

**COMPETENCY 1.0 DETERMINE THE MEANING OF WORDS AND PHRASES IN CONTEXT****Skill 1.1 Use context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words or words with multiple meanings.**

**Context clues** help readers determine the meaning of words they are not familiar with. The context of a word is the sentence or sentences that surround the word.

Read the following sentences and attempt to determine the meanings of the words in bold print.

The **luminosity** of the room was so incredible that there was no need for lights.

If there was no need for lights then one must assume that the word luminosity has something to do with giving off light. The definition of luminosity is: the emission of light.

Jamie could not understand Joe's feelings. His mood swings made understanding him somewhat of an **enigma**.

The fact that he could not be understood made him somewhat of a puzzle. The definition of enigma is: a mystery or puzzle.

Familiarity with word roots (the basic elements of words) and with prefixes can also help one determine the meanings of unknown words.

Following is a partial list of roots and prefixes. It might be useful to review these.

<b><u>Root</u></b>	<b><u>Meaning</u></b>	<b><u>Example</u></b>
aqua	water	aqualung
astro	stars	astrology
bio	life	biology
carn	meat	carnivorous
circum	around	circumnavigate
geo	earth	geology
herb	plant	herbivorous
mal	bad	malicious
neo	new	neonatal
tele	distant	telescope

<u>Prefix</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Example</u>
un-	not	unnamed
re-	again	reenter
il-	not	illegible
pre-	before	preset
mis-	incorrectly	misstate
in-	not	informal
anti-	against	antiwar
de-	opposite	derail
post-	after	postwar
ir-	not	irresponsible

### Word forms

Sometimes a very familiar word can appear as a different part of speech.

You may have heard that *fraud* involves a criminal misrepresentation, so when it appears in its adjective form *fraudulent* ("He was suspected of fraudulent activities."), you can make an educated guess.

You probably know that something out of date is *obsolete*; therefore, when you read about "built-in *obsolescence*," you can detect the meaning of the unfamiliar word.

### Practice Questions: Read the following sentences and attempt to determine the meanings of the underlined words.

- Farmer John got a two-horse plow and went to work. Straight furrows stretched out behind him.

The word furrows means

- (A) long cuts made by plow
- (B) vast, open fields
- (C) rows of corn
- (D) pairs of hitched horses

- The survivors struggled ahead, shambling through the terrible cold, doing their best not to fall.

The word shambling means

- (A) frozen in place
- (B) running
- (C) shivering uncontrollably
- (D) walking awkwardly

## Answers:

1. (A) is the correct answer. The words “straight” and the expression “stretched out behind him” are your clues.
2. (D) is the correct answer. The words “ahead” and “through” are your clues.

\* \* \*

The context for a word is the written passage that surrounds it. Sometimes the writer offers synonyms—words that have nearly the same meaning. Context clues can appear within the sentence itself, within the preceding and/or following sentence(s), or in the passage as a whole.

### Sentence clues

Often, a writer will actually **define** a difficult or particularly important word for you the first time it appears in a passage. Phrases such as *that is*, *such as*, *which is*, or *is called* might announce the writer’s intention to give just the definition you need. Occasionally, a writer will simply use a synonym (a word that means the same thing) or near-synonym joined by the word *or*. Look at the following examples:

*The credibility, that is to say the believability, of the witness was called into question by evidence of previous perjury.*

*Nothing would assuage or lessen the child’s grief.*

**Punctuation** at the sentence level is often a clue to the meaning of a word. Commas, parentheses, quotation marks and dashes tell the reader that a definition is being offered by the writer.

