LESSON 1
Using Context Clues

Building Vocabulary

Reading can be a complex process. Whenever you read, you apply decoding skills of various kinds to get meaning from the text. One of those skills—and a vital one—is recognizing and understanding vocabulary.

Vocabulary is the collection of words that you encounter throughout your reading life. In fact, the English language is so rich with words that your vocabulary will probably continue to grow for as long as you continue to read. Increasing your vocabulary will not only make you sound more articulate when you write and speak, it will also increase your understanding of anything else you read and hear.

No matter what you're reading—a textbook, a newspaper article, a popular magazine, a Web page, or the liner notes for some new music—you will understand and appreciate it more if you know what each word means. How can you make this happen?

Strategies to Use

Here are some of the most effective ways to build vocabulary as you read:

- Analyzing context clues
- Recognizing word parts like prefixes and suffixes
- Looking for words within words

Let's take a look at the first strategy listed above — analyzing context clues.

Analyzing Context Clues

What does the phrase *context clues* mean? Context clues are the parts of a reading that surround a word or phrase you don't know and that can shed some light on its meaning. Some examples of context clues might be

- a definition before or after the unfamiliar word or phrase
- a synonym or an antonym near the unfamiliar word
- examples in the text that illustrate the meaning of the unfamiliar word or phrase
- restatement of the basic meaning of the unfamiliar word or phrase

Context Clues in Action

Read the following passage.

The husband of Loreta Velázquez had always <u>vacillated</u> about which side he should take in the Civil War. He was born in Texas, which was part of the South. Like many other Southerners in the U.S. Army, he was divided between loyalty to the Union, which gave him his career, and his family's <u>allegiance</u> to the Confederate South. He wavered between the two sides. Velázquez, having been raised in the South, convinced her husband to quit his job with the Union army and join the Confederate army. As soon as he went east to begin training for battle, she formed a plan to join him. Since women were <u>prohibited</u>—forbidden by law—to be soldiers, she decided to disguise herself as a man.

Velázquez went to New Orleans in early 1861 to carry out her plan. First, she had a tailor sew a special padded uniform that made her waist appear larger and more masculine. Then she had a barber cut and style her hair to resemble that of a man. Next, a trusted male friend helped her glue on a false mustache. He also helped her practice disguising her voice and feminine <u>mannerisms</u>, like tossing her head and taking short, dainty steps. Finally she selected the name Lieutenant Harry T. Buford, CSA. The transformation was complete.

Adapted from *Latino Heroes of the Civil War* by Michael Walbridge. ©1997 by J. Weston Walch, Publisher.

In this passage, some challenging words have been underlined. At first glance, these words may appear baffling. However, you can begin to make sense of them by analyzing context clues. The following is an example of how you might use context clues to figure out the meaning of new words.

The first underlined word, *vacillated*, is not defined or explained in the sentence in which it occurs. But I see that the next two sentences restate *vacillate's* meaning: Velazquez's husband "was divided" between loyalty to the North (the Union) and the South (the Confederates). He "wavered" between the North and the South. Let me try substituting "was divided" or "wavered" for *vacillated*. That works! "The husband of Loreta Velazquez had always been divided about which side he should take in the Civil War." Now I know that *vacillated* means "felt divided" or "wavered between."

The next underlined word is *allegiance*. In the first part of the sentence, I see what looks like a related phrase: "he was divided between loyalty to the Union . . . and his family's allegiance to the Confederate South." The related term for *allegiance* is *loyalty*; I think they are synonyms.

> *Prohibited,* the next underlined word, is actually followed by a definition: forbidden by law.
>
> The fourth underlined word, *mannerisms,* is followed by a couple of examples: "like tossing her head and taking short, dainty steps." These are examples of ways of moving—gestures—that are sometimes considered typically feminine. Maybe *mannerisms* means "typical gestures or habits."

Application   Read the following passage. Then use what you have learned about context clues to answer the questions.

> Samuel Adams was born in Boston in 1722. His father, also named Samuel, was a wealthy businessman and an important figure at the Old South Meetinghouse and thus was referred to as Deacon Adams. At fourteen, young Samuel Adams entered Harvard, as expected of the son of a Boston dignitary. There are no records of his academic career, but it is probable that at Harvard Adams became familiar with John Locke's powerful written argument *Of Civil Government.* In this treatise, Locke set out his doctrine that every citizen had natural rights of life, liberty, and property. This position also meant that a ruler could not take property from his or her subjects in the form of taxation without their consent.
>
> Adams graduated from Harvard in 1740 and went on to receive his master's degree in 1743. In 1748, Deacon Adams died, and Samuel inherited his father's business, which supplied malt to brewers. Under Samuel's control the business soon began to weaken, then to fail. What really came to interest Samuel Adams was politics. By 1763, he had joined the Caucus Club. This was a secret organization that met in advance of all town meetings to decide upon the slate of candidates for office and what the stands would be on various issues.
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> Adapted from *Critical Thinking Using Primary Sources in U.S. History* by Wendy S. Wilson and Gerald H. Herman. ©2000 by J. Weston Walch, Publisher.

1. Based on your reading of context clues, how would you define the word *dignitary*?

    What examples can you find in the reading to support your definition?

2. How would you define *treatise*?

   What context clue helped you in your definition?

3. How would you define *doctrine*?

   What context clue helped you in your definition?

4. How would you define *caucus*?

   What context clues helped you in your definition?