

Use Context to Clarify Vocabulary

L04 · v0.1.2 · Teacher guide and answer key

In this estimated 40-minute lesson, learners use nearby words, examples, restatements, contrasts, actions, and setting details to infer the meaning of unfamiliar or multiple-meaning words. They 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

Teacher directions

Audience: Grade 6 ELA. Provisional Grade 6 ELA authoring target. No wider grade fit or local curriculum alignment is claimed.

Prerequisites: Learners can read or listen to a short fictional excerpt and point to a word or sentence. No prior lesson on a particular vocabulary strategy is required.

Materials: Learner pages in print or editable format.; Pencil; a highlighter is optional.; Board or display for the model; optional.; A dictionary may be used after an initial context-based response to compare possible senses, not to replace the text evidence.

Estimated preparation: 5 minutes. Basis: Estimate to review the five excerpts, keys, and optional board model and prepare learner copies; not tested.

Estimated teaching: 40 minutes. Basis: Planning estimate: opening 3 minutes, strategy 5, model 8, guided practice 10, independent response 12, closure 2. Not classroom-timed or learner-tested.

Before teaching (about 5 minutes, estimate): read the five excerpts and keys, prepare learner copies, and optionally write the word bank on a board. No slide deck or external passage is needed.

Opening — 3 minutes (estimate): write two original sentences: “Mara sat on the bank beside the creek.” and “Mara took coins to the bank to deposit them.” Ask what nearby words help each sense fit. Note that context helps select a sense; it does not make every possible meaning true.

Strategy — 5 minutes (estimate): introduce the learner sequence. Model reading beyond the target word, marking exact clue words, offering a candidate meaning, and trying it back in the excerpt. Point out restatement, example, contrast, action, and setting clues. Remind learners that context may support a broad meaning while leaving nuance uncertain.

Model — 8 minutes (estimate): read “The barren room.” Think aloud through the chairs/props, bare walls, and empty shelf. Select “empty or lacking furnishings.” Compare the plant-growth sense of barren and explain why it does not fit a room with no plants or soil. Do not claim that the room is always unused or explain why it was cleared.

Guided practice — 10 minutes (estimate): partners work with concise and reluctant. Ask them to underline the exact support before they settle on a meaning. For reluctant, separate observable hesitation from a guessed motive such as nervousness or disinterest. Accept equivalent meanings when the clue-based explanation fits.

Independent response — 12 minutes (estimate): learners complete both short excerpt entries for current and inaccurate. The organizer is optional and does not supply meanings. Score meaning, context evidence, alternative analysis, and limits separately; do not grade one preferred synonym or sentence pattern.

Closure — 2 minutes (estimate): ask each learner to name one clue type and finish “Context supports ____ because ____; it does not tell me ____.” Do not treat one response as a measure of general vocabulary mastery.

Shortened 30-minute option (estimate): opening 2 minutes; strategy 4; model 6; guided practice 7; independent response 9; closure 2. Keep both independent words and the comparison with plausible alternatives. Reduce partner share-out, not the evidence or uncertainty step. Untested planning estimate.

Support: If reading or holding several clues in mind is a barrier, read the excerpt aloud or use text-to-speech, chunk it by sentence, and let learners mark one clue at a time. The target remains choosing and justifying a meaning from context. If writing is not the target, an oral or pointing-plus-explanation response may show the same vocabulary reasoning; record the response mode. Confirm individual access needs locally; generic suggestions do not replace an access plan.

Extension: For an extension, invite learners to choose a familiar multiple-meaning word such as “draft” and write two short fictional contexts that make different senses fit. Each context should include at least two clues and a tempting alternative sense that does not fit. A partner underlines the clues and explains which sense the context supports and what remains uncertain. Do not use a real person’s private information.

Do not preview the target definitions before the learner’s first attempt. After an initial response, a dictionary may be used to compare possible senses, but learners should return to the passage and explain which sense fits its clues. Do not present a word list as proof that one sense is correct.

Common confusions: “concise” can be brief without being clear; “reluctant” shows hesitation but does not identify its cause; “inaccurate” means errors are present, not necessarily that the map is unfinished; “current” has more than one sense, and context selects the water-flow sense in this excerpt. Accept concise paraphrases, not only dictionary wording.

All five excerpts and the opening sentences are original fictional instructional examples. No external factual source or official standards alignment is claimed. Grade 6 ELA and timing remain provisional.

L04-TASK-MODEL — intended evidence: Learner uses the room’s missing furnishings to infer “empty,” rejects a land-specific sense, and limits the claim to the room’s current contents.

L04-TASK-GUIDED — intended evidence: Learner supports “brief” and “hesitant” with exact clues and does not claim the context establishes Devin’s reason.

L04-TASK-INDEPENDENT — intended evidence: Learner uses context to justify each meaning, weighs an alternative against the clues, and names what remains unstated.

L04-KEY-MODEL — key for L04-TASK-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.

The context names several absent objects and identifies the place as a room. Those details support the “empty/lacking furnishings” sense. The plant-growth sense is a real possible sense in another context, but nothing here concerns land, soil, or crops. The excerpt supports the room’s present condition; it does not establish its normal use or the reason for clearing it.

