Vocabulary in Context

If you were asked to define the words candid, quelled, and inundated, you might have some difficulty. On the other hand, if you saw these words in the sentences below, chances are you could come up with fairly accurate definitions. To illustrate, see if you can define the words in italics in the three sentences below. Circle the letter of the meaning you think is correct in each case.

1. Since you want a candid opinion of your new pants, I honestly think they are too tight.
   
   **Candid** means
   
   a. complimentary  
   b. straightforward and honest  
   c. creative

2. The kindergarten teacher *quelled* the racket in her classroom by promising that she'd finish the funny story she had started yesterday.

   **Quelled** means

   a. taught  
   b. recorded  
   c. quieted

3. The town was *inundated* with water when the river overflowed during the storm.

   **Inundated** means

   a. flooded  
   b. sprinkled  
   c. blessed

In the sentences above, the context – the words surrounding the unfamiliar word – provides clues to each word’s meaning. You may have guessed from the context that a *candid* opinion is a straightforward and honest one, that *quelled* means “quieted,” and that *inundated* means “flooded.”

Using context clues to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words will help you in several ways:

- It will save you time when reading. You will not have to stop to look up words in the dictionary. (Of course, you won’t always be able to understand a word from its context, so you should always have a dictionary nearby as you read.)
- After you figure out the meaning of the same word more than once through its context, it may become a part of your working vocabulary. You will therefore add to your vocabulary simply by reading thoughtfully.
- You will get a good sense of how a word is actually used, including its shades of meaning.

**TYPES OF CONTEXT CLUES**

There are four common types of context clues:

1. Examples
2. Synonyms
3. Antonyms
4. General Sense of the Sentence or Passage

In the following sections, you will read about and practice using each type. The practices will sharpen your skills in recognizing and using context clues. They will also help you add new words to your vocabulary.
1 Examples

If you are given examples that relate to an unknown word, you can often figure out its meaning. To understand how this type of clue works, read the sentences below. An italicized word in each sentence is followed by examples that serve as context clues for that word. These examples, which are in boldfaced type, will help you figure out the meaning of each word. Circle the letter of each meaning you think is correct.

Note that examples are often introduced with such signal words and phrases as including and such as.

1 There was obviously animosity between Carmen and Jack – they glared at each other and refused to stay in the same room together.

Animosity means
a. space     b. nothing     c. ill will

2 The neighborhood is so affluent that there are Olympic-sized swimming pools, tennis courts, and luxury cars on most properties.

Affluent means
a. wealthy     b. crowded     c. far away

3 The children had only two options after school – either study at school until their mother picked them up or walk the four miles home.

Options means
a. ways to get somewhere     b. choices     c. classes

In the first sentence, the examples of Carmen and Jack’s behavior toward each other suggest that animosity means "ill will." In the second sentence, the examples pools, tennis courts, and luxury cars—show that affluent means "wealthy." Finally, the examples in sentence three indicate that options means "choices."

Practice 1

In each of the sentences below, underline the examples of the italicized word. Then circle the letter of the meaning of the word in italics.

1 The mayor introduced various stringent financial measures, including cutting the police force in half and reducing the pay of all city employees.

Stringent means
a. minor     b. strict     c. expensive

2 My grandmother loves gardening, so her garage is filled with such implements as spades, hoes, and rakes.

Implements means
a. tools     b. junk     c. boxes

3 Under the new contract, stipends for top employees, including wages and transportation allowances, were increased by 10 percent.

Stipends means
a. bonuses     b. payments     c. charges

4. As they moved westward, early pioneers faced many adversities, including unknown routes and loneliness.

Adversities means
a. criminals     b. decisions     c. hardships

From Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills by John Langan Second Edition
5. Large crowds, skyscrapers, and subways are characteristic of an *urban* environment.

*Urban* means

a. country  
b. central  
c. city

### 2 Synonyms

Context clues are often found in the form of _synonyms_: words that mean the same as the unknown word. Synonyms may be purposely included by an author to help readers understand a less familiar word. In such cases, the synonyms are usually set off by special punctuation within the sentence, such as commas, dashes, or parentheses; and they may be introduced by _or_ ("Nuptials, or weddings,...") and that is ("Our work was arduous, _that is_, difficult..."). A synonym may also appear anywhere in a sentence as a restatement of the meaning of the unknown word.

