



Engaging in Reading: Using Context to Find Meaning

Notes

What teachers do	What students do
<p>Before</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a reading passage on a current topic or issue. Identify one or more important concept words in the text. • Write the concept word on the chalkboard and ask students to suggest possible meanings for the word. • Direct students to the concept word in the text. Ask students to read the paragraph(s) and confirm or reject their suggested meanings. • Discuss how they were able to determine the meaning of the concept word in context. Note that writers use different ways of providing meanings for concepts and words. Record these on the chalkboard. • Show several examples from a course text or resource. (For subject specific samples, see the Teacher Resources on the following pages.) • Model how to use context to determine the meaning of the words/concepts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recall what they already know about the topic or concept. Make connections to known words and phrases. • Locate the concept word in the passage, and read the text. • Make connections between the new learning and what they already know about the concept. • Note different ways a reader can use context to help figure out unfamiliar ideas, concepts and words. • Identify how to determine meaning and monitor understanding.
<p>During</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide groups of students with different reading passages on the same topic/ concept. • Ask groups to read the passage, identify the important concept, determine the meaning of the concept, and (optionally) complete a concept map. For more on concept maps, see <i>Sorting Using a Concept Map</i>. • Ask groups to share and compare their findings. Discuss similarities and differences in order to establish a common understanding of the concept. • Concept maps can be posted, or a class concept map can be created based on the compiled findings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the passage, identify the important concept, and use context to understand the passage. • Contribute to the concept map, if that strategy is used. • Define the important concept.
<p>After</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to describe how they used context to understand what they read. • Assign further reading so that students can practise using context when reading. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe how they used context to help understand the text (e.g.: “I read ahead to look for a definition or more information.” “I looked for diagrams and side bars.” or “I looked for signal words that pointed me to the relevant information.”).

Using Context to Find Meaning - Electricity Example

In “Learning about Electricity,” the writer uses different ways to help the reader understand electricity and electric circuits. Context clues include definition, example, description, illustration, clarification, parenthetical, comparison, or elaboration.

Read the excerpt and see how many different context clues the writer provides for the different concepts and terms related to electricity and electric circuits. Write your annotations on the left-hand side of the excerpt. After reading, try to make a quick sketch of an electrical circuit.

Write Your Annotations Here

Definition: Electricity is a form of energy.

Description: *It is produced by the movement of electrons.*

3.1 Learning About Electricity

Electricity is a form of energy. It is produced by the movement of electrons. But do you know what actually happens when you flip a switch to turn on the light, or the computer, or the television set? Why don't all the lights go out in your house when one light bulb burns out? Electricity is very useful, but if people do the wrong thing, electricity can also hurt. In some cases it can even kill. Safety is key when it comes to electricity.

Electric Circuits

How does electricity flow? Electricity flows through paths, or electric circuits. Electrons travel through these paths, but only if they can move around the path and get back to where they started. If the path is broken, the electrons will not move.

A closed circuit allows electrons to travel through an unbroken path and back to where they started. An open circuit has a break in the path. Electrons will not move through an open circuit.

All circuits must contain three things: connecting conductors, an energy source, and a load. A conductor is a device, such as a wire, that allows electricity to pass easily through it. An **energy source**, such as a battery, is what gives the circuit its energy. A **load** is a device or appliance that uses the energy, such as a light bulb. Figure 3.2 shows the symbols for the basic parts of a circuit.

ScienceWise 11, (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 2003).



Using Context to Find Meaning – Geography Examples

A typical textbook page may contain ten or more terms that students have difficulty understanding. Some textbooks put these terms in bold print.