“Barren” means mostly empty here because the chairs, props, posters, and shelf objects are gone. The land sense does not fit a room; we do not know why it is empty.

Accept “empty,” “bare,” “without furnishings,” or another accurate paraphrase grounded in the scene. A learner may say “unused” is possible, but should note that the passage does not establish usual use. Do not require a soil/plant-growth dictionary formulation; accept any clear contrast showing that sense does not fit this room context.

Scoring criteria: L04-C01, L04-C02, L04-C03, L04-C04

L04-KEY-GUIDED — key for L04-TASK-GUIDED

A. Concise means brief or expressed in few words. “Four short lines” and “no extra description” support that meaning, while the lines still name the entrance, room numbers, and tour time. Concise does not prove the sign is clear, and it does not mean essential information is missing. B. Reluctant means hesitant or not eager to act. Devin approaches and starts writing but stops, caps the pen, and waits for an invitation. Nervousness, shyness, lack of interest, or wanting company could be possible, but the excerpt does not say why Devin hesitates.

The first excerpt supplies direct length cues and also shows that the short sign contains practical details. That supports brevity, not a judgment about clarity. The second excerpt gives a sequence of actions consistent with hesitation. It gives no statement of Devin’s feelings or motive, so a specific cause remains uncertain.

For A, “short and to the point” fits because the sign has four short lines and no extra description. It might be clear too, but the excerpt does not test that. For B, Devin seems hesitant because he starts writing, then stops and caps the pen; the text does not tell why.

Accept “brief,” “compact,” or “using few words” for concise; do not treat “clear,” “simple,” or “complete” as guaranteed synonyms. Accept “hesitant,” “unwilling,” or “not eager” for reluctant. Accept a possible reason only when clearly labeled as a possibility, not as a fact established by the excerpt.

Scoring criteria: L04-C01, L04-C02, L04-C03, L04-C04

L04-KEY-INDEPENDENT — key for L04-TASK-INDEPENDENT

A. Current most likely means the movement or flow of the canal water. The word is beside a blue arrow near the water, and the paper boat and leaves drift in the arrow’s direction. “Happening now” is another sense of current, but that meaning does not explain the arrow or the shared direction of the floating objects. The excerpt does not give the water’s speed or explain who drew the arrow. B. Inaccurate means not correct or not matching the route information: west is labeled east, a bridge is shown where the written route says there is none, and 12 is printed instead of 21. “Unfinished” is a possible description of a draft in other situations, but this excerpt gives errors, not missing sections; it does not tell why the copy is wrong or whether more edits are planned.

In A, the map arrow, water setting, and repeated direction of the boat/leaves identify the water-flow sense of current rather than the time-related sense. In B, three specific mismatches support incorrectness. The excerpt does not say the map is incomplete or explain the source of the errors. Learners may phrase the

meaning differently, but their clues must match the excerpt and their alternatives must be evaluated against those clues.

A: The current is the water's movement because the arrow is beside the canal and the boat and leaves drift the same way; it does not mean "happening now." We do not know its speed. B: Inaccurate means wrong because the direction, bridge, and room number do not match; the passage does not say how the errors happened.

Accept water flow or the direction in which the water moves for A; "happening now" is a valid dictionary sense but not a fit for these clues. Accept incorrect, wrong, or not matching the route details for B. A learner may call the map unclear as an effect, but the listed evidence specifically supports incorrectness. Do not infer an unfinished state, intent to mislead, or reason for the errors.

Scoring criteria: L04-C01, L04-C02, L04-C03, L04-C04

Scoring criteria and extensions

L04-C01 — scoring criterion

States a meaning that fits the target word's use in the specific excerpt, rather than selecting a dictionary sense without context. Example: "Barren" means empty of furnishings in the room scene; "current" means water movement in the canal excerpt. Alternatives: Accept accurate paraphrases and familiar or unfamiliar dictionary wording when the explanation shows the sense that fits this context. Do not require technical vocabulary.

L04-C02 — scoring criterion

Points to at least two accurate, relevant context clues and explains how they support the proposed meaning. Example: The west/east mismatch and wrong room number show the copied map is inaccurate. Alternatives: Accept different relevant clue combinations. A clue named without explaining its connection is partial evidence.

L04-C03 — scoring criterion

Examines a plausible alternative meaning or interpretation and explains why it fits less well, or notes when context supports more than one close paraphrase. Example: "Happening now" is a sense of current, but it does not explain why a boat and leaves drift in the arrow's direction. Alternatives: Do not require one exact distractor or dictionary definition. Credit a reasoned alternative analysis, including an explicit statement that the passage does not resolve a fine shade of meaning.

L04-C04 — scoring criterion

Names a reasonable limit on the inference and does not invent a cause, motive, fact, or precision absent from the excerpt. Example: The passage does not reveal why Devin hesitated or how quickly the canal water moved. Alternatives: A learner may offer a possible explanation if clearly labeled as a possibility; do not score an unsupported explanation as a fact.