In each of the following sentences, the word to be defined is italicized. Underline the synonym for the italicized word in each sentence.

1. Gaining the help of a _mentor_, that is, a wise and trusted adviser, is helpful when beginning a new job.
2. Kim had _fortified_ the walls of her sand castle with aluminum cans, but that hadn't strengthened them enough to resist the incoming tide.
3. The five-year-old girl must have an _innate_ musical talent; playing piano that well at her age requires an inborn gift.

(Hint: In sentences 2 and 3, a synonym of the italicized word is used later in the sentence to restate the word's meaning.)

You should have underlined "a wise and trusted adviser" as a synonym for _mentor_, "strengthened" as a synonym for _fortified_, and "inborn" as a synonym for _innate_. (Remember, by the way, that you can turn to your dictionary whenever you want to learn to pronounce an unfamiliar word.)

### Practice 2

Each sentence below includes a word or phrase that is a synonym of the _italicized_ word. Underline the synonym of the italicized word in each case.

1. I swore not to reveal Anita's secret, but then I did _divulge_ it to Ted.
2. The children tried to _divert_, or distract, the cat until the baby bird could fly to safety.
3. The trappers left _explicit_ directions to their cabin in the mountains. Without those clear: directions, we might never have made it there.
4. "This is a _poignant_ book, as it is filled with touching stories of the author's days in a small Southern town," wrote the reviewer.
5. Stan was convicted of several _felonies_; as a result of being involved in such serious crimes, he was given a sentence of twenty years.
3 Antonyms

Antonyms – words and phrases that mean the opposite of a word—are also useful as context clues. Antonyms are often signaled by words and phrases such as however, but, yet, on the other hand, and in contrast.

In the sentences below, underline the words that mean the opposite of the italicized words; then circle the letter of the meaning of each word in italics.

1 Novices at bowling throw more gutter balls than people who are experienced at the game.
   Novices means
   a. experts  
   b. beginners  
   c. players

2 The teacher would have achieved better results if she had been as quick to commend students for their successes as she was to criticize them for their failures.
   Commend means
   a. blame 
   b. grade 
   c. praise

3 Most of my friends' mothers seemed ordinary; mine, however, did such bizarre things as speaking to strangers in the supermarket and spraying the dead tree in front of our house green.
   Bizarre means
   a. odd 
   b. easy 
   c. dangerous

   In the first sentence, novices is the opposite of "people who are experienced"; novices thus means "beginners." In the second sentence, the opposite of commend is "criticize"; commend means "praise." Last, bizarre is the opposite of "ordinary"; bizarre means "odd."

Practice 3

Each sentence below includes a word or phrase that is an antonym of the italicized word. Underline the antonym of the italicized word in each case. Then, based on each clue, circle the letter of the meaning of the word in italics.

1 Those who were in agreement with the mayor's tax proposal were in the majority, but there were also some outspoken dissidents.
   Definition of dissidents:
   a. those in the majority 
   b. supporters 
   c. people who disagree

2 It was always hard to know what Uncle Harold was really thinking – was his enthusiasm for the trip feigned or genuine?
   Feigned means
   a. secret 
   b. pretended 
   c. formal

3 My piano teacher's criticism was always profuse, but her praise was scarce.
   Profuse means
   a. loud 
   b. well-founded 
   c. plentiful

4 Roberto's mother was lenient when he took some money from her dresser drawer, but when he stole candy from the local drugstore, her punishment was harsh.
   Lenient means
   a. not strict in punishing 
   b. tough 
   c. complimentary
5. Mom thinks it's futile to try to talk Dad into exercising, but I think it could be useful to show him statistics that tell how beneficial exercise is.

