

Lesson 1

What Is Context?



What can you tell about the object pictured above? Write “yes,” “no,” or “can’t tell” in answer to each of the following questions.

1. Is it something produced by nature?

2. Is it larger than a human hand?

3. Is it a piece of jewelry?

4. Is it a weapon?

5. Is it widely used today?

Your answer to most of these questions was probably “can’t tell,” since the illustration above simply doesn’t provide enough information to help you. Now look at the next drawing.



Return to the previous questions. You should be able to answer several more. The difference between the two illustrations is that the first shows only the object, while the second shows it being used. Another way of saying this is that the second illustration shows the object in a context.

The same situation often applies to words. When we speak of the **context** of a word, we mean the other words that come before and after it in the sentence or paragraph of which it is a part. The context of a word often contains clues to its meaning.

Exercise

Read the following sentences and try to figure out the meanings of the italicized words. Select the best meaning for each word from the list below. Write its letter on the line in front of the sentence.

- _____ 1. She was *loath* to admit that her shameful failure had been largely her own fault.
- _____ 2. His *jocose* account of the meeting had us all laughing.
- _____ 3. Her duties as president were so *onerous* that they left her little time or energy for herself.
- _____ 4. We paid only a *nominal* rent for the cottage, because we were willing to take care of the upkeep.
- _____ 5. Their meeting on the train was simply *fortuitous*, because neither had known of the other's plans.
- _____ 6. A scholar from the museum was consulted to determine the *provenance*, or origin, of the manuscript.
- _____ 7. The man *bartered* a fine horse in exchange for a sack of flour.
- _____ 8. A common trick of *legerdemain* is to pull a rabbit from an apparently empty hat.
- _____ 9. Centuries ago, the cost of eyeglasses was so *exorbitant* that only the wealthy could afford them.
- _____ 10. After losing my wallet and getting sick, I thought I had reached the *nadir* of my week, but today was even worse.
- | | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| a. small | g. vicious |
| b. expensive | h. burdensome |
| c. source | i. magic |
| d. unwilling | j. humorous |
| e. traded | k. accidental |
| f. sickly | l. lowest point |

Lesson 2

More About Context Clues

Look at the italicized word in the three sentences below.

- A. With such a *luxuriant* head of hair, Joan can wear the fanciest styles.
- B. Down by the spring the honeysuckle has run wild, a *luxuriant*, almost jungle-like growth.
- C. The front of the building was covered with such elaborate, *luxuriant* decoration that it almost hid the door.

Circle the best meaning for *luxuriant*.

- a. stylish
- b. sweet-smelling
- c. rich, abundant
- d. artistic

You know that sometimes it may be hard to recognize an object seen by itself. If it is completely unfamiliar you may have no way of telling what it is until you see it in use, in a **context**. The same thing is true of words. Although *luxuriant* is not exactly defined in any of these sentences, you can get a little information from each sentence about the meaning of the word—rich and abundant.

In addition to helping you understand unfamiliar words, context clues can also help you understand the many familiar words that have more than one meaning.

Exercise A

You certainly know the word *dog*, but in the sentences below, *dog* is used in several different ways. Read the sentences and then select from the list that follows the word or phrase that best fits the meaning of *dog* in each sentence. Write its letter on the line provided.

- _____ 1. The great detective would *dog* his enemy to the ends of the earth.
 - _____ 2. The *dog* fox guarded the door to his den.
 - _____ 3. In moving to a new home the young couple lost one brass *dog* of a set they had bought for the fireplace.
 - _____ 4. I asked the waiter for a *dog* with mustard and onions.
 - _____ 5. "Some *dog* has emptied all the ice trays and not refilled them," she shouted from the kitchen.
- a. frankfurter
 - b. follow
 - c. male
 - d. support for wood
 - e. rascal
 - f. afflict

The word *dog* may have been used in ways that were new to you in some of the sentences above. But you should have been able to guess the meaning from the context of the sentence.

