

## Unit 2

### Finding Context Clues

When students try to comprehend a text they often come across some unknown words. Many students waste their time when opening a dictionary to understand every word in a particular text. This is not necessary. You don't need to use a dictionary every time you want to find out the meaning of the word because you can use a reading technique which can help you to figure out a meaning of a word by using the words around it. It is called "context clues"

Context clues are hints to help the reader understand an unfamiliar word. The author usually uses clues to give the information about an extra word which is used in the text. In this unit you can learn five common types of context clues: definition clues, synonym clues, antonym clues, example clues and inference or logic clues.

Punctuation can be used in some types of context clues. Punctuation is a mark that is used to organize or indicate something in the text. The authors usually use punctuation as an aid for readers to understand the text better. These punctuations include dashes, brackets, colon, semicolon, etc.

You can guess the meaning of the unknown words from the context of the sentence or paragraph. Context may be words or sentences around the unknown word which help you to determine the meaning of the word. You can guess the word meaning by looking at surrounding words to find clues. Those clues enable you to figure out the meaning. Sometimes you do not need to know the exact meaning of the word just knowing the general sense is sufficient to help you read effectively.

The content of this unit is based on the topic of "Using Context Clues" in my own textbook "Essential Reading Skills for College Students". (Lohday, 2016: 79-95) You will learn five common types of context clues: definition clues, synonym clues, contrast or antonym clues, example clues and inference or logic clue.

## I. Definition Clues

The authors usually give the explanation or the meaning of the extra word immediately after it to make sure that the readers understand the content. There may be some clues such as phrases or punctuations.

**Words or phrases:** is, are, which is, which are, is called, are called, is known as

**Punctuation:** a colon (:), a semicolon (;), dash (-), comma (,)

**Example:** **Dactylology** *is* sign language made with the fingers to communicate and convey ideas.

From the example sentence the word “**is**” is a clue indicating that the sentence after that is the definition of the word “Dactylology”

**Exercise 1: Circle the clues and underline the definition of the bold printed words.**

1. Owls are **nocturnal**. This means they fly around and look for food at night.
2. The flower called “dandelions” is **edible**; it can be eaten.
3. Some children are **ambidextrous**. By this we mean they are able to use both left and right hands equally well.
4. **Deficit** is a situation when a government has more expenses than income.
5. Our bodies have a kind of chemical which help everyone grow. It is called “**growth hormone**”
6. Participants were chosen to give a speech **randomly**- having no specific pattern. This made everyone so excited.
7. Most of the Thai night markets are at the **pedestrian zones**, which are areas only for walkers where no cars are allowed. You might have to park your car far away.
8. People in many capital cities often get stuck in **gridlock** which is known as a terrible traffic jam which has no vehicular movement. They waste a lot of hours on streets.

9. Good staff have to set their tasks by **priority** –by order of importance – which helps them to work efficiently.
10. Nowadays people can work at home and communicate by computers, smartphones and tablets – which is defined as “**telecommuting.**”

## II. Synonym Clues

The authors often use another word which has the same or similar meaning with the word that has already been mentioned. Punctuation and words or phrases may be used in the sentence

**Words or phrases:** or, that is, i.e.

**Punctuation:** brackets ( ), a semicolon (:), dash (-), comma (,)

**Example:** After-sale service is one of the factors which made the **clients** *or* customers decide to purchase your product.

If you do not know the meaning of the word “clients”, you will see the word “or” which indicates that the next word is the similar meaning word which we call “synonym.”

**Exercise 2: Circle clues and underline synonyms of the words in bold print in each sentence.**

1. Exercise is very important in order to **alleviate** or reduce stress.
2. Regular exercise can keep you **energized** (full of energy)
3. I usually carry **creel** - a wicker basket – to hold the fish I catch.
4. Most parents **indulge** or spoil the children.
5. It is very difficult to beat a **lethargic** i.e. lazy lifestyle.
6. Laura tries to **eschew** or avoid dessert because she would like to lose weight.
7. We couldn't endure anymore because she was so **verbose** (talkative).
8. My friend damaged my library book so she has to make **remuneration**– compensation- to me.

- 9. Headaches and stomachaches are symptoms caused by **tension** or pressure.
- 10. If you don't understand some words in the text, you can use context clues to **assist** or help you to figure out the word meaning.

**Exercise 3: Replace the bold printed words with its synonym.**

ideas            choices            know            chance            meet people

.....

Studying abroad is a great 1. opportunity, and for many people, it's a dream

.....

comes true. However, it is important to 2. realize that people in other cultures may

.....

think and behave differently. In some cultures, for example, your 3. options of what

to wear may be different. It may also be wrong to drink alcohol, or for women and

.....

men to 4. socialize in certain places. If you go to another country on a study trip,

try to respect the culture you are living in. You may not be comfortable about

.....

certain things, but do not believe your 5. values are always better. Try to

understand, and live as the local people live.

(Craven, 2003: 15)

### III. Antonym Clues

Sometimes the authors use the word which has an opposite meaning to help readers guess the word meaning. There is no punctuation but words or phrases are very helpful.

**Words or phrases:** but, although, while, whereas, however, not, instead of, unlike, on the other hand, rather than

**Example:** Most of women like a **monogamous** man *not* a flirtatious one.

When you do not what “monogamous” means you could look at the clue which indicates the antonym in this sentence. It is the word “not”. So you could interpret that “monogamous” is opposite of “flirtatious” Then you will know that “monogamous” means not flirtatious.