Futile means
a. unlikely  b. useless  c. sentimental

General Sense of the Sentence or Passage

Sometimes it takes a bit more detective work to puzzle out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. In such cases, you must draw conclusions based on the information given. Asking yourself questions about the passage may help you make a fairly accurate guess about the meaning of the unfamiliar word. Each of the sentences below is followed by a question. Think about the answer to each question, and then circle the letter of the meaning you think is correct.

1. Several times Lucy told the anecdote about her winning the hog-calling contest.
   (What would we call the telling of an event?)

   Anecdote means
   a. sermon  b. short story  c. question

2. One argument against capital punishment is that if an innocent person is executed, the mistake cannot be rectified.
   (What cannot be done about a mistake as final as an execution?)

   Rectified means
   a. remembered  b. predicted  c. corrected

3. It took two days for volunteers to extricate the little girl from the bottom of the well.
   (How would volunteers try to help the trapped girl?)

   Extricate means
   a. free  b. delay  c. remember

   The first sentence provides enough evidence for you to guess that anecdote means "short story." Rectified in the second sentence means "corrected." And to extricate means "to free." (You may not hit on the exact dictionary definition of a word by using context clues, but you will often be accurate enough to make good sense of what you are reading.)

Practice 4

Try to answer the question that follows each item below. Then, making a logical guess based on your answer, circle the letter of the meaning you think is correct.

1. My three-year-old likes to fight for her autonomy by saying, "I can do it myself."
   (What is being sought with the statement "I can do it myself"?)

   Autonomy means
   a. sister  b. independence  c. toys

2. The puppy had such a tenacious grip on my sneakers that I finally decided to wear my loafers instead.
   (What kind of grip would make the speaker choose other footwear?)

   Tenacious means
   a. short  b. firm  c. loose

From Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills by John Langan Second Edition
3. Emily's signature, *embellished* with loops and swirls, was easy to recognize.  
(What do loops and swirls do to the signature?)

*Embellished* means  
a. hidden  
b. decorated  
c. made plain

4. Athletes from all over the world *convened* in Barcelona, Spain, in order to compete in the 1992 Summer Olympic Games.  
(What would the athletes do first before actually competing in the Olympic Games?)

*Convened* means  
a. gathered  
b. left  
c. remembered

5. Hector thought his mother’s suggestion to use peanut butter to remove the gum from his hair was *ludicrous* – but it worked!  
(What is a likely first opinion of Hector's mother's suggestion?)

*Ludicrous* means  
a. practical  
b. delicious  
c. ridiculous

**A NOTE ON TEXTBOOK DEFINITIONS**

You don't always have to use context clues or the dictionary to find definitions. Very often, textbook authors provide definitions of important terms. They usually follow a definition with one or more examples to ensure that you understand the word being defined. Here is a short textbook passage that includes a definition and example:

People do not always satisfy their needs directly; sometimes they use a substitute object. Such use of a substitute is known as *displacement*. This is the process that takes place, for instance, when you control your impulse to yell at your boss and then go home and yell at the first member of your family who is unlucky enough to cross your path.

Textbook authors, then, often do more than provide context clues: they define a word and provide examples as well. When they take the time to define and illustrate a word, you should assume that the material is important enough to learn.

**Review Test 1**

A. Using context clues for help, circle the letter of the best meaning for each word in italics.

1. The dean was *adamant*: "Make up your gym classes or don't graduate, and no arguments."
   a. vague  
b. friendly  
c. firm  
d. confused

2. There were many things about the library that made it *conducive* to study, including good lighting, quiet, and nearby reference books.
   a. harmful  
b. cold  
c. unattractive  
d. helpful

3. After the funeral, the widow's friends were very *solicitous* – they came to see her each day and took turns calling every evening to be sure she was all right.
   a. bold  
b. concerned  
c. annoyed  
d. careless

4. As the six members of the President's staff were charged with various crimes, the public's confidence in the government *eroded*; and once the public trust wears down, it is difficult to rebuild.
   a. deteriorated  
b. healed  
c. grew  
d. repeated
5. Imagine my *chagrin* when I looked in the mirror right after giving a report in front of class-and discovered that on my chin was some of the blueberry pie I had eaten for lunch.
   a. embarrassment  b. encouragement  c. pleasure  d. hatred

