

Vocabulary Strategy: Use Context Clues

If you stopped to figure out how many words you know, you would probably find that you know many thousands. And you didn't use a dictionary to learn most of them! How did you learn so many words? As you listened to people talk, you learned the meanings of the words in context. The **context** of the word is the collection of words, phrases, and sentences that surrounds it. The context provides clues to a word's meaning.

When you read a new term in your science textbook, a complete definition often appears with it. But what about unfamiliar words that are not defined? You can use context clues to help you.

Look For a Description or an Example

A description of a new term or an example can serve as a clue. Look for clue words, including *for instance*, *for example*, *called*, *means*, and *such as*. Examine the context of the sentence below.

← Tropical grasslands called savannas have distinct dry and wet seasons.

The clue word *called* tells you that savannas are tropical grasslands with distinct dry and wet seasons.

Look For a Comparison

Writers often provide clues to a word's meaning by pointing out ways that something is similar to or different from a familiar object. Here is an example.

A swamp looks like a flooded forest, with trees and shrubs growing in the water.



The comparison word *like* tells you that a swamp is a water covered area where trees and shrubs grow.

Vocabulary Strategy: Use Context Clues, Cont.

Use Context Clues *(continued)*

TRY THIS

Underline context clues, descriptions, example, and comparison words. Then write the definition of each word on the lines below.

1. intertidal zone

On many seashores, there is a strip of land called an intertidal zone that is under water at high tide but becomes dry land at low tide.

2. tether

Several shuttle flights have experimented with tethered satellites. Basically, the idea is to drag a satellite through space on a tether.

3. tule

Wetlands contain tule and other tall grasslike plants.

4. exoskeleton

As an animal grows larger, it can become trapped in its exoskeleton like a knight in armor that's too tight. The animal sheds its outgrown exoskeleton and grows a new, larger one.

5. surface tension

Because of surface tension, which makes the water's surface like a tight skin, an insect can actually skip across the top of the water.

6. virus

A virus is not a living thing. The virus particle is tiny enough to get into the cells of a living thing, but the virus itself has no cells. It does not need food or energy to grow or respond to its surroundings. The only way a virus is like a living thing is in its ability to reproduce.