ə ago, item, easily, gallop, circus	s sell
		t top
		v have
		w way
		y yes
		z zero
		ch church
		sh dish
		th then
		th thick
		zh usual