*A tendency toward hyperbole, extravagant exaggeration, is a common flaw among persuasive writers.*

*Political apathy--lack of interest--can lead to the death of the state.*

A writer might simply give an **explanation** in different words that you can understand in the same sentence:

*The xenophobic townspeople were suspicious of every foreigner.*

Writers also explain a word in terms of its opposite at the sentence level:

*His incarceration was ended, and he was elated to be out of jail.*

## Adjacent sentence clues

The context for a word goes beyond the sentence in which it appears. At times, the writer uses adjacent (adjoining) sentences to present an explanation or definition:

*The 200 dollars for the car repair would have to come out of the contingency fund. Fortunately, Angela's father had taught her to keep some money set aside for just such emergencies.*

Analysis: The second sentence offers a clue to the definition of *contingency* as used in this sentence: "emergencies." Therefore, a fund for contingencies would be money tucked away for unforeseen and/or urgent events.

## Entire passage clues

On occasion, you must look at an entire paragraph or passage to figure out the definition of a word or term. In the following paragraph, notice how the word *nostalgia* undergoes a form of extended definition throughout the selection rather than in just one sentence.

*The word nostalgia links Greek words for "away from home" and "pain." If you're feeling nostalgic, then, you are probably in some physical distress or discomfort, suffering from a feeling of alienation and separation from loved ones or loved places. Nostalgia is that awful feeling you remember the first time you went away to camp or spent the weekend with a friend's family—homesickness or some condition even more painful than that. But in common use, nostalgia has come to have more sentimental associations. A few years back, for example, a nostalgia craze had to do with the 1950s. We resurrected poodle skirts and saddle shoes, built new restaurants to look like old ones, and tried to make chicken à la king just as mother probably never made it. In TV situation comedies, we recreated a pleasant world that probably never existed and relished our nostalgia, longing for a homey, comfortable, lost time.*

**Skill 1.2 Recognize the correct use of commonly misused pairs (e.g., affect/effect) in a passage.**

Students frequently encounter problems with homonyms—words that are spelled and pronounced the same as another but that have different meanings such as *mean*, a verb, “to intend”; *mean* an adjective, “unkind”; and *mean* a noun or adjective, “average.” These words are actually both homonyms and homographs (written the same way).

A similar phenomenon that causes trouble is heteronyms (also sometimes called heterophones), words that are spelled the same but have different pronunciations and meanings. (In other words, they are homographs that differ in pronunciation or, technically, homographs that are not homophones). For example, the homographs *desert* (abandon) and *desert* (arid region) are heteronyms (pronounced differently); but *mean* (intend) and *mean* (average) are not. They are pronounced the same, or are homonyms.

Another similar occurrence in English is the capitonym, a word that is spelled the same but has different meanings when it is capitalized and may or may not have different pronunciations. Example: *polish* (to make shiny) and *Polish* (from Poland).

Some of the most troubling homonyms are those that are spelled differently but sound the same. Examples: *its* (third-person singular neuter pronoun) and *it’s* (“it is”); *there*, *their* (third-person plural pronoun) and *they’re* (“they are”); and *to*, *too*, and *two*.

Some homonyms/homographs are particularly complicated. *Fluke*, for instance, is a fish, a flatworm, the end parts of an anchor, the fins on a whale’s tail, and a stroke of luck.

**Common misused words:**

**Accept** is a verb meaning to receive or to tolerate. **Except** is usually a preposition meaning excluding. **Except** is also a verb meaning to exclude.

**Advice** is a noun meaning recommendation. **Advise** is a verb meaning to recommend.

**Affect** is usually a verb meaning to influence. **Effect** is usually a noun meaning result. **Effect** can also be a verb meaning to bring about.

**Allusion** is an indirect reference. **Illusion** is a misconception or false impression.

**Add** is a verb meaning to put together. **Ad** is a noun abbreviating the word advertisement.

**Ain't** is a common nonstandard contraction for the contraction **aren't**.

**Allot** is a verb meaning to distribute. **A lot** can be an adverb that means often, or to a great degree. It can also be a noun meaning a large quantity.

**Allowed** is an adjective that means permitted. **Aloud** is an adverb that means audibly.

**Bare** is an adjective that means naked or exposed. It can also indicate a minimum. As a noun, **bear** is a large mammal. As a verb, **bear** means to carry a heavy burden.