B. Using context clues for help, write the definition for each word in italics. Choose from the definitions in the box below. Each definition will be used once.

| sociable | continuous | by chance | backslide | belitling |

6. When people are stressed, they often *regress*. My little brother, for example, started to suck his thumb when he first went to camp.
   Definition of *regress* ____________________________________________________________

7. Little Amanda hid shyly behind her mother when she met new people, yet her twin brother Adam was very *gregarious*.
   Definition of *gregarious* _________________________________________________________

8. During the argument, the angry woman called her husband such *derogatory* names as "idiot" and "fool."
   Definition of *derogatory* _________________________________________________________

9. The noise in the nursery school classroom was *incessant*; the crying, laughing, and yelling never stopped for a second.
   Definition of *incessant* _________________________________________________________

10. Did you plan to meet your brother for lunch, or was your meeting at the restaurant *fortuitous*?
    Definition of *fortuitous* _______________________________________________________

**Review Test 2**

A. Five words are italicized in the two paragraphs below. Write the definition for each italicized word, choosing from the definitions in the box. (Four definitions will be left over.)

| weakening | dust | suggest |
| rock fragments | negatively | narrow |
| wisely | disbelief | despair |

   Divorce, death, and demands on family members' time can isolate senior citizens, producing deep loneliness which then *adversely* affects their health. Increasingly, doctors are recommending that lonely older Americans acquire pets to help halt their slide into despair, which is *debilitating* physically as well as mentally. Dogs, cats, parakeets, and other sociable pets can provide seniors with companionship. And caring for their dependent pets gives senior citizens an appreciated and needed feeling-an important preventive to *despondency*. Both pets and their owners win in this relationship.

   1. Definition of adversely: _______________________________________________________
   2. Definition of debilitating: _____________________________________________________
   3. Definition of despondency: ____________________________________________________

   Every day almost twenty tons of interplanetary *debris*, including pebbles and boulders the size of cars, come raining down through the atmosphere. In 1988 an asteroid one-half mile in diameter just missed Earth by a matter of six hours, rocketing through space at 44,000 miles per hour only twice the distance from the moon. Eighty years earlier a comet the size of an office building exploded above Siberia, leveling trees for over 750
square miles. Similar incidents this century have inspired nervous scientists to propose shooting a rocket armed with nuclear weapons at incoming asteroids to jolt them off course. If the idea that these relatively small bodies that revolve around the sun are really something to fear seems unbelievable, remember that over 1500 asteroids, some the size of mountains, cross and recross Earth's orbit every day.

4. Definition of debris: ____________________________________________________________

5. Definition of propose: __________________________________________________________

B. Use context clues to figure out the meaning of the italicized word in each of the following sentences, and write your definition in the space provided.

6. The lawyer tried to confuse the jury by bringing in many facts that weren't pertinent to the case.
   Definition of pertinent: __________________________________________________________________

7. The physician could only conjecture about the cause of the bad bruise on the unconscious man's head.
   Definition of conjecture: __________________________________________________________________

8. Freshman are often naive about college at first, but by their second semester they are usually quite sophisticated in the ways of their new school.
   Definition of naive: _____________________________________________________________________

9. We firmly believed that Uncle Albert would be found innocent in court, so we were delighted but not surprised when the jury exonerated him.
   Definition of exonerate: __________________________________________________________________

10. Cosmetic manufacturers often claim that their products can rejuvenate the skin, but very few creams have been proven to make skin look younger.
    Definition of rejuvenate: __________________________________________________________________

Review Test 3

A. To review what you've learned in this chapter, answer each of the following questions.

1. Often, a reader can figure out the meaning of a new word without using the dictionary – by paying attention to the word's ___________________________.

2. One type of clue that helps readers figure out the meaning of a new word is the general sense of a ___________________________.

3. In the sentence below, which type of context clue is used for the italicized word?
   a. example  b. antonym  c. synonym

   In addition to getting a jail sentence, some criminals are required to pay restitution. One thief had to pay an elderly woman both the money he stole from her and several thousand dollars for her injuries.

