ENGLISH, LITERACY, AND COMMUNICATION

Understanding context clues

Difficulty level: Easy

English, Literacy, and Communication

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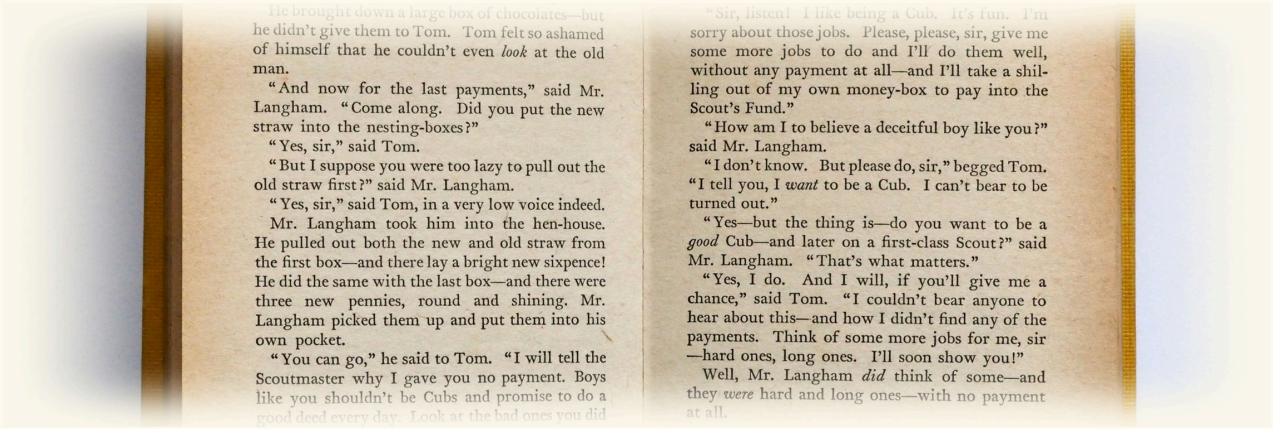
Overview of the concept

This is how you work out a word you do not know from the words around it, like guessing a new word in a story from the rest of the sentence, without stopping to look it up. The sentence usually gives you hints, a definition, an example, or a contrast that points to the meaning. Reading those hints lets you keep going and understand the passage, instead of stopping at every new word. That is how you read a book, an article, or a test passage fluently, even when it contains words you have never seen.



He brought down a large box of chocolates—but he didn't give them to Tom. Tom felt so ashamed of himself that he couldn't even *look* at the old man.

"And now for the last payments," said Mr. Langham. "Come along. Did you put the new straw into the nesting-boxes?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"But I suppose you were too lazy to pull out the old straw first?" said Mr. Langham.

"Yes, sir," said Tom, in a very low voice indeed.

Mr. Langham took him into the hen-house. He pulled out both the new and old straw from the first box—and there lay a bright new sixpence! He did the same with the last box—and there were three new pennies, round and shining. Mr. Langham picked them up and put them into his own pocket.

"You can go," he said to Tom. "I will tell the Scoutmaster why I gave you no payment. Boys like you shouldn't be Cubs and promise to do a good deed every day. Look at the bad ones you did

"Sir, listen! I like being a Cub. It's fun. I'm sorry about those jobs. Please, please, sir, give me some more jobs to do and I'll do them well, without any payment at all—and I'll take a shilling out of my own money-box to pay into the Scout's Fund."

"How am I to believe a deceitful boy like you?" said Mr. Langham.

"I don't know. But please do, sir," begged Tom. "I tell you, I *want* to be a Cub. I can't bear to be turned out."

"Yes—but the thing is—do you want to be a *good* Cub—and later on a first-class Scout?" said Mr. Langham. "That's what matters."

"Yes, I do. And I will, if you'll give me a chance," said Tom. "I couldn't bear anyone to hear about this—and how I didn't find any of the payments. Think of some more jobs for me, sir—hard ones, long ones. I'll soon show you!"

Well, Mr. Langham *did* think of some—and they *were* hard and long ones—with no payment at all.

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Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q Work out 'ancient' in: The ancient castle, built 800 years ago, still stands.

SOLUTION

Look at the words around 'ancient': built 800 years ago.

Something built 800 years ago is very old.

So 'ancient' means very old.

EXAMPLE 2

Q Work out 'generous' in: The generous man gave food to everyone in need.

SOLUTION

Look at the words around 'generous': gave food to everyone in need.

Giving to people in need is kind and giving.

So 'generous' means giving freely to others.

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Practice questions

1

Work out 'fragile' in: The fragile vase broke when it fell. What does it mean?

A Breaks easily

B Very strong

C Very heavy

D Lasts a long time

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2

Work out 'brave' in: The brave firefighter ran into the burning building. What does it mean?

A Not afraid and willing to face danger

B Afraid and running away

C Very angry and shouting

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3 Work out 'vacant' in: The vacant house had no furniture and no one living in it. What does it mean?

- A Full of people
- B Crowded
- C Empty
- D Noisy

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4 Work out 'swift' in: The swift cheetah caught its prey in seconds. What does it mean?

- A Very slow
- B Very fast
- C Very loud
- D Very big

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5

Work out 'joyful' in: The joyful children laughed and cheered. What does it mean?

- A Full of anger
- B Very tired
- C Very quiet
- D Full of happiness

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6

Work out 'enormous' in: The enormous whale was longer than a bus. What does it mean?

- A Very large
- B Very small
- C Very fast
- D Very old

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7

Work out 'tiny' in: The tiny seed was barely visible. What does it mean?

A Very large

B Very heavy

C Very small

D Very bright

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8

Work out 'furious' in: The furious man shouted and slammed the door. What does it mean?

A Very happy

B Very angry

C Very calm

D Very sad

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9

Work out 'curious' in: The curious student asked question after question. What does it mean?

A Wanting to sleep and rest

B Wanting to learn and asking questions

C Very angry and shouting

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10

Work out 'sturdy' in: The sturdy bridge held up under the heavy trucks. What does it mean?

A Weak

B Broken

C Light

D Strong

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ANSWER KEY

1. Breaks easily
2. Not afraid and willing to face danger
3. Empty
4. Very fast
5. Full of happiness
6. Very large
7. Very small
8. Very angry
9. Wanting to learn and asking questions
10. Strong

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