	Text Samples*	Meaning in Context
1	<i>People and the Hydrosphere</i> In the past we thought oceans were great places to dump things. We felt that they were so large that there could never be a problem. Today, we know that isn't so. With so many people living in coastal zones dumping their sewage and garbage into the oceans, there are big problems for the water life (the fish we eat!) and for us. (p. 89)	The term "hydrosphere" in the title can be associated with the words "oceans" and "water life" if you know the meaning of "hydro." This is a case where students need to deconstruct the word into its two component parts: hydro = water; and sphere = domain.
2	The continental drift theory suggests that the earth's crust is divided up into large pieces called plates which are floating on the hot, plastic-like top layer of the mantle (the large middle layer of the earth). (p. 100)	The terms "plates" and "mantle" are defined in context with descriptive phrases that help us to "see" what they mean.
3	Molten rock, magma , is formed and explodes up through the cracks and breaks in the plates to the surface of the earth to form volcanoes. (p. 101)	The term "magma" is defined by other words, (e.g., "molten rock") that stand beside it.
4	The type of agriculture that is practised depends on several factors including climate, soil, and topography . Some areas are fortunate enough to have a wealth of sunshine and timely rain, rich soil, and flat (or gently rolling) topography. Others are faced with short growing seasons, lack of rainfall, and steep slopes. People have adapted their farming practices to suit their locations and climates. (p. 147)	Contrast is used here to give an indication that topography refers to a broad variety of landscape forms - "flat," "gently rolling," "steep slopes." Climate elements add some confusion because they are not topography.
5	Most places where irrigation is practised use surface irrigation . In fact, about 96% of all irrigation is surface irrigation. Canals and ditches carry water to fields. Farmers make small openings in the walls to let the water flow from the canals and ditches into the fields. With sprinkler irrigation , the water is carried by pipes to the field and sprayed onto the crops using a sprinkler head. (p. 207)	The terms "surface irrigation" and "sprinkler irrigation" are explained through the use of examples of these forms of irrigation. For example, surface irrigation = canals and ditches; sprinkler irrigation = pipes with sprinkler heads.

*All text samples are taken from *Physical Geography: Discovering Global Systems and Patterns*, Toronto: Gage 2000.

Using Context to Find Meaning – Science & Technology Examples

Reading is a process of finding meaning in text. Writers use many ways to convey the meaning of words and concepts. Some are overt and some are subtle. These clues include definitions, examples, descriptions, illustrations, clarification, parenthetical notes, comparison, and elaboration. Here are some samples from Science & Technology texts:

Sample Text	Type of Clue
" Electricity is a form of energy. It is produced by the movement of electrons."	Definition
" Hydraulic systems use liquids under pressure to move many things. Huge amounts of soil at a construction site can be moved with hydraulic machinery , such as backhoes and excavators."	Description Example
"Oil from the tank is sent along a conductor (a hose or pipe) to a pump where it is pushed into a cylinder or metal pipe. A cylinder is like a large syringe."	Parenthetical note Comparison
"To find out more about atoms, scientists want to make particles move even faster. A machine called a supercollider will do this. Figure 2.1 shows how this machine works."	Illustration



Clues for Using Context to Find Meaning

Clue	Description	Signals
Definition	The unfamiliar word is specifically defined in the sentence, or in the preceding or following sentences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “is” or “which means” • commas that set off a qualifying phrase
Example	The unfamiliar word is illustrated by one or more examples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “for example,” “including,” or “such as” • pictures or diagrams
Description	Characteristics or features of the unfamiliar word are described.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • descriptive words • sensory words • adjectives and adverbs
Illustration	The unfamiliar word is shown in a diagram, picture or map.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “see figure 2.1” • graphic features on the page
Clarification	The meaning of the unfamiliar word is restated in slightly different language, summarized, or paraphrased.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “in other words,” “simply,” “clearly”
Parenthetical Note	The meaning of the unfamiliar word is provided in parentheses directly following the word.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (.....)
Comparison	The meaning of the unfamiliar word is provided by contrasting or comparing it to another word, phrase or concept.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “such as,” “like,” “compared to,” “unlike” or “similar to” • synonyms, antonyms • charts
Elaboration	Additional information about the unfamiliar word is provided in the following sentences and paragraphs. This may be a description of a related event, process or product, or a question prompt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “in addition,” “another,” or “consequently”
Typography and Design	Design features draw attention to important words and concepts, and to their definitions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bold, <i>italics</i>, and other embellishments