

Word-Learning Strategy Activities

Word-learning strategies enable children to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words on their own. These activities focus on two key strategies—using context clues and using a dictionary.

I. Using Context Clues During Reading

Purpose: *Understand how to use context clues to determine the meanings of words*

Materials: *Reading materials, read-aloud books, self-sticking notes*

Using context clues to determine a word's meaning is a difficult task for many children. The sentences children read or hear might not contain explicit, helpful clues, or children might not be able to recognize or use clues to determine the meaning of the word. When reading to children or guiding their reading, use the following steps to teach them how to use context clues:

1. Scan the text for a few important words children probably don't know that are in a helpful context. Flag the pages with self-sticking notes to remind yourself to discuss these words.
2. After you or children read the sentence containing the unfamiliar word, pause and ask what this part of the text is about. Restate important information that can help them decipher the unfamiliar word. For example, if the word is *frustrated*, it is helpful to know that a character feels upset or has a problem.
3. Point out the unfamiliar word. Remind children they can sometimes use pictures or the words before and after an unfamiliar word to figure out what it means. Draw their attention to helpful context clues (see below). At this age, it's sufficient for children to recognize there are a variety of clues they can use. They don't need to name or distinguish the types of clues.

Definition: An *invention* is something new a person thinks up.

Example: The box was filled with pots, pans, and other kitchen *utensils*.

Synonym: It is *absurd*, or foolish, to think a dog can talk.

Antonym/Contrast: Jessica is very *outgoing*, not shy at all.

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4. Ask children what they think the word means and why they think that. Allow for more than one possible meaning.
 5. Try out possible meanings by using each one in place of the unfamiliar word and asking if that meaning makes sense in the sentence. Work with children to decide which meaning fits. Restate the unfamiliar word and the explanation, adjusting the language to ensure it's an accurate definition.

Help children apply these steps for unfamiliar words they encounter. Acknowledge when the text doesn't provide sufficient clues to figure out the meaning. Point out that sometimes they can figure out enough about a word's meaning that they can keep reading. Tell them that if they get stuck and can't figure out what is happening in the story, they can ask for help or, if they're able, use a dictionary to find out what a word means.

2. Practice Using Context Clues with Cloze Sentences

Purpose: Use context clues to identify a hidden word

Materials: Reading materials, self-sticking notes

Scan a text children have recently read to find a few sentences that give helpful context clues about a word, such as the following:

“Thanks, Ettabetta!” said Doc. “What a *fantastic* ending for the Spingle Spangle Talent Show!”

Photocopy the page with these sentences. Enlarge the size, if possible, so everyone can see the text. Cut up a self-sticking note and use it to cover the word you want to discuss. (*fantastic*) Display the text with the hidden word. Review the story and tell what part the excerpt is from. Have children read the text, saying “blank” for the covered word. Ask what word makes sense in the sentence. Before they start guessing, remind them to use the words before and after the covered word (and any pictures) to help them figure out what the missing word is. When a child suggests a word, have him give reasons for choosing that word. Discuss whether that word makes sense in the sentence. If children's guesses are way off, point out clues they can use to figure out the missing word. For the example sentences above, note that Doc is thanking Ettabetta and seems pleased. Point out the missing word is right before the word *ending*. Ask what kind of ending to the show would make Doc feel pleased. (*good, great, wonderful, terrific*) Peel back part of the sticky note to reveal the first letter of

the hidden word. Have children revise their guesses based on this new information. (After seeing the *f* for *fantastic*, children might guess *fun*, *fabulous*, *fantastic*.) Discuss if these new guesses make sense. Continue to reveal more of the word as children refine their guesses. Reveal the entire word when most are certain they know what the missing word is.

Repeat the activity for other words in children's reading materials.

Variation 1 Gather children's reading materials. Use self-sticking notes to cover a few words in a text that children are about to read. Be sure the words are in a helpful context. Cover the same words in everyone's books. When children come to a covered word during their reading, use the steps above to have them figure out what the covered word is.

Variation 2 Choose sentences from children's reading materials that stand alone as good context sentences and write them on the board. (Or make up your own decodable sentences.) Replace a key word in a sentence with a blank line. Help children use context clues to guess what the missing word is. Or list two or three possible words and have children tell which word makes the most sense.

TIP: Using context clues to confirm pronunciations When children struggle to decode a word or seem unsure of its pronunciation, remind them to think about the meaning of the sentence. Ask, "What word makes sense here? Is that the word you said?" Remind them to try different sounds for vowels or to emphasize a different syllable to see if that produces a word that makes sense.

3. Understanding Alphabetical Order

Purpose: Put words in alphabetical order

Materials: Alphabet chart, word cards

To use a dictionary (and other reference sources), children must understand and be able to use alphabetical order. Display the letters of the alphabet and have children say the letters in order (or sing “The Alphabet Song” to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”). Have them refer to the displayed letters to answer questions about alphabetical order, such as the following:

Which letter comes right after *a*? (*b*)

Which letter comes right before *e*? (*d*)

Which letter comes between *l* and *n*? (*m*)

Which letter is near the beginning of the alphabet: *c* or *w*? (*c*)

Which letter is near the end of the alphabet: *e* or *s*? (*s*)

Give children practice arranging word cards in alphabetical order. Make cards for *can*, *apple*, *zipper*, *jam*. Spread them faceup on a table in random order. Tell children you want them to put the words in alphabetical, or ABC, order. Have them name the first letter of each word. (*c*, *a*, *z*, *j*) Draw a line under these letters. Help children alphabetize the words, referring to the displayed alphabet. Ask which letter, *c*, *a*, *z*, *j*, comes first in the alphabet. (*a*) Put the card for *apple* at the top of the table. Ask which letter comes next in the alphabet, *c*, *z*, *j*? (*c*) Put the card for *can* under *apple* and point out that *can* comes after *apple* because *c* comes after *a* in the alphabet. Use similar reasoning to have children alphabetize the other words. (*apple*, *can*, *jam*, *zipper*) Say one of the words and have children point to the word you said. Repeat for the other words.

Once children can do the activity above without difficulty, give practice alphabetizing to the second letter using *dig*, *desk*, *dog*, *drum*. Point out to children that all the words begin with *d* so they’ll have to look at the second letter in each word to figure out how to put them in alphabetical order. Have children identify the second letter in each word. (*i*, *e*, *o*, *r*) Draw a line under these letters. Follow the same steps as above to have children alphabetize the words. (*desk*, *dig*, *dog*, *drum*) Have children alphabetize *fun*, *box*, *boat*, *fish*, *lamp*, *hand*, *ham*. Have them look at the first letter of each word and find the words whose letters are the earliest in the alphabet. (*box*, *boat*) Have them put the card for *boat* above *box*. Tell them to compare letters in each word until they find letters that aren’t the same. Point out that the

apple

can

jam

zipper

desk boat

ig ox

dog fish

rum un

ham

hand

lamp

first two letters, *b* and *o*, are the same, but the third letters, *a* and *x*, are different. Explain that *boat* comes before *box*, because *a* comes before *x* in the alphabet. Use similar reasoning to help children alphabetize the rest of the words. (