**Exercise 4: Circle clues and underline antonyms of the word in bold print in each sentence.**

1. Unlike **international** flights, domestic flights are much cheaper; sometimes you can fly for free when there is a big deal promotion.
2. When we moved to our new home, my mom moved everything **carefully** but the workers who helped us were careless.
3. George is very active. He likes adventure but his son is **passive** and prefers staying home.
4. The driver expected his license would be renewed, but he found that it was **revoked**.
5. When I was young I liked **mental** work. I was happy to do math problems rather than physical work like swimming or cycling.
6. People in the countryside are healthy, unlike people in urban areas who are **infirm**.
7. Bob was **nervous** about a calculus test whereas Billy was relaxed.

8. Simon's family has two daughters, Sally and Sarah. Sally is **hostile** while Sarah is quite friendly.
9. Instead of **frowning**, he had a smirk when he met a pretty girl.
10. Even when he tries to clean it, his room is still **messy**.

#### IV. Example Clues

The authors may give some examples to help the reader interpret the word meaning. You need to be aware that the given example is not the meaning of the word instead, you have to interpret from those examples in order to understand the word meaning. The following are some clues.

**Words or phrases:** for example, for instance, such as, like

**Punctuation:** a colon (:), a semicolon (;)

**Example:** There are many kinds of **digital equipment** *such as* computers, tablets and smartphones. They make communication convenient.

You can determine the meaning of "digital equipment". Notice the clue "such as" which is used to give the examples: computers, tablet and smartphones. You just ask yourself "What are computers, tablet and smartphones?" You can interpret that they are devices that process data in electronic technology.

**Exercise 5: Work in pairs. Circle clues, underline the example and give the meaning of the bold printed words.**

1. **Celestial objects** -including the sun, moon, and stars -have fascinated man through the century.

"Celestial objects" means \_\_\_\_\_.

2. Every year many Thai people died because of serious **diseases** for example, AIDS, cancer, Tuberculosis (TB).

“**diseases**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

3. The nurse checked vital signs such as body temperature, blood pressure, pulse and breathing rate before taking me to see the doctor.

“**vital signs**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

4. Many tourists like visiting Thailand because there are several **attractions** in Thailand. For example, Similan Island, Railay Beach, Chiangmai Night Bazaar, Ayuthaya, and the Grand Palace are popular attractions.

“**attractions**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

5. The main problem of Bangkok is **pollution** like car exhaust, waste water and rubbish which should be solved.

“**pollution**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

6. I try to use my free time for leisure activities: going fishing, playing volleyball and doing gardening.

“**leisure activities**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

7. The weather researcher found that **atmospheric conditions** such as sun, wind, rain, and snow influence human’s health and feelings.

“**atmospheric conditions**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

8. Some examples of **Thai architectures** are traditional Thai house, Buddhist temples, house of monk (Kuti), open pavilion (Sala Thai). They are a valuable legacy for Thai people.

“**Thai architectures**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

9. People in high mountain regions get the benefit of a **healthful environment** e.g. fresh air, clean water, and moderate temperature. These conditions make them healthy.

“**healthful environment**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

## V. Inference or logic clues

The authors might not describe the word meaning directly. You have to imply from the meaning of the whole sentence and figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

**Example:** We bought a plot of land for 1,000,000 baht, then we sold it for 1,500,000, so we made 500,000 baht **profit**.

The example above has no clues, but you can imply that the price of selling is more than the price of buying so “profit” means the money you got after counting all expenses.

**Exercise 6: Work in pairs. Give the correct meaning of the bold printed words.**

1. Although his leg was cut off, he wasn't **depressed** about it.

“**depressed**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

2. The workers have to finish their work this month so they have to **increase** working hours from 8 to 12 hours a day.

“**increase**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Most Bangkokians take many hours to **commute** from their home to their work every day.

“**commute**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

4. When you are at home, it is hard to focus on your work. Your children, housework and TV programs usually **distract** you.

“**distract**” means \_\_\_\_\_.

5. Since there was no electricity, campers tried to **illuminate** their tents with flashlight and candles.

“**illuminate**” means \_\_\_\_\_.



## Conclusion

The five types of context clues assist you to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Whenever you encounter an unknown word, it is advised not to stop reading and look up the meaning from dictionary. Keep reading, surrounding words or sentences encourage you to find out the meaning of the unknown word. The important skill for using context clue is knowing what the clue in the sentence and which type of clue should be used in each case.

## Activity

I. Work in pairs. Discuss together and identify meaning, clue and type of clue in each sentence.

1. Thomas conducted a research about **biometeorology** that is a study of the interaction between atmospheric condition and living organism.

**Biometeorology** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Education in England is **egalitarian**; that is, all students are equal and learn the same materials.

**egalitarian** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

3. **Flu** or cold are usually relevant to temperature changes.

**Flu** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

4. When you have a breathing problem, it can often lead to **pneumonia**.

(lung disease).

**pneumonia** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

5. University students have **moral sense** but primary students are innocent.

**moral sense** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

6. The economy of Thailand is based on **agriculture** for example rice, rubber, sugar, fish etc.

**agriculture** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

7. The **anatomical features** of the respiratory system include the trachea, bronchitis, lung and diaphragm.

The **anatomical features** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Many people were **favorable** toward the Harry Potter movie. They saw it more than three times.

**favorable** means \_\_\_\_\_

Clue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Type of clue: \_\_\_\_\_

## References

Craven, M. (2003). **Developing Reading Keys**. Oxford: Macmillan.

Lohday, K. (2016). **Essential Reading Skills for College Students**. Pathumthani:  
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