4. In the sentence below, which type of context clue is used for the italicized word?
   a. example  b. antonym  c. synonym

   Many students are simply passive during lectures, but it is more productive to be active, taking notes and asking yourself questions about what is being said.
5. Often when textbook authors introduce a new word, they provide you with a
__________________________________ and follow it with ____________________ that help make the
meaning of the word clear.

B. Does most of the conversation in your household come from the television set? In the following article, Robert Mayer suggests an alternative. Here is a chance to apply the skill of understanding vocabulary in context to a full-length selection. After reading the selection, answer the vocabulary questions that follow.

Words to Watch

Following are some words in the reading that do not have strong context support. Each word is followed by the number of the paragraph in which it appears and its meaning there.

slack (2): loose
byword (5): slogan
byproduct (7): side effect
pompous (14): given an exaggerated importance
drivel (14): nonsense

THE QUIET HOUR

Robert Mayer

1 What would you consider an ideal family evening? Call me a romantic, but that question calls up in my mind pictures of parents and children lingering around the dinner table to cozily discuss the day's events; munching popcorn from a common bowl as they engage in the friendly competition of a board game; or perhaps strolling through their neighborhood on an early summer evening, stopping to chat with friends in their yards.

2 Let me tell you what "an ideal family evening" does not conjure up for me: the image of a silent group of people – the intimate word "family" seems hardly to apply – bathed in the faint blue light of a television screen that barely illuminates their glazed eyes and slack jaws.

3 Yet we all know that such a scenario is the typical one. I would like to suggest a different scenario. I propose that for sixty to ninety minutes each evening, right after the early-evening news, all television broadcasting in the United States be prohibited by law. Let us pause for a moment while the howls of protest subside.

4 Now let us take a serious, reasonable look at what the results might be if such a proposal were adopted.

New Explorations

5 Without the distraction of the tube, families might sit around together after dinner and actually talk to one another. It is a byword in current psychology that many of our emotional problems – everything, in fact, from the generation gap to the soaring divorce rate to some forms of mental illness – are caused at least in part by failure to communicate. We do not tell each other what is bothering us. Resentments build. The result is an emotional explosion of one kind or another. By using the quiet family hour to discuss our problems, we might get to know each other better, and to like each other better.

6 On evenings when such talk is unnecessary, families could rediscover more active pastimes. Freed from the chain of the tube, forced to find their own diversions, they might take a ride together to watch the sunset. Or they might take a walk together (remember feet?) and explore the neighborhood with fresh, innocent eyes.

Pros and Cons
With time to kill and no TV to slay it for them, children and adults alike might rediscover reading. There is more entertainment and intellectual nourishment in a decent book than in a month of typical TV programming. Educators report that the generation growing up under television can barely write an English sentence, even at the college level. Writing is often learned from reading. A more literate new generation could be a major byproduct of the quiet hour.

A different form of reading might also be dug up from the past: reading aloud. Few pastimes bring a family closer together than gathering around and listening to Mother or Father read a good story.

It has been forty years since my mother read to me, a chapter a night, from *Tom Sawyer*. After four decades, the white-washing of the fence, Tom and Becky in the cave, Tom at his own funeral remain more vivid in my mind than any show I have ever seen on TV.

When the quiet hour ends, the networks might even be forced to come up with better shows in order to lure us back from our newly discovered diversions.

Now let us look at the other side of the proposal. What are the negatives?

At a time when "big government" is becoming a major political bugaboo, a television-free hour created by law would be attacked as further intrusion by the government on people's lives. But that would not be the case. Television stations already must be federally licensed. A simple regulation making TV licenses invalid for sixty to ninety minutes each evening would hardly be a major violation of individual freedom.