**Capital** refers to a city; capitol refers to a building where lawmakers meet. **Capital** also refers to wealth or resources. As an adjective, **capital** means first and foremost.

A **chord** is a noun that refers to a group of musical notes. **Cord** is a noun meaning rope or a long electrical line.

**Compliment** is a noun meaning a praising or flattering remark. **Complement** is a noun that refers to something that completes or makes perfect.

**Climactic** is derived from climax, the point of greatest intensity in a series or progression of events. **Climatic** is derived from climate; it refers to meteorological conditions.

**Discreet** is an adjective that means tactful or diplomatic; **discrete** is an adjective that means separate or distinct.

**Dye** is a noun or verb used to indicate artificially coloring something. **Die** is a verb that means to pass away. **Die** is also a noun that means a cube-shaped game piece.

**Effect** is a noun that means outcome. **Affect** is a verb that means to produce an effect.

**Elicit** is a verb meaning to bring out or to evoke. **Illicit** is an adjective meaning unlawful.

**Emigrate** means to leave one country or region to settle in another. **Immigrate** means to enter another country and reside there.

**Hoard** is a verb that means to accumulate or store up. **Horde** is a noun that means a large group.

**Lead** is a verb that means to guide or serve as the head of. (**Led** is the past tense of **lead**.) **Lead** is also a noun that is a type of metal.

**Medal** is a noun that means an award. **Meddle** is a verb that means to involve oneself in a matter without right or invitation. **Metal** is an element such as silver or gold. **Mettle** is a noun meaning toughness or courage.

**Morning** is a noun indicating the time between midnight and midday. **Mourning** is a verb or noun pertaining to the period of grieving after a death.

**Past** is a noun meaning a time before now (past, present and future). **Passed** is past tense of the verb "to pass."

**Piece** is a noun meaning a portion. **Peace** is a noun meaning harmony or the opposite of war.

**Peak** is a noun meaning the tip or height or the highest point. **Peek** is a verb that means to take a brief look. **Pique** is a verb meaning to incite or raise interest.

**Principal** is a noun meaning the head of a school or an organization or a sum of money. As an adjective, it means most important. **Principle** is a noun meaning a basic truth or law.

**Rite** is a noun meaning a special ceremony. **Right** is an adjective meaning correct or direction. **Write** is a verb meaning to compose in writing.

**Than** is a conjunction used in comparisons; **then** is an adverb denoting time.

**There** is an adverb specifying place; it is also an expletive. (Expletive: There are two plums left.) **Their** is a possessive pronoun. **They're** is a contraction of they are.

**To** is a preposition; **too** is an adverb; **two** is a number.

**Your** is a possessive pronoun; **you're** is a contraction of *you are*.

Strategies to help students conquer these demons: Practice using them in sentences. Context is useful in understanding the difference. Drill is necessary to overcome the misuses.

To effectively teach language, it is necessary to understand that as human beings acquire language, they realize that words have denotative and connotative meanings. Generally, denotative words define, and connotative words deal with mental suggestions that the words convey. The word skunk has a denotative meaning if the speaker intends the word to identify the actual animal. Skunk has connotative meaning depending upon the tone of delivery, the socially acceptable attitudes about the animal, and the speaker's personal feelings about the animal.

### Problem Phrases

Correct	Incorrect
Supposed to	Suppose to
Used to	Use to
Toward	Towards
Anyway	Anyways
Couldn't care less	Could care less
For all intents and purposes	For all intensive purposes
Come to see me	Come and see me
En route	In route
Regardless	Irregardless
Second, Third	Secondly, Thirdly

### Other confusing words

**Lie** is an intransitive verb meaning to recline or rest on a surface. Its principal parts are lie, lay, lain. **Lay** is a transitive verb meaning to put or place. Its principal parts are lay, laid, laid.