Lesson 4

Direct and Indirect Context Clues

Sometimes a sentence with an unfamiliar word also includes a word or phrase that directly explains it. Such words or phrases are called direct context clues.

Exercise A

Read the example sentences and answer the questions that follow.

- A. The people of Babylon in ancient *Mesopotamia* (present-day Iraq) used a *cuneiform* (kyü nē ə fôrm), or wedge-shaped, style of writing.
- B. Cuneiform writing was not *deciphered* until the middle of the nineteenth century when an English soldier and traveler named Henry Rawlinson discovered the meaning of the characters.
1. In sentences A and B above, underline the direct context clues that tell you the meanings of the italicized words.

Sometimes direct context clues come immediately after the words they explain and are indicated by punctuation such as commas, dashes, or parentheses. But often they appear in another part of the sentence.

None of the sentences C through F contains a word or phrase that directly explains the italicized word. But you can understand the meaning of the word by using indirect context clues.

Indirect context clues are information the sentence contains about the meaning of a word other than a direct definition.

- C. Another nineteenth-century student of cuneiform, George Smith, was a *recluse* who avoided any contact with his fellow scholars at the British Museum.
2. Circle the best meaning for *recluse*.
- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| a. gossip | c. politician |
| b. shy person | d. salesman |
- D. One day in 1872 Smith was *electrified* when he discovered a startling likeness in a cuneiform inscription he was reading to the story of Noah and the Ark.
3. Circle the best meaning for *electrified*.
- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| a. burned | c. bored |
| b. thrilled | d. interested |
- E. Smith was so excited by his discovery that he *cavorted* around, surprising other students with his unscholarly behavior.
4. Circle the best meaning for *cavorted*.
- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| a. jumped | c. limped |
| b. walked | d. looked |

F. When his *paroxysm* had been succeeded by his usual quiet, he looked again at the inscription and discovered that it contained about half the story of the Flood.

5. Circle the best meaning for *paroxysm*.

- a. walk c. meal
b. outburst d. nap

Exercise B

The following sentences continue the passage begun above. Decide whether each of the context clues is direct or indirect, placing a check on the correct line.

1. The inscription Smith had found was a small part of a much longer *epic*, the tale of the heroic adventures of an ancient king, Gilgamesh.

direct _____ indirect _____

2. In one *episode*, the portion of the tale Smith had first discovered, Gilgamesh hears an account very like the biblical story of the Flood, from its survivor, Atram-hasis.

direct _____ indirect _____

3. Like his biblical *counterpart*, Noah, Atram-hasis is warned of the coming Flood and builds a great ship into which he takes his family and many animals.

direct _____ indirect _____

4. In the Babylonian story, it rains only six days and six nights, instead of the biblical forty, but the resulting *deluge* still drowns everyone except Atram-hasis and his family.

direct _____ indirect _____

5. Although he had always lived the *sedentary* life of a scholar, Smith now left it for a dangerous expedition to Mesopotamia, where he found the missing portions of the story.

direct _____ indirect _____

Lesson 5

Clues in Longer Contexts

Read the following paragraph and try to figure out the meaning of the italicized word.

The watery part of the earth's surface is *colossal*. It covers more than seventy percent of the planet. It is so much bigger than the dry part that the earth from space appears a lovely, cloud-streaked blue.

1. What is the meaning of *colossal*?

2. Did you find context clues for its meaning inside or outside the sentence in which *colossal* appears?

Often context clues for the meaning of an unfamiliar word are found outside the sentence in which the word appears. For example, there are no good clues for the meaning of *colossal* in the sentence in which it appears. But the paragraph as a whole contains information that provides good clues for the meaning of *colossal*—huge.

If the sentence containing an unfamiliar word does not provide good clues to the meaning of the word, first look at the rest of the paragraph of which the sentence is a part, and then at the paragraphs immediately before and after it.