It will be argued that every television set ever made has an "off" knob; that any family that wants to sit down and talk, or go for a drive, or listen to music, or read a book need only switch off the set, without interfering with the freedom of others to watch. That is a strong, valid argument – in theory. But in practice, it doesn't hold up. Twenty-five years of saturation television have shown us the hypnotic lure of the tube. Television viewing tends to expand to fill the available time. What's more, what is this "freedom to watch" of which we would be deprived? It is the freedom to watch three or four quiz shows and mediocre sitcoms. That's all. In practice, the quiet hour would not limit our freedom; it would expand it. It would revitalize a whole range of activities that have wasted away in the consuming glare of the tube.

Economically, the quiet hour would produce screams of outrage from the networks, which would lose an hour or so of prime-time advertising revenues; and from the sponsors, who would have that much less opportunity to peddle us deodorants and hemorrhoid preparations while we are trying to digest our dinners. But given the vast sums the networks waste on such pompous drivel as almost any of the TV "mini-series," I'm sure they could make do. The real question is, how long are we going to keep passively selling our own and our children's souls to keep Madison Avenue on Easy Street?

At first glance, the notion of a TV-less hour seems radical. What will parents do without the electronic baby-sitter? How will we spend the quiet? But it is not radical at all. It has been only about thirty-five years since television came to dominate American free time. Those of us 45 and older can remember television-free childhoods, spent partly with radio-which at least involved the listener's imagination-but also with reading, learning, talking, playing games, inventing new diversions, creating fantasy lands.

It wasn't that difficult. Honest.

The truth is, we had a ball.
Vocabulary Questions

Use context clues to help you decide on the best definition for each italicized word. Then circle the letter of each of your answers.

1. The word *lingering* in "an ideal family evening...calls up in my mind pictures of parents and children lingering around the dinner table to cozily discuss the day's events" (paragraph 1) means
   a. rushing.
   b. leaving.
   c. staying.
   d. arguing.

2. The words *conjure up* in "an ideal family evening calls up in my mind pictures of parents and children lingering around the dinner table ... Let me tell you what 'an ideal family evening' does not conjure up for me: the image of a silent group of people ... bathed in the faint blue light of a television screen" (paragraph 2) mean
   a. provide help.
   b. question.
   c. bring to mind.
   d. break.

3. The word *scenario* in "a silent group of people ... bathed in the faint blue light of a television screen that barely illuminates their glazed eyes and slack jaws ... such a scenario is the typical one" (paragraph 3) means
   a. imagined scene.
   b. television show.
   c. light.
   d. achievement.

4. The word *subside* in "I propose that for sixty to ninety minutes each evening ... all television broadcasting in the United States be prohibited by law. Let us pause for a moment while the howls of protest subside" (paragraph 3) means
   a. investigate.
   b. persuade.
   c. inform.
   d. quiet down.

5. The word *distraction* in "Without the distraction of the tube, families might sit around together after dinner and actually talk to one another" (paragraph 5) means
   a. cost.
   b. attention-grabbing.
   c. principle.
   d. dislike.
6. The word *diversions* in "forced to find their own diversions, they might take a ride together to watch the sunset. Or they might take a walk together (remember feet?) and explore the neighborhood" (paragraph 6) means
   a. facts.
   b. stories.
   c. pastimes.
   d. friends.

7. The word *slay* in "With time to kill and no TV to slay it for them, children and adults alike might rediscover reading" (paragraph 7) means
   a. build up.
   b. forget.
   c. rediscover.
   d. kill.

8. The word *literate* in "children and adults alike might rediscover reading .... Writing is often learned from reading. A more literate new generation could be a major byproduct of the quiet hour" (paragraph 7) means
   a. able to read and write.
   b. active outdoors.
   c. having a close family.
   d. being understanding of others.

9. The word *revitalize* in "the quiet hour ... would revitalize a whole range of activities that have wasted away in the consuming glare of the tube" (paragraph 13) means
   a. bury.
   b. bring new life to.
   c. cleverly invent.
   d. follow

10. The word *radical* in "At first glance, the notion of a TV-less hour seems radical. What will parents do without the electronic baby-sitter?...But it is not radical at all. It has been only about thirty-five years since television came to dominate American free time" (paragraph 15) means
    a. secure.
    b. extreme.
    c. useful.
    d. old-fashioned.