Use Context to Clarify Vocabulary

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Use nearby words, examples, restatements, contrasts, actions, and setting details to infer the meaning of unfamiliar or multiple-meaning words. Then cite context clues, test a plausible alternative, and distinguish a meaning supported by context from a nuance or cause the text does not establish.

Use context, then test a meaning

Context is the words and details around a target word. Try this sequence: (1) read the whole sentence and nearby sentences; (2) mark the clue words, examples, contrasts, actions, or setting; (3) suggest one or two meanings; (4) try each meaning in the sentence and check it against all the clues; (5) state what the excerpt still does not tell you. A clue may narrow a word to a broad meaning without proving its exact shade. A familiar word may also have more than one dictionary sense; the surrounding sentence helps show which sense fits here.

The barren room

Invented instructional example.

After the set crew carried every chair and prop out of the theater’s side room, the room looked barren. The bare walls held no posters, the single shelf held no objects, and volunteers planned to bring tables the next day.

Modeled practice

Read “The barren room.” Identify two details around barren. Which meaning fits this scene best? Consider a different sense of barren that might be found in a dictionary. Explain why the context supports one meaning here and what the excerpt does not prove. Then compare your reasoning with the model.

> Here, barren most likely means empty or lacking furnishings. The chairs and props were carried out, the walls have no posters, and the shelf holds no objects. Barren can also describe land that cannot support much plant growth, but this scene is about a room, not soil or crops. The excerpt shows the room is bare now; it does not tell us whether it is usually unused or why the room was cleared.

Two guided excerpts

Invented instructional example.

A. The visitor sign was concise. It used four short lines to name the entrance, two room numbers, and the last tour time, with no extra description.

B. Devin was reluctant to audition. He walked up to the sign-up sheet, looked at the empty name line, started writing, then capped the pen and waited until a friend invited him to go together.

Guided practice

Work through A and B with a partner. For concise, choose a likely meaning and underline the words that support it. Explain why concise does not automatically mean “clear” or “incomplete.” For reluctant, identify the actions that show hesitation or unwillingness. Name one possible reason Devin might hesitate, then explain why the excerpt does not establish that reason. Use only the words in each excerpt.

Partner notes for A and B

Two independent excerpts

Invented instructional example.

A. On the club's fictional canal map, a blue arrow beside the water was labeled current. In the story, a paper boat and two floating leaves drifted past the footbridge in the same direction as the arrow.

B. The copied route map was inaccurate. Its key labeled the west trail as east, drew a bridge where the written route said there was none, and listed room 12 where the posted room number was 21.

Independent practice

Work through A and B on your own. For each target word, write a meaning that fits, cite at least two context details, and explain why one plausible alternative meaning or interpretation fits less well. End by naming one thing each excerpt does not establish. Use the organizer if helpful; the excerpts, not outside guesses, are your evidence.

Independent response: A and B

Context clue organizer

Use this optional organizer for both independent excerpts, A and B. Write evidence from each excerpt before you choose a meaning. The organizer gives steps and space but does not give the answers.

A · “current”: two details around the word

Meaning that fits best

Another meaning and why it fits less well

B · “inaccurate”: two details around the word

Meaning that fits best

A plausible alternative and why it fits less well

A · One thing excerpt A does not establish

B · One thing excerpt B does not establish