

## GUESSING MEANING FROM CONTEXT

### (A FAVOURITE STRATEGY)

The ability to guess meaning from context is a useful skill to practise and try to improve.

The things which will help you work out the meaning of an unfamiliar word are:

- a) the meaning of the text which surrounds it;
- b) the way the word is formed;
- c) your own background knowledge of the subject.

Discourse is full of redundancy: exploit meaning relations between items, eg:

⇒ SYNONYM (in apposition) - *Our uncle was a **spendthrift**, never did he have a penny.*

⇒ ANTONYM - *While the mother loved him deeply, she absolutely **despised** his sister.*

⇒ CAUSE & EFFECT - *The protesters were surrounded by armed police and the uprising **quashed**.*

⇒ ASSOCIATION BETWEEN OBJECT & USE -  
- *The scientists removed the **treatise** from the shelf and began to read.*

⇒ DESCRIPTION - *The **newt** lives in water. It is a small reptile.*

⇒ EXAMPLE - *Mary can be **gauche**; yesterday she blew her nose on a linen napkin.*

Most words may have several meanings/nuances depending on the context and many of them may serve different functions in the sentence. If you still feel you can't understand the new word, **look it up in a dictionary**. Some words cannot be guessed. Besides, a common source of error is premature use of word form to guess at meaning of an unknown word. Don't trust form too much: it's very misleading; there are hundreds of deceptive cognates ("*falsos amigos*") in all languages.

Guessing is useful only when you can **interpret/understand** the surrounding text. If you think you have exhausted the contextual information available to guess at the word, **LOOK IT UP IN A DICTIONARY**.

No matter how good your English is, you will never fail to come across unknown words in nearly every text you'll be exposed to. Inferring and guessing meanings of unfamiliar words is, thus, a strategy which is worth developing in your learning process particularly in those situations when there is no dictionary available.

## STRATEGIES FOR INFERRING MEANINGS OF UNFAMILIAR WORDS

### 1.- Word elements such as prefixes, suffixes and roots

The ability to recognise component parts of words, word families and so on substantially reduces the number of completely new words you will encounter and increases your control of the English lexicon.

### 2.- Pictures, diagrams, graphs and charts.

All these illustrations, where available, give us clues of particular vocabulary items which may be causing difficulty in a text.

### 3.- Clues of definition.

There are many types of highly useful definition clues, such as...

a) Parenthesis or footnotes, which are the most obvious definition clues. It's easy to recognise the physical characteristics of the clue.

b) Synonyms and antonyms usually occur along with other clues: "that is", "is"-clauses, explanations in parenthesis, and so on:

(1) "**is**", "**i.e.**" & "**that is**" (*X is Y; X, i.e. Y; X, that is Y*)  
are easily recognisable signal words living definition clues.

(2) appositive clause constructions set off by **commas**, "**which**", "**or**", or **dashes** (*X, Y; X, which is Y; X, or Y; X-Y*) are also physically recognisable clues.

### 4.- Inference clues from discourse, which are usually not confined to one sentence:

a) Example clues, where the meaning for the word can be inferred from an example. Typical physical clues often used: "**i.e.**" / "**e.g.**" / "**for example**"

b) Summary clues: from the sum of the information in a sentence or paragraph, the word can be understood.

c) Experience clues: we can often recall a similar situation we have experienced and get the meaning from a word making the appropriate inference.

### 5.- General aids.

These include the function of the word in question (the part of speech of the unknown word), i.e. noun, adjective, etc, and the subjects being discussed.

Although these usually do not help you with specific meaning, they narrow the possibilities.