

How to Use Context Clues to Define Words

Context Clue:

A word or phrase in the same sentence or a nearby sentence that can help the reader decipher the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

Type	Explanation & Tips	Example
Definition Clue	A definition clue is a word or phrase that defines the unfamiliar word. Look for words or phrases that introduce a definition for the unfamiliar word, such as defined as, means, and refers to. Also, look for punctuation marks that set off a definition, such as quotation marks, parentheses, and brackets.	Telepathy is defined as the ability to communicate information to another person without the use of any known senses or communication devices.
Synonym Clue	A synonym clue is a word or phrase that has a similar meaning to the unfamiliar word. Look for words or phrases that introduce a synonym, such as in other words, or, that is to say, and also known as. Also, look for punctuation marks that set off a synonym, such as commas, parentheses, dashes, and brackets.	The cheerleader appeared vapid – spiritless – as he delivered his pitiful performance in front of the stands.
Contrast Clue	A contrast clue is a word or phrase that has the opposite meaning of the unfamiliar word. In other words, it's an antonym. Look for words or phrases that introduce a contrast, such as however, but, instead of, on the other hand, on the contrary, whereas, in contrast, unlike, although, and even though.	Lions are solitary creatures that prefer to hunt alone, but hyenas are gregarious creatures that hunt in packs.
Example Clue	An example clue is a word or phrase that provides an example to illustrate the unfamiliar word. Look for words or phrases that introduce examples, such as for example, for instance, to illustrate, like, and such as.	The manager disliked obsequious behavior, such as fawning and kowtowing.
Experiencing Clue	An experience clue draws upon personal experience or background knowledge to help you infer the meaning of the unfamiliar word. Look for a word, phrase, or sentence that includes a familiar experience or information you already know.	Television audiences are familiar with disingenuous ads that make grand promises.
Adjacent Clue	An adjacent clue is a word or phrase in a nearby sentence that explains the meaning of the unfamiliar word.	Nanotechnology is becoming more widespread in society. As computer chips continue to shrink, manufacturers are placing them in everything from clothing, to building materials, to even the human body.