

Building a strong vocabulary

To read well, you need a strong vocabulary. To build a strong vocabulary, you need read well.

These sentences are a paradox-that is, they seem to express opposite points but, nevertheless, are both true. Together, they state the challenge facing anyone trying to improve their reading skills. In order to read confidently, you have to know many words and you have to know how to figure out the meanings for new words that you discover as you read. Yet the best way to expand your knowledge of words is to read often and in varied content areas. Reading and vocabulary are deeply connected. As you improve your skills in one, you improve your skills in the other.

However, you will get difficulties in reading text with many unrecognized words. There are some keys to recognize word meaning:

1. Structural Clue
2. Word clue
3. Context clue

1. Structural Clue

- a) Some sentences set off the definition for a difficult word by means of punctuation, such as dashes (-), parentheses (), brackets { }, commas.

Example:

To read well, you need a strong vocabulary. To build a strong vocabulary, you need to read well. These sentences are a *paradox*-that is, they seem to express opposite points but, nevertheless, are both true.

The dash (-) and the words in the following is introduced a definition of paradox.

- b) Sometimes helping words, along with punctuation, provide important clues. Some helping words are: *that is, meaning, such as, or, is called*.

Example: Mary felt perturbed; that is, she was greatly disturbed by her sister's actions.

- c) Because some sentences give examples for a new word, you can build a definition.

Example: Select a ***Periodical*** from among the following: Playboy, Time, Reader's Digest, or Seventeen.

The sentence doesn't say that a periodical is a magazine, but you can figure out that out from the examples

2. Word Clue

Occasionally, two words may be put together to form a new word that is not familiar to you. If you look at each word unit, though, you can sometimes recognize the new word. Then you can try to understand the meaning. For example, look at these words:

Rawhide	(raw + hide)
Gentleman	(gentle + man)
Backstage	(back + stage)
Broomstick	(broom + stick)
Paperwork	(paper + work)

Words new to you may contain certain groups of letters that have meanings you can learn. If you don't know what the word itself means, these groups of letter may help you reach a definition.

The root (stem) is the basic part of a word. We add prefixes or suffixes to some roots and create new words.

Example: Introspective

- The root : Spect means "look"

- The prefix intro means “within” or “inward”
- The suffix ive means “to tend to” or “to lean toward”

3. Context clue

We can guess the meaning of the unrecognized words from context clue. Context clue are hints provided by the words and sentences surrounding the unfamiliar word.

- a) Some sentences tell the opposite of what a new word means. From its opposite, you can figure out the meaning of the word.

Example: Parents who constantly spank their children can hardly be called lenient.

Explanation: If you are lenient you do not often punish your children. Merciful or gentle would be a good guess for the meaning of lenient.

- b) Sometimes you can use your own experiences to figure out the definition of a word.

Example: The cacophonous rattling made Maria cover her ears.

A noise that would make you cover your ears would be **unpleasant** or **jarring**.

- c) Sentences before or after a sentence containing a difficult word sometimes explains the meaning of the word.

Example: Mozart gave his first public recital at the age of six. By age thirteen he had written symphonies and an operetta. He is justly called a child **prodigy**.

It would certainly take a remarkably talented person to do a public recital and written symphonies at a very early age. Thus, ‘prodigy’ can be defined as **an extraordinary person**.

- d) Some sentences are written just to give the definitions of difficult words- words that the reader will need to know in order to understand what they are reading.

Example: one of the remarkable features of the Nile valley is fertility of its soil. This rich earth that supported plant growth made it possible for Egyptians to thrive in a dry season.

The second sentence, which tells you that the soil was rich and that is supported plant growth, explains fertility.

- e) Some sentence use a word you do not know to help explain a word you do not know.

Example: A *formidable* enemy is one to be feared.

Formidable - through the clues in this sentence - means *fearful* or *dreadful*.

References

Wiener and Bazerman, 1985, Reading Skills Handbook, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston.