

STRATEGY LESSON

Using Context Clues to Figure Out Tough Words



Introduction

Developing expertise with this strategy leads to independence in reading and improved comprehension, for students learn to explore the clues authors embed in texts that enable them to clarify the meaning of new words and phrases. Show students how to discover a word's meaning by exploring clues in the sentence, in sentences that come before or after the unknown word, and in illustrations, diagrams, photographs, and charts.

Materials

overhead transparency and projector or chart paper; sample sentences from a textbook, fiction, or nonfiction

Guidelines

1. On the transparency or chart paper, print three or four difficult sentences and/or passages that you've taken from students' reading. (See sample sentence at right.)
2. Uncover samples one at a time. I read the selection from Seymour Simon's *The Brain*. First, I read the sentence with the word *dominant*. Then, I back up and read the sentence that came before the one I just read.
3. Think aloud, showing students how you use the clues to determine a word's meaning. Here's what I told students for the passage from *The Brain*:
"I couldn't find the meaning of dominant from the sentence, so I reversed and read the sentence starting with If. In that sentence it uses similar examples, but with the right hand. It explains that with right-handed people, the left hemisphere of the brain is in control. So dominant must mean in control for the right hemisphere."

Sample Sentence

If you usually kick with your right foot and point with your right hand, then your left hemisphere is in control. But if you usually use your left foot and left hand, your right hemisphere is **dominant**. (unpaged)

—from *The Brain: Our Nervous System*, by Seymour Simon (Morrow)





Standardized Test Link: Using Context Clues

Students can improve their scores on the vocabulary and reading comprehension sections of standardized tests if they can readily detect the meaning of a word by using context clues. Repeatedly practicing this strategy will help students avoid the tendency to skip over the word or guess a meaning—as was the case with one of my sixth graders, who thought the word *oracle* “sounded like a statue or something.”

4. Continue the process with the second sample.
5. Have students study the third sample. In their journals, students can jot down the context clues they used.
6. Call for volunteers to share the clues they uncovered.

Suggestions for Guided Practice

1. Repeat the demonstration several times during a couple of guided practice sessions with the entire class.
2. Have partners work together, using their independent-reading books, and help one another use context clues to figure out unfamiliar words.
3. Work one-on-one with students who need additional practice using their instructional and independent-reading books.
4. Invite students who have internalized the strategy to do so to work independently.

Robb’s Examples for Sixth-Grade Mini-Lesson

Following are three excerpts from readings that I use to model how context clues can help readers clarify a word’s meaning.

I put the excerpts on an overhead transparency and read the first example to the entire class. Next, I think aloud, explaining how I used clues to figure out a word’s meaning. Here is how I approached number 1:

“You watch.” He grips the bars hard, and his eyes drill into me.
“You watch for a chance to strike against the murdering, thieving lobsterbacks. Be **vigilant**, and your chance will come.”

—*The Keeping Room* by Anna Myers, page 76 (Walker)

My think aloud: *The sentence with vigilant doesn’t give me good clues, so I better reread the sentences that came before. [I reread these aloud.] Two*



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6. Ask students to explain what conclusions they can draw about the other characters in the dialogue. A student focuses on the nurse and says: “She [the nurse] can’t handle Kenji’s honesty. She asks him how he could know he will die. Then she is caring about Sadako who is also very sick. I know that because the nurse wheels Kenji away so Sadako won’t hear anymore.”

When I ask, “Why does Sadako deny that Kenji has leukemia and then suggest that Kenji make paper cranes?” another student points out: “She first denies that Kenji has leukemia by saying, ‘You weren’t even born then.’ I think she’s trying to convince herself that she wasn’t born then, either, and can’t be that sick. Sadako puts thoughts of her illness aside and tries to comfort Kenji when she suggests he make cranes. But Sadako has still not connected Kenji’s fate to her own, for she wonders what it would be like to be sick like Kenji and have no family.”

PROMPTS THAT SUPPORT INFERRING FROM DIALOGUE AND INNER THOUGHTS

As you teach students to infer from characters’ words, actions, and thoughts, you can scaffold their learning with these prompts:

- ◆ Why did the character say that [restate the words]?
- ◆ Why were the inner thoughts different from the spoken words?
- ◆ Why won’t the character say her/his inner thoughts out loud?
- ◆ Does the situation or setting for the dialogue help you draw conclusions about the character’s feelings? thoughts? personality?
- ◆ Using events that came before these words, explain what motivated the character to speak this way.
- ◆ How does the tone of voice you imagine for the character help you understand his or her mood? feelings?
- ◆ Try to visualize the character’s expression and gestures. What can you infer from these?
- ◆ Can you select words the character says that enable you to infer feelings, attitude, personality, inner conflicts?