

Context Clues as an Aid to the Reader

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Context clues have been referred to as the most important single aid to word perception. The author proposes a simplified schema to organize context clues according to three categories for perception of printed words—*meaning clues*, *language clues*, and *organization clues*—and within each of the categories, describes a number of types of context clues and gives examples.

Reading authorities frequently recognize that context clues are an important aid to the reader in the perception of words (Cordts, 1965; Gray, 1960). Combined with other word perception clues they represent an indispensable tool for readers at all levels of reading ability. Young children often use context to help identify words they have previously known, but for the moment have forgotten. Similarly, young children use context as a check on words they have tentatively identified through the use of structural and phonic analysis. Mature readers use context clues for the above purpose and also to anticipate words for the rapid recognition of words in sequence, since it is a faster technique than sounding out a word and more reliable than merely recognizing a word by sight. All readers must use the context for the correct identification of such words as *read*, *lead*, *wind*, and *bank*.

Although the study of context clues is not specifically concerned with letterform research, readers of *The Journal of Typographic Research* should be made aware, at least, of one of our connecting links with the extensive reading research resources in the world. We are all concerned, basically, with perception and comprehension of our visible language.

To use context clues the reader must bring to the printed page prior experiences, oral language, and a knowledge that reading demands the achievement of meaning. Using his background, the reader limits his possible choice of words to relatively few which fit the meaning

of the passages. Thus, he does not need to be concerned with all the other thousands of words in the language. By combining context clues with other clues, the reader can very often correctly perceive an otherwise unrecognized word.

Artley (1943), McCullough (1943), and Ames (1966) did comprehensive studies on categorizations of context clues. They and others found their categorizations to be complex and technical. These classifications did not lend themselves well to interpretation and instruction of students.

This author proposes a simplified, yet comprehensive, schema to organize context clues according to three categories for perception of printed words. One category of clues uses the sense gleaned from the surrounding words and is referred to in this article as *meaning clues*. A second category involves the use of syntax, and is called *language clues*. How sentences and paragraphs are organized, or *organization clues*, represents a third set of clues. Such categories are not all inclusive and a reader may use a combination of these. However, a knowledge of such a schema for classifying clues and the types of clues comprising each category can be an aid to writers preparing manuscripts as well as readers. This article will go into a further discussion of this classification schema. Each type of clue will be explained briefly and examples given. In each example the italicized word may be recognized using the type of clue presented.

Meaning Clues

1. Definitions: An author may define a word for the readers. For example: The *median*, or midpoint score, was 10.5.

2. Descriptions: The reader uses the context that describes an unknown word to recognize it. For example: In the dirty, crowded *slum* of major cities, few children have an opportunity to grow as other children do.

3. Examples: Examples of an unknown word may help the reader to recognize it. For example: The *feline* family includes cats, tigers, and lions.

4. Synonyms: A more familiar word than the unknown word may be supplied. For example: The next-door *neighbor* was helpful.

5. Antonyms: The meaning of one word which gives an opposite

meaning may help in recognizing the other word. For example: While she was sociable, he was more *reserved*.

6. Comparison and contrast: Sometimes a word may be identified because it is evident in a comparison or contrast. For example: Do not run on the stairs, but *walk*.

7. Tone, mood, setting: A reflection of the situation may give a clue to an unknown word. For example: Nothing suited him. Dinner was late, the coffee was too hot, the meal was too cold. Father was in a *captious* mood.

Language Clues

1. Familiar expressions and idioms: Such a clue requires a knowledge of familiar language patterns. For example: To err is human; to forgive, *divine*.

2. Phrases or clauses: A phrase modifying an unknown word may help in identifying its meaning. For example: John *determinedly* tried again and again.

3. Referral signals: A modifier such as these, that, or first may refer the reader to what had been stated previously. For example: Children like candy, pies, and cakes. These *sweets* are preferred by boys and girls alike.

4. Parts of speech: A word sometimes may be identified because it is associated with another word of a different part of speech. For example: The fish *swam* silently in the brook. The children played in the *green* grass.

Organizational Clues

1. Series of words: A word may be recognized because the other words in series are known to the reader. For example: The enemy hit the Allies with bombs, guns, and *rockets*.

2. Main idea to details: In paragraphs in which a main idea is supported by evidence, the recognition of this organization may help the reader to identify an unknown word. For example: The Air Force's new plane has many advances. It has wings that sweep back in flight, new weapons, and advanced *radar*.

3. Questions to answers: A word may be identified in paragraphs in which the writer asks a question and then answers it if the reader

recognizes the use of such an organization. For example: Which approach is best? There is no clear-cut *proof* that any one method is better than another.

4. Cause and effect: Recognizing sentences that use a cause and effect thought relationship may help in word perception. For example: By hard work, students may receive higher grade-point *averages*.

The context clues discussed above include only those types of clues which the reader can glean from the printed word. There are other types of context clues which a reader may use in perceiving words. These clues may come from accompanying material (pictures, graphs, footnotes), punctuation (quotation marks, exclamation marks), and typographic treatment (italics, headline schedule, layout).

Authors, especially those writing matter of a technical nature for lay readers, would probably do well to make a concerted effort to include context clues for various words in their writing. They should attempt to give adequate clues to words which may be unfamiliar to their reading audience. The number of words which are likely to be unfamiliar to the reader would probably be small, although the exact ratio of unknown words to known words will probably depend upon the intelligence, maturity, and experience of the audience. Attempts should be made to reflect the language patterns of the reader whenever possible, use a concept level appropriate to the reader, and have the likely unknown words distributed throughout the text and not concentrated in any one point. An obvious connection should exist between the context clue and the unknown word, and the clue should be as close as possible to the unknown word. Clues should be distributed so that some come before the unknown word and some after. A variety of clues should be used from the meaning bearing, language bearing, and organizational clues categories.

Teachers could help students develop skill in the use of context clues so they are used easily and automatically. Students could be taught that words always make sense in context, that the context may be used to help recognize and get the meaning of unfamiliar words, and that other clues besides context clues may be necessary when more than one word may fit the meaning.

In addition, students may be given specific exercises. Pictures may be used at the beginning to develop the idea of using meaning as a way of perceiving words. At higher levels exercises in which words or,

which is probably better, parts of words may be given context clue study should probably be combined with the study of other word perception skills.

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