

Context Clues

What Are Context Clues?

Context clues have a powerful effect on students' comprehension of words and sentences. Context clues are the syntactic (structural) and semantic (meaning) clues that help a reader to identify an unknown or difficult word. They are the "hints" about the meaning or pronunciation of an unknown word based on the words, phrases, or sentences that surround it.

Syntactic clues relate to the sentence structure or grammar of the English language. For example, in the sentence, *I can ride a _____*, the syntax, or the way the sentence is structured, indicates that the missing word must be a noun. It would not be structurally correct to say, *I can ride a jumping*. That sentence does not "sound right".

Semantic clues relate to the accumulated meaning of the sentence. In the previous example, *I can ride a _____*, the syntax required the word to be a noun. However, it cannot be just any noun. Semantics narrows the possible word choices to those nouns that would fit with the meaning of the sentence. It would not "make sense" to say, *I can ride a tangerine*. The semantics or meaning of the sentence dictates that the missing word must be something that can be ridden.

Context clues are useful in a number of ways. Readers use context clues to:

- Help them confirm the pronunciation of a word they are trying to decode.
- Resolve ambiguity and arrive at the correct pronunciation of multiple meaning words (e.g. *lead a parade* versus *a lead pipe*).
- Determine a possible meaning of an unknown word.
- Accelerate their reading rate.

Although context clues play an important role in effective reading, research also confirms that the use of context clues is limited for purposes of word learning. The use of context alone will rarely lead to the identification of an exact word. It will narrow the possibilities; however, the reader must orchestrate or cross-check, the use of the visual, graphophonic information about the word (phonics/decoding strategy), the structure of the sentence (syntax), and the meaning of the sentence (semantics) to determine the exact word in a text.

What Are the Instructional Implications of the Research?

There are two major implications of the research on context clues that can impact reading instruction (see the reading research section for a summary of the research on context clues).

1) Teach students how to use context clues

Teachers model the use of context clues when reading and help to guide students to use them as they read. Using prompts such as, “Does that sound right?” to focus a reader’s attention on structural errors and “Does that make sense?” to focus a reader’s attention on meaning errors, helps students become aware of the importance of context to reading.

2) Teach students to use context clues in concert with the phonics/decoding strategy (graphophonic clues)

Effective reading instruction addresses the appropriate use of context clues. Research has shown that skilled readers are able to quickly and effortlessly identify words based on their letter composition and they use context clues to confirm or clarify. Poor readers over-rely on context. It is important to teach students to coordinate and cross-check their use of graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic clues to read effectively.

Context Clues Resources

Contents:

Question Stems that Build the Use of Context Clues

Question Stems that Develop the Use of Context Clues

The following question stems can be used in small-group or independent reading settings to prompt student's thinking about the use of context clues. When a student encounters a problem with an unknown word while reading, the teacher may use one of the following prompts:

- “You said ____, does that make sense?”
- “You said ____, does that sound right?”
- “It could be ____, but look at ____.”
- “Can the rest of the sentence help you?”
- “Try that again and think about what would make sense.”
- “Try that again and think about what would sound right.”
- “How did you know it was ____?”
- “Try that again.”