- (A) There are twenty-six large classifications under which scientists group all living animals. Members of all these major classes live in the sea.
- (B) The basic food chain in the sea begins with *plankton*. First, the plant forms of this kind of life are eaten by the animal forms. Then these animal forms are eaten by small fish. These small fish in turn are food for larger fish or sea mammals.
- (C) It wasn't until 1848 that a Danish scientist discovered that some of these tiny forms of life that drift with the ocean currents are plants and some are animals.

Notice that you are not given a clue about the definition of *plankton* until the third paragraph.

Exercise

Read the following passage and try to figure out the meanings of the italicized words. Remember that the context clues for a word can be anywhere in the passage. Then answer the questions that follow.

- (A) One *anomaly* in the basic food chain of the sea—plankton eaten by small fish who are, in turn, eaten by big fish—is the case of the *baleen* whales. These whales are very large. One of them, the blue whale, is

the largest animal that has ever lived. Its *gargantuan* stomach can hold more than two tons of food.

- (B) These whales are an exception to the rule in the food chain because, despite their great size, these whales feed directly on small, pink, shrimplike plankton that are only inches long.
- (C) These tiny creatures, called *krill*, live in vast numbers in the cold waters of the Antarctic. Unlike shrimp, which become pink only when they are cooked, they are this color when alive, making huge pink patches on the sea when they feed near the surface.
- (D) The whales get their name from the substance that grows in place of teeth in their upper jaws. It is very light, strong, and elastic, and grows together in long, thin plates that strain the tiny creatures the whales eat from the water.

1. What is the meaning of *anomaly*?

2. Which paragraph contains a good clue to its meaning?

3. What is the meaning of *gargantuan*?

4. What two clues helped you determine its meaning?

5. What is the meaning of *baleen*?

6. Which paragraph contains a good clue to its meaning?

7. What is the meaning of *krill*?

8. Which paragraph contains a good clue to its meaning?

Lesson 6

When Context Doesn't Help

suspect
 permit
 some persons
 clandestinely, but I co
 "What's all the secrecy for?
 way. I told him no
 as quickly as I
 walked the block or so to the
 and there found the
 exonerated"

Is this scrap of paper part of a friendly note or an important clue to a mystery? Could it have been torn from someone's diary, or is it part of a short story? Just *what* can you tell about it?

Read the following questions and determine whether it is possible to answer any of them based on the information provided on the paper scrap. If you can't determine the answer, write "can't answer" on the blank.

1. Use whatever context clues there are to write the meaning of *clandestinely*.

2. Does *suspect* mean "a person who might be guilty" or "to doubt"?

3. Does *permit* mean "a written order or license" or "to let something be done"?

4. Is the note telling about *some persons* who were involved? Or could it be describing those persons as "handsome" or "quarrelsome"?

5. Use whatever context clues there are to write the meaning of *exonerated*.

If you answered the last four questions, you were guessing without evidence. Only the first question could be answered with context clues found in the note. If you connected *clandestinely* with the next line, you might have decided that it meant "secretly." There is no way to tell what any of the other words mean. You would have to find the rest of the note and use context or the dictionary.

Sometimes the unfamiliar words you find will not have enough context clues to help you. You may have to skip over a word and hope that you will find more context clues later. Or you may have to go to the dictionary. The important thing is to learn when the context of an unfamiliar word will help you and when it won't.

Exercise

Read the following sentences and then select the best meaning for each of the italicized words from the choices below. Write the letter of your choice on the line in front of the sentence. If there are not enough context clues to give you the meaning, write *d*, "can't tell."

- _____ 1. She thought that chicken soup was a *panacea* that could help any sick person.
a. flavor c. smell
b. cure-all d. can't tell
- _____ 2. The preacher's sermon was full of *opprobrium*.
a. praise c. scorn
b. comfort d. can't tell
- _____ 3. John's views were too *partisan* to be trusted.
a. prejudiced c. confused
b. silly d. can't tell
- _____ 4. The dough was a heavy, *glutinous* mass that clung to the bowl and my fingers.
a. slippery c. floating
b. sticky d. can't tell
- _____ 5. The woman lives in a *secluded* house on a quiet street.
a. hidden c. lovely
b. new d. can't tell