

UNIT 4

Using Vocabulary Knowledge for Effective Reading

Guessing Unknown Vocabulary

What do you usually do when you come to a word you do not know in your reading? Do you

- look it up in the dictionary?
- ask your teacher?
- ask another student or a friend?
- first try to guess what it means?

The best strategy is *d*, first try to guess what the word means.

If you answered *a*, *b*, or *c*, then you are not reading as effectively and efficiently as you could be.

Guessing is the best strategy. Guessing

- is fast because you don't have to interrupt your reading.
- helps your comprehension because you stay focused on the general sense of what you are reading.
- helps build vocabulary because you are more likely to remember the words.
- allows you to enjoy your reading more because you don't have to stop often.

Guessing Word Meaning in Context

When you try to guess the meaning of an unknown word, you use the text surrounding the word—the context.

Example a:

Sometimes you can guess the meaning of a word from the other words in the sentence. Try to guess the meaning of *gargantuan* in this sentence:

Some of the trees in Redwood National Park are truly gargantuan, and in fact they are the tallest trees in the world.

You can guess from the last part of the sentence that *gargantuan* means "very large."

Example b:

Sometimes you need to read several sentences in order to guess the meaning of an unknown word.

Do you know the meaning of the word *misogynist*? If not, try to make a guess:

A misogynist is _____

Now read these sentences and then try again to guess what *misogynist* means.

- a. Mary realized that Mr. Ashman was a misogynist soon after she started working as his assistant.
- b. It is difficult for a woman to work for a misogynist. She is never sure if his criticism is based on her work or on the fact that she is a woman.
- c. Mary knew that no woman would ever get a top-level job in a company run by a misogynist.

A misogynist is _____

We know from sentence *a* that a misogynist is a man (Mr. Ashman). From sentence *b* we learn that a misogynist may sometimes criticize a woman just because she is a woman. Then from *c* we understand that a misogynist may not be fair to women. From these sentences, we can conclude that a misogynist is someone who dislikes women.

Exercises 1–4 will help you develop the skill of guessing vocabulary from the context. While you are doing the exercises

- do not use a dictionary!
- do not talk about the vocabulary with other students until you have tried to make a guess on your own and everyone else has finished.
- do not try to translate the unknown words into your own language. Instead, you should try to describe them or give words with similar meanings in English.

EXERCISE 1

Guess the meaning of each word from the context of the sentences below it. Compare your answers with those of another student.

1. What does *porch* mean? _____

On nice days, old Mrs. Willows always sat out on her front porch and watched the people pass by.

After lunch in summer, we always moved out to the porch, since there was usually some wind there, but we were protected from the sun.

2. What does *soggy* mean? _____

The window had been left open during the storm, and the papers on my desk were a soggy mess.

We gathered up the soggy towels and bathing suits and hung them all in the sun to dry.

3. What does *sketch* mean? _____

Many artists make a pencil sketch of their subject before they start to paint it.

Mr. Johnson showed me a rough sketch of the house he is planning to build.

4. What does *shrink* mean? _____

I washed the T-shirt in cold water so it wouldn't shrink.

If you want to have enough spinach for dinner, you need to buy a lot. It shrinks to almost nothing when you cook it.

5. What does *peak* mean? _____

When he won the race at the Olympics, he was at the peak of his career.

It took us all day to climb to the peak of Mount Mansfield.

6. What does *swell up* mean? _____

Jill's skating accident made her foot swell up until she could no longer wear her shoe.

Poor Simon! After he had his tooth pulled out, the whole side of his face swelled up.

EXERCISE 2

Guess the meaning of each word from the context of the sentences below it. Compare your answers with those of another student.

1. What does *turn up* mean? _____

Don't worry about the book that you lost. I'm sure it will turn up.

Do you remember the umbrella I couldn't find last week? It turned up in the back of the car.

2. What does *lid* mean? _____

William took the lid off the pot to see what his mother was cooking for supper.

Sometimes the lid to the honey jar gets stuck, and it's hard to get it off.

3. What does *glance* mean? _____

I always glance at the headlines in the morning, but I rarely have time to read the whole newspaper.

As he ran up the stairs of the school, William glanced at his watch—late again!

4. What does *promptly* mean? _____

Gerald always came home promptly on Tuesdays so that he could watch his favorite TV show.

The firefighters arrived promptly and were able to stop the fire from spreading to other houses.

5. What does *foul* mean? _____

We were all shocked by the foul language the little boy was using.

With the windows closed for so long, there was a foul smell in the room.

6. What does *dew* mean? _____

In the early morning, you could see the dew on every leaf and every branch.

When we got up, the tent was wet with dew outside, but we were warm and dry inside.



reading Strategy

What to Do When You Find a New Word

It's important to guess the meaning of new words from the context—and not use a dictionary—whenever possible. This is easy if the context is clear. Here are some clues that will help you avoid using a dictionary.

1. Definition:

A metaphor is something that stands for another thing or idea.

2. Definition or synonym after a comma or dash or in parentheses:

Metaphor, a kind of symbol, is an important analytical concept.

3. Examples after *such as*, *for instance*, *for example*, or *e.g.*:

They buy real estate such as houses, office buildings, and land.

They bought luxury items—e.g., Rolls Royces and Rolex watches.

4. Opposites:

Political symbols may seem trivial, but they are actually very important, and people take them seriously.

5. The reader's own experience:

Black is the color of mourning; at a funeral people wear black clothing.

6. Information in another part of the sentence or another sentence:

In some countries, each child has a separate bedroom. In other countries, siblings of the same sex share a bed, which emphasizes interdependence of family members.

7. The expressions *in other words*, *that is*, and *i.e.*:

Food can be used to distinguish different categories of rank; in other words, people of certain levels of social status are prohibited from eating certain foods.

8. Logic:

In many cultures, long hair is a symbol of sexuality. Short hair symbolizes restraint, while a shaved head often indicates celibacy.

Frequently, it's possible to guess *something* about a new word, but you can't guess the exact meaning. In this case, you still probably don't need a dictionary.

Example: Anthropologists observe and record what a culture does, believes, and says. They do this in part by discussing material with informants. (Here you can guess that informants are people who provide information, but you don't know if they are inside or outside the culture. Is it important to know this? Probably not. Often, you will learn more about a word as you keep reading.)

Sometimes it's not possible to guess the meaning *at all* because the context is too limited. In this case, you need to decide how important the word is; if it isn't essential, don't worry about it. Just keep reading. If the word is essential—if you can't understand a paragraph without it—you'll need to use a monolingual dictionary.