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IELTS Introduction to Reading Course Lesson 13

“Guessing Meaning From Context”

Guessing meaning from context in the IELTS exam is an important technique that will improve your reading skills and speed.



You do not have a dictionary in the exam so there are likely to be a lot of words from the reading text that you do not understand and you cannot check.

If you come across a word you do not understand, then you cannot spend a lot of time working out its meaning because you only have 20 minutes for each reading.

Therefore, guessing meaning from context is necessary.

This means work out what it means (or have a good guess at least) from the words that are around it and from the topic of the paragraph.



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Take a look at this example:

“It had been raining hard through the night so the ground was saturated.”

What does 'saturated' mean?

You may already know, but if you do not, you should be able to have a good guess from the rest of the sentence.

It had been raining which means the ground must be wet. It was raining 'hard' so this means the ground is probably very wet.

saturated = completely wet

By doing this you are guessing meaning from context and you should try and use this technique for words you do not know.

Kinds of Context Clues



1. Definition Clues

The author provides a direct (explicit) definition of an unknown word in the sentence.

Signal words: is/are; is/are called; is/are known as, is/are defined as; means; refers to

- *Martha is a **curator**, a person who is responsible for looking after a museum's collection.*
- ***Entomology** is the study of insects.*
- ***Archeology** is the scientific study of prehistoric cultures by excavation of their remains.*



2. Synonym or Restatement

The author uses a word having the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or other words in a sentence.

Signal words: Commas (,); Semicolon (;); Dashes (-); Parenthesis (()); sometimes signal words **or**, **that is**, **or** in other words are used.

- ***Carnivores**, that is, meat eaters, are the top of the food chain.*
- *My best friend **squandered** all his money; his drinking and gambling wasted all his earnings.*
- *After seeing the picture of the starving children, we all felt **compassion** or pity for their suffering.*
- *After a time, **glaciers**, or slowly moving rivers of ice, formed over many parts of the Earth.*



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3. Antonym or Contrast

The author uses a another word or phrase that means the opposite of an unfamiliar word.

Signal words: but, however, although, otherwise, unless, instead of, on the contrary, on the other hand, while, unlike

- *Mike's parrot was **loquacious**, but Maria's said very little.*
- *The gentleman was **portly**, but his wife was thin.*
- *While Luis is hardworking, his **indolent** brother spends most of the time watching TV or sitting around with friends.*



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4. Comparison

In comparison clues, the author uses words and phrases that have the same or similar meaning as an unfamiliar word.

Signal words: like, as, similar to, in the same way, likewise, resembling, too, also

- *My brother is **enthralled** by birds similar to the way that I am fascinated by insects.*
- *The **stench** of the old shoes was like the smell of garbage.*



5. Example/Explanation

The author provides examples or additional explanations or summaries to help you understand an unfamiliar word. The word is cleared up by giving an example.

Signal words: for example, for instance, including, such as, specifically, to illustrate

- *The archaeologist found different **amulets**, such as a rabbit's foot and bags of herb.*
- *Paula was suspended from school because of several **infractions** of the rules, including smoking in the bathroom and dressing improperly.*
- ***Celestial bodies**, such as the sun, moon, and stars, are governed by predictable laws.*



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6. Cause and effect

The meaning of an unknown word depends on the cause/effect relationship with other words in the text.

Signal words: as a result, accordingly, because, since, consequently, for this reason, hence, if...then

- *Since no one came to the first meeting, attendance for the second one is **mandatory** for all staff.*
- *Because the **conflagration** was aided by wind, it was so destructive that every building in the area was completely burned to the ground.*



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7. List or Series

The unfamiliar word is included in a series of related words that give an idea of word's meaning.

Signal words: Look for a list words

- *North American **predators** include grizzly bears, pumas, wolves, and foxes.*
- *The **debris** in the stadium stands included numerous paper cups, ticket stubs, sandwich wrappings, and cigarette butts.*



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8. Inference or General Context

The meaning of an unfamiliar word can be inferred (guessed) from the description of a situation.

The author provides non-specific clues, often spread over the sentence or number of sentences.

Signal words: Look for clues over several words or sentences

- *The monkey's **vociferous** chatter made me wish I had earplugs.*
- *Katie's **belligerence** surprised everyone. She threw her book across the room, glared at Chris, and then pushed him to the floor.*

Exercise. Guess the meaning of the underlined words using context clues.



1. This situation is a conundrum - a puzzle.
2. The dates are listed in chronological order. They start at the beginning and end with the last event.
3. Avoiding the accident was futile. Both cars did not have time to stop before crashing.
4. There was a lot of tangible evidence, including fingerprints and DNA, to prove them guilty.
5. There is a 30 percent chance of precipitation, such as snow or sleet.
6. Something in the refrigerator has a putrid odor; the smell was rotten when we opened the door.
7. The cat has a kind disposition and would never bite or claw anyone.



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8. Diane was lethargic and didn't have the energy to get out of bed.
9. Sometimes he is perplexed by Sudoku puzzles, but others find them much easier to solve than a crossword puzzle.
10. The feral cat would not let us pet him, unlike our tame cat.
11. The hero was virtuous, not like the evil villain.
12. The winner of the gold medal was omnipotent against his weaker opponents.



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Thank You

See you next class!

References:

"Guessing Meaning from Context - IELTS Reading." IELTS Buddy, www.ieltsbuddy.com/guessing-meaning-from-context.html.

YourDictionary. "Examples of Context Clues." YourDictionary, 16 June 2016, examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-context-clues.html.