

PARENT TEACHING TIPS

... on Reading and Context Clues

By Bill Welker, EdD

In today's column, we are going to investigate clues ... "context clues." Your child can often determine what an unknown word means by its use in context, be it literature, mathematics, social studies, science, health, etc.

But first, let me explain what context is in reading. Context is the written setting – sentences, paragraphs and chapters in which the unknown words are found. And note, the meaning of words can change, depending on their contextual usage in a textbook. Now consider the correct answers for these three multiple choice items:

1. Cabinet is:

- A. A case or cupboard used for storage.**
- B. A governmental advisory group.**
- C. An upright case housing a radio or television.**

2. Model is:

- A. A miniature representation of something.**
- B. A person employed to display clothes.**
- C. An individual that poses for an artist.**

3. Stage is:

- A. The height of a river's surface.**
- B. A part of a theater.**
- C. Produced for public viewing.**

No doubt you are confused as to which answers are correct. Well, read the following statements. Then go back and check off the correct answers.

1. The president's CABINET will meet tomorrow.
2. Making MODEL airplanes is a relaxing hobby.
3. The students will STAGE a campus demonstration tonight.

The preceding activity clearly demonstrates how context plays a very important role in figuring out the meanings of words. Likewise, your subject area textbooks often contain many types of contextual clues that can help students understand word meanings. Below are eight of the more prevalent "word meaning" clues found in textbook materials.

1. *Direct Definition or Explanation Clue:* It is usually very easy to recognize this context clue. The words "is" and "means" often are indicators that a definition or explanation will follow.

Example: A *meteor* is a piece of comet or asteroid that lights up the sky because of friction with the Earth's atmosphere.

2. *Example Clue:* Sometimes writers use examples to help the reader understand the meaning of a new word.

Example: Mr. Jones has *arthritis*; the joints of his fingers are swollen and painful.

3. *Words-In-A-Series Clue:* The reader can get an idea about what a word's meaning if a series of related terms is associated with it.

Example: The street was jammed with all kinds of *vehicles*, including cars, buses, bicycles, and various commercial trucks.

4. *Synonym Clue:* An unknown word is identified through the use of a different word that has a similar meaning.

Example: You should always cut meat with an *acute*, or sharp knife.

5. Comparison or Contrast Clue: A new word is compared or contrasted with a word of idea already known.

Example: A *machete*, like a sword, can be very dangerous.

6. Familiar Expression or Figure of Speech Clue: Widely used phrases are utilized to help the readers understand the meaning of a new word.

Example: Our guest was very *somnolent*. He slept like a log.

7. Circumstance Clue: The situation or event in which a new word is found assists the reader in determining the meaning of the word.

Example: John was going on a train trip. When he got on the east-bound train, the conductor asked, “What is your *destination*? He replied, “I’m going to New York City.”

8. Mood Clue: The unknown word is associated with words or phrases that stress the mood the writer is conveying to the reader.

Example: There was not a ripple on the quiet lake. And swans could be seen gently gliding along the surface of the water. It was a very *placid* scene.

Keep in mind, sometimes there are no context clues in the written setting to assist you in determining the meaning of a word. When this happens, consult the textbook’s glossary (if there is one), a dictionary or the teacher.

In essence, the mystery of word meanings is much simpler to solve when you learn to search your textbook for clues ... context clues.

Parent Proverb

“The impossible is often untried.”

- Jim Goodwin

Next Month’s Column: “The Wild World of Figurative Language”

(Editor’s Note: Dr. Bill Welker is a retired reading specialist who was a K-12 classroom teacher for 40 years. He is a former “Teacher of the Year” recipient awarded by the Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce. His e-mail is mattalkwv@hotmail.com.)