**Learning to Use Context Clues**

Everyone comes across words they do not know as they read, particularly, while reading complex text. To find out unfamiliar words meanings while reading, a common strategy of efficient readers is the use of clues the author leaves behind. These clues are called context clues. Unfortunately, students can have difficulty locating or using clues effectively. The information throughout this paper provides explicit examples in the effective use of clues to identify the meanings of new words in context while reading.

*Context clues* are words, phrases, sentences, and punctuation surrounding an unfamiliar word that can explicitly define the word or hint at its meaning. Readers can find enough information in text to figure out the meaning of an unknown word.

As an example, examine the paragraph on probability from Joy Hakim’s *The Story of Science: Newton at the Center.*  Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books: 2005, cited in the Appendix B, pg. 137 of the Common Core Standards. Think aboutthe clues provided for the meaning of the word *probability*:

*Probability*, a branch of mathematics, began with gambling. Pierre de Fermat (of the famous Last Theorem), Blaise Pascal, and the Bernouillis wanted to know the mathematical odds of winning at the card table. Probability didn’t tell them for certain that they would or wouldn’t draw an ace; it just told them how likely it was. A deck of 52 cards has 4 aces, so the odds of the first drawn card being an ace are 4 in 52 (or 1 in 13).

If 20 cards have been played and not an ace among them, those odds improve to 4 in 32 (1 in 8). Always keep in mind that probability is about the likelihood of outcomes, not the certainty. If there are only 4 cards left in the deck, and no aces have been played, you can predict with certainty that the next card will be an ace-but you’re not using probability; you’re using fact. Probability is central to the physics that deals with the complex world inside atoms. We can’t determine the action of an individual particle, but with a large number of atoms, predictions based on probability become very accurate.

The clues within the passage alert readers to understand that probability refers to gambling, mathematical odds, a level of uncertainty, and the likelihood of outcomes.

Authors keep their writing interesting by not telling all--- by leaving something to the readers’ imagination. In the following example, Nathaniel Hawthorne does not tell the reader the meaning of *mendicant:*

Mr. Medbourne, in the vigor of his age, had been a prosperous merchant, but had lost all by a frantic speculation, and was now little better than a *mendicant.*

The reader knows Mr. Medbourne was once “prosperous” but he “lost all” which tells the reader that *mendicant* has something to do with being poor. In fact, the word means “beggar.”

In this case, the reader considers antonyms—words that are opposite in meaning to prosperous.

**Punctuation**

Writers use punctuation to provide clues to the meanings of unknown words. In the examples below, the use of a comma and the word “or” indicate that what follows is a definition of the word. A clue that a synonym or definition will follow is the use of a comma or a dash.

To protect against the attacks of the Enlightenment, they waged a war of *censorship*, or restricting access to ideas and information.

The new literature, the arts, science and philosophy were regular topics of discussion in *salons*, informal social gathers at which writers, artists, philosophes, and others exchanged ideas.

New kinds of musical entertainment evolved during this era. Ballets and operas-plays set to music-were performed at royal courts.

In fiction text, commas often signal the writer providing a clue. Here is an example from Jack London’sTheSea Wolf:

But Wolf Larson seemed *voluble, prone to speech* as I had never seen him before.

Signal words that offer clues that the text provides a definition of a difficult word include *or, is called, that is,* and *in other words, also known as, also called, which is,* and *that is.* These words signal that a definition or restatement will be provided by the writer.

**Definition and Restatement**

Sometimes a writer will directly define a word that is probably unfamiliar to the reader. For example, the following sentence contains the word *encomienda*.

Spanish noblemen lived in large estates called *encomiendas*.

Spanish noblemen lived in *encomiendas*, estates given to Spaniards in the new world beginning in 1503.

Writers don't always state the definition directly. Often they will restate the word in a less precise form with other types of context clues mixed in:

Juan de Valdez de Ortega de Ramone governed his large estate magnanimously from the third floor of his mansion as natives worked the fields and scrubbed the high walls. His *encomienda* was the cleanest in the country.

**Concrete Examples**

Writers sometimes give examples that illustrate and clarify a difficult concept or idea. The

examples the writer uses help you determine the meaning of the new word. Again, writers will often use signal words –*such as, including, for instance, to illustrate, are, examples of,* and *for example* --to let the reader know examples will follow. Notice how the writer provides examples of what the baroque style is:

“In the age of Louis XIV, courtly art and architecture were either in the Greek and roman tradition or in a grand, complex style known as *baroque.* Baroque paintings were huge, colorful, and full of excitement. They glorified historic battles or the lives of saints. Such works matched the grandeur of European courts.”

From this example we learn the baroque style was grand, complex, huge colorful, full of excitement and glorified battles and the lives of saints. The reader can infer a style that appealed to the aristocracy as expressing triumphant power and control, particularly when thinking about the age of Louis XIV.

Here’s an example from Essentials of Anatomy and Physiology, the writer gives examples to clarify the concept of *foreign antigens:*

“Antigens can be divided into two groups: foreign antigens and self antigens. *Foreign antigens* are introduced from outside the body. Components of bacteria, viruses, and other microorganisms are examples of foreign antigens that cause disease.”

**Contrast Clues**

Sometimes the writer will use the opposite meaning to clarify an unknown word. Notice how John Berendt in Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil illustrates for the reader the appositive meaning of *elegance.*

Williams was wearing gray slacks and a blue cotton shirt turned up at the sleeves. His heavy black shoes and thick rubber soles were oddly out of place in the *elegance* of Mercer House, but practical; Williams spent several hours a day on his feet restoring antique furniture in his basement workshop. His hands were raw and callused, but they had been scrubbed clean of stains and grease.

From the paragraph, the reader learns what *elegance* is **not**; the reader infers elegance has to do with classiness, style, and beauty.

**Description Clues**

Writers sometimes use context clues that describe what a word means. Here in the story Brown Wolf, by Jack London, the description helps a reader understand the meaning of unsociable.

A most *unsociable* dog he proved to be, resenting all their advances, refusing to let them lay hands on him, menacing them with bared fangs and bristling hair.

**Conjunctions Showing Relationships**

Writers sometimes link unfamiliar words with familiar words using conjunctions (*and, but, or, nor, for, yet, since, because, even though, if, just as, when, whenever, until,* and *although)*. In the following passage from The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde, notice how the word *portrait* can be determined by the reader using the phrase after the conjunction “but”.

“How sad it is!” murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own *portrait.* “How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrid, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it was only the other way! If it was I who were to be always young, and the picture that were to grow old! For this–for this–I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give!”

These examples provide teachers and students with a way to understand structural context clues within a variety of texts (literary, mathematical, scientific). These descriptions and text exemplars will help students learn new words as they read.