8 Strategies for Teaching Context Clues

By Matt Foster at Spiral WarmUps

1) Interactive Reading Oops
During an interactive read aloud, simply skip a word. When you finish the sentence, say, “Oops, let me try that again.”

Go back and read the sentence again, and repeat, “Oops.”

Prompt the students, “What word do you think I missed?”

2) Clue Charts
Work with students to create a Context Clue Anchor Chart. List and describe five common kinds of clues (like the ones in this video) and give an example of each.

Then, have students suggest meanings for the underlined words in the sentences you used for the chart.

Discuss how they determined the meaning and what clues they found in the context. Repeat the process, but this time, students create their own in their reading notebooks.
3) Cooperative Clues
Divide students into pairs or small teams. Have them read passages from informational text task cards (here are some great ones).

Ask the students to write any challenging words on index cards. Have them take their best inferences at the word meaning and make note of the clues they used.

Come back as a class and share the challenging words. Discuss how the context clues helped with determining the word meaning.

4) Context Sentences
This activity builds proficiency with words that students already know. It also helps them practice using context clues.

- Display sentences that have blanks for words that students should already know.
- Example: Sean needed to ___ to the house. Luckily, he had his sneakers on, because they make it easier to ___.
- Allow students time to read silently.
- Then prompt discussion about the context by asking what's happening in these sentences?
- Ask students to share what belongs in the blanks.
- Then discuss what other words could fill in the blanks.

5) Silly Sentences
This activity is similar to Context Sentences. It's different in that there are no blanks. Instead, there are made up words.

- Display sentences that have a fake word in them. The word must be spelled with grammar in mind (i.e. verb tense, plural conventions).
- Example: Sean needed to run to the honka. Luckily, when he made it to his honka, he was able to relax on the couch and play games.
- Ask a student to read aloud. Some giggling may be involved. 😊
- Then ask students to figure out the word that best fits in place of the fake word.
- Without knowing it, students are practicing using context clues!
6) Word Parts
Morphology (how words change) and word parts are valuable clues to meaning. Explain how there’s context around words, but there’s also context within a word. Those are word parts.

Hold a mini-lesson or small group on common affixes (prefix, root/base word, suffix) and use references—Google search, dictionary, or thesaurus—to determine the word’s meaning.

7) Clue Giver
This is a game-like way to practice using context clues. Ask if any students know the meanings of the words “gaunt,” “aloof,” “forlorn,” and “commercial vehicle.” Likely, none will. Tell them that you are going to reveal a powerful detective technique that will sometimes allow them to figure out what these words mean, as well as others, without ever looking at a dictionary.

Give them one-word clues. You can write these on a board one at a time, slowly building context.

Add context clues until someone correctly determines the meaning. Then challenge students to be the clue giver too.

8) Scaffolded Questions
It’s not enough just to ask students to use context clues and hand them a book. Sometimes they need scaffolded practice.

Use questions that scaffold thinking about context clues:

- Identifying synonyms in the context
- Identifying contrast in the context
- Understanding descriptions in the context
- Using grammar (i.e. this word is a verb, adjective, or a noun)
- Looking for examples in the context
- Break apart within-word context (i.e. base words, roots, affixes)

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