Birds lay eggs.  
I lie down for bed around 10 PM.

**Set** is a transitive verb meaning to put or to place. Its principal parts are set, set, set. **Sit** is an intransitive verb meaning to be seated. Its principal parts are sit, sat, sat.

I set my backpack down near the front door.  
They sat in the park until the sun went down.

**Among** is a preposition to be used with three or more items. **Between** is to be used with two items.

Between you and me, I cannot tell the difference among those three Johnson sisters.

**As** is a subordinating conjunction used to introduce a subordinating clause. **Like** is a preposition meaning “similar to” that is followed by a noun or a noun phrase.

As I walked to the lab, I realized that the recent experiment findings were much like those we found last year.

**Can** is a verb that means to be able. **May** is a verb that means to have permission. They are only interchangeable in cases of possibility.

I can lift 250 pounds.  
May I go to Alex’s house?

**Skill 1.3 Determine the meaning of figurative or colloquial language in a passage.**

1. Simile: Direct comparison between two things. “My love is like a red-red rose.”
2. Metaphor: Indirect comparison between two things. The use of a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action in place of another to suggest a comparison between them. While poets use them extensively, they are also integral to everyday speech. For example, chairs are said to have “legs” and “arms” although we know that it’s humans and other animals that have these appendages.
3. Parallelism: The arrangement of ideas in phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that balance one element with another of equal importance and similar wording. An example from Francis Bacon’s *Of Studies*: “Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.”
4. Personification: Human characteristics are attributed to an inanimate object, an abstract quality, or animal. Examples: John Bunyan wrote characters named Death, Knowledge, Giant Despair, Sloth, and Piety in his *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The metaphor of the arm of a chair is a form of personification.
5. Euphemism: The substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive term for one that might offend or suggest something unpleasant. Many euphemisms are used to refer to death to avoid using the real word--such as “passed away,” “crossed over,” or “passed.”
6. Hyperbole: Deliberate exaggeration for effect or comic effect. An example from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*:  
Why, if two gods should play some heavenly match  
And on the wager lay two earthly women,  
And Portia one, there must be something else  
Pawned with the other, for the poor rude world  
Hath not her fellow.

7. Climax: A number of phrases or sentences are arranged in ascending order of rhetorical forcefulness. Example from Melville's *Moby Dick*:  
"All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*."
8. Bathos: A ludicrous attempt to portray pathos—that is, to evoke pity, sympathy, or sorrow. It may result from inappropriately dignifying the commonplace, using elevated language to describe something trivial, or demonstrating greatly exaggerated pathos.
9. Oxymoron: A contradiction in terms that is deliberately employed for effect. It is usually seen in a qualifying adjective whose meaning is contrary to that of the noun it modifies, such as "wise folly."
10. Irony: Expressing something other than and particularly opposite the literal meaning, such as words of praise when blame is intended. In poetry, it is often used as a sophisticated or resigned awareness of contrast between what is and what ought to be and expresses a controlled pathos without sentimentality. It is a form of indirection that avoids overt praise or censure. An early example: the Greek comic character Eiron, a clever underdog who by his wit repeatedly triumphs over the boastful character Alazon.
11. Alliteration: The deliberate repetition of consonant or vowel sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables. In its simplest form, it reinforces one or two consonant sounds. Example: Shakespeare's Sonnet #12:  
When I do count the clock that tells the time.  
Some poets have used more complex patterns of alliteration by creating consonants both at the beginning of words and at the beginning of stressed syllables within words. Example: Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples"  
The City's voice itself is soft like Solitude's
12. Onomatopoeia: The naming of a thing or action by a vocal imitation of the sound associated with it, such as "buzz" or "hiss" or the use of words whose sound suggests the sense. A good example: from "The Brook" by Tennyson:  
I chatter over stony ways,  
In little sharps and trebles,  
I bubble into eddying bays,  
I babble on the pebbles.