# MODULE INTENSIVE READING
**(PBI 221)**

## MODULE SESION 14

## GUESS WORDS MEANING FROM THE CONTEXT

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# Guess meaning from the context

## What is context?

It is the sentence or sentences around a word. The context can tell you a lot about a word. These exercises can help you learn about context. Some words are missing in each story. You must use the context to find the right words. First read the story. Think about the context for each missing

word. Then look for the right words.

## Example:

Mara Milvaney is 36 yearsold. Mara and her family live in a small _____ in Australia.

What is the missing word?

| horse | meat | girl | town | yard |
|-------|------|------|------|------|
|       |      |      |      |      |

The missing word is **town.** It is the only word that is good for this context. A family does not live in a horse, a meat, a girl, or a yard.

## Guessing Word Meaning

Context can help you understand new words. You read the context (the sentences) around the new word. Then you make a guess about the meaning. In these exercises, you can learn to guess from the context. When you are doing the exercises, do not use a dictionary. Do not ask your teacher or your classmates. After you finish each exercise, you can check the meanings. Then you can use a dictionary or ask your teacher.

**Example:**

1. We have a little white cat. She is always hungry. We give her milk in a bowl on the kitchen floor. She drinks all the milk in a very short time. Then she wants more!

What is a bowl? *It's a large cup*

## Guess meaning from the context

When you encounter an unfamiliar word, a good strategy is to infer (or guess) its meaning from the context. You may not always be able to infer an exact meaning, but you can often get the general meaning—enough to continue reading with understanding. You can benefit from this strategy in three ways:

• It allows you to continue reading and stay focused on the ideas in the text.

• It helps you develop a more complete understanding of the word and the way it is used.

• It helps you remember the word in the future.

Obviously you do not have a dictionary in the exam so there are likely to be a lot of words from the reading text that you do not understand and you cannot check. If you come across a word you do not understand, then you cannot spend a lot of time working out its meaning because you only have 20 minutes for each reading.

## Therefore, guessing meaning from context is necessary.

This means work out what it means (or have a good guess at least) from the words that are around it and from the topic of the paragraph. Take a look at this **example:**

It had been raining hard through the night so the ground was saturated.

What does 'saturated' mean?

You may already know, but if you do not, you should be able to have a **good guess from the rest of the sentence.**

It had been raining which means the ground must be wet. It was raining 'hard' so this means the ground is probably very wet.

*saturated = completely wet*

By doing this you are **guessing meaning from context** and you should try and use this technique for words you do not know.

It may not always be clear from the actual sentence and you may have to look at other sentences around the word.

However, only do this for words that seem important for an understanding of the text. If it looks like they are not, then leave it and move on with the reading. You probably won't have time to do it with every word, especially if you are at a lower reading level.

## Guidelines for Inferring Meaning from the Immediate Context

• Analyze the way a word is used in a sentence. What part of speech is it (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.)?

• Look at the words that are used with it. These often help determine meaning. For example, if it is an adjective, what is the noun? If it is a verb, what is the subject?

• Think about the topic and the meaning of the sentence. How does the word fit in?

**Example:**

**Follow the guidelines above to infer the general meaning of the underlined word in each of the three sentences below. Then write the inferred meaning (in English or another language). Do not use a dictionary.**

The president's spokesman said that it was too early to comment on the outcome of the meeting. One unfortunate outcome of the elections was that both parties were weaker than before. The outcome of hospital-based treatment was clearly better than home-based treatment.

Inferred meaning: the result or effect of something

## Using Context to Choose a Dictionary Definition

If you are able to infer the general meaning of a word from the context, you can make better use of the dictionary. In fact, many words have more than one definition and you need to choose the most appropriate one. For example, the word laugh (as a verb) has eleven different definitions in the Longman Advanced American Dictionary. Definitions for the word get cover three pages!

## Guidelines for Choosing a Definition in the Dictionary

- Determine the part of speech of the unknown word. This is necessary because there may be several dictionary entries for one word as different parts of speech.

- Look at the words that are used with it. If it is a part of a frequent combination of words, the definition may be listed separately. For example, you will find

separately numbered definitions for sign up and sign off. The same is true of on sight and sight unseen (both listed in the dictionary under sight).

- Analyze the context for clues to the general meaning of the word.

- Think about the topic and the meaning of the sentence in which the word is found.

- Look at the definitions listed in the dictionary and choose the most appropriate one—the one that best fits the way the word is used in the sentence.

**Example:**

**A. Read the sentence, write the part of speech of the underlined word, and choose the most appropriate definition. Follow the guidelines for choosing a dictionary definition.**

Finally managing to wrench herself free, she turned and stared at him. Part of speech: verb

Definitions:

1. to use your strength to pull yourself away from someone who is holding you

2. to take someone away from somewhere without their permission

3. to twist a joint in your body suddenly and painfully

## Inferring the Meaning of a Word in a Paragraph

Beyond the immediate context of the sentence, you can also find clues to the meaning of an unknown word in the larger context of a whole paragraph. In the following exercises you will practice inferring meaning from a whole paragraph, with a nonsense word in the place of a real word.

*Example:*

*Read the following paragraph and answer the questions about the underlined nonsense word.*

As the harmful effects of mropping on health have become widely known, many cities and some countries have passed laws that limit where it is allowed. In many places, mropping is no longer permitted in restaurants and bars. Owners of restaurants and bars were against the laws because they believed that their businesses would suffer, but that happened only in the first few months. After that, business returned to normal. The laws have also had another positive effect, apart from making the air cleaner for everyone: More people have given up mropping altogether.

a.     What part of speech is it? noun

b.     What words are found around it? effects of mropping, mropping is no longer permitted, more people have given up mropping

c.     What word or phrase could replace it? smoking

## Using the Larger Context to Infer Meaning

Sometimes you cannot infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word by using just the sentence or paragraph in which it appears. You need to read more of the surrounding text to look for clues to its meaning.

## Guidelines for Using the Larger Context to Infer Meaning

•      Determine the part of speech.

•      Look at the words that are used with it.

•      Think about the meaning of the sentence and the topic of the passage.

- Notice if the word is repeated elsewhere in the passage or if the writer has used any synonyms ( words with the same meaning) or antonyms (opposites).

- Look for an explanation or definition of the word somewhere else in the passage (especially in a textbook).

- Infer an approximate meaning of the word.

- Read the sentence with your meaning instead of the original word. Does it make sense? If not, check steps 1-5 again (or look in a dictionary!).

## Learn new words from your reading

Learn new words every week. It is important to write new words.

You can remember them much better that way. Here is a good way to learn new words:

a. Write the new word. Be sure the spelling is correct.

b. Write the sentence (or sentences) around the word from your reading.

c. Write the meaning of the new word in English or in your own language.

## Guessing meaning from context

Guessing from context refers to the ability to infer the meaning of an expression using contextual clues. These clues may be purely linguistic or situational:

- Linguistic context: the linguistic environment in which a word is used within a text

- Situational context: extra-linguistic elements that contribute to the construction of meaning this may involve background knowledge of the subject.

What this amounts to is that learners should be able to infer the meaning of an unknown word using:

1.    the meaning of vocabulary items that surround it;

2.    the way the word is formed;

3.    background knowledge of the subject and the situation.

## Techniques for guessing

Texts are often full of redundancy and consequently, students can use the relation between different items within a text to get the meaning. Our prior knowledge of the world may also contribute to understanding what an expression means.

- Synonyms and definitions:
    - o Kingfishers are a group of small to medium-sized brightly colored birds
    - o When he made insolent remarks towards his teacher they sent him to the principal for being disrespectful

- Antonym and contrast
    - o He loved her so much for being so kind to him. By contrast, he abhorred her mother

- Cause and effect
    - o He was disrespectful towards other members. That's why he was sent off and penalized.

- Parts of speech

  o Whether the word is a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb, functioning as a subject, a predicate or an object.

  Examples

  o Trojan is an example of a computer virus

- Word forms (the morphological properties of the word)

  o Getting information from affixes (prefixes and suffixes) to understand a word. Examples: dis- (meaning not), –less (meaning without)…

- General knowledge

  o The French constitution establishes laïcité as a system of government where there is a strict **separation of church and state.**

These techniques help students get the meaning of words or at least narrow the possibilities. If need be using the dictionary should be the last resort to fine tune the understanding of a vocabulary item.

## Using context

When you guess the meaning of a word from context, you need to consider first the immediate context, i.e. the other words in the sentence. If this is not enough, you need to use the wider context, i.e. sentences which come before and after the one which contains the word you are guessing.

## Immediate context

Consider the following sentence:

*Although the company's income from sales was higher than expected, its high costs in the form of salaries and other overheads put it in a* **disadvantageous** *position.*

Imagine the word you want to guess in this sentence is 'disadvantageous' (it doesn't matter if you already know this word - this is just an example). The immediate context of the word tells you the following:

- it is probably an adjective, because it comes before a noun ('position')
- it is probably negative, because it relates to 'high costs', which are not usually good for a company
- it is probably negative, because the sentence begins with 'although', a contrast marker, so the idea in the second clause contrasts with the first clause, which is positive ('high income' is good for a company)

A good guess for the word at this point would be 'bad'. This is probably close enough for you to understand the main idea, and you would be able to keep reading.

## Wider context

Now consider the following paragraph:

*Although the company's income from sales was higher than expected, its high costs in the form of salaries and other overheads put it in a disadvantageous position. This was one of the main reasons why the company folded. This put all two hundred of its employees out of work.*

Imagine the word you want to guess this time is 'folded' (this is a common word, but it has a special meaning in this sentence). The immediate context of the word does not tell you much: it is clearly a verb, but it is difficult to determine more than this using only the sentence it occurs in. To guess the meaning, you need to use the wider context, i.e. the sentences which come before and after. Using these, you can tell the following:

- it is probably negative, because it is the result of the company's 'disadvantageous (bad) position'

- it is something which can happen to companies

- it resulted in all of the company's employees being 'out of work'

From this, you can guess that the word means something like 'stopped' or 'stopped doing business' (because no one works there any more). In fact, 'to fold' in this context means '(of a company etc.) to close because it is not successful'.

## Using prefix, suffix, root

Again consider the following sentence:

*Although the company's income from sales was higher than expected, its high costs in the form of salaries and other overheads put it in a **disadvantageous** position.*

Imagine (again) that the word you want to guess in this sentence is 'disadvantageous'. This word can be broken down into three components: dis-, which is the prefix; advantage, which is the root; and -ous, which is the suffix. You can get the following information by studying the word in this way:

- it is probably an adjective, because it ends in -ous, which is a common suffix for adjectives
- it is probably negative, because it begins with a negative prefix dis-
- its meaning is probably opposite to the root of the word, advantage

As before, a good guess for the word at this point would be 'bad'. Again, this would be close enough to allow you to understand the main idea and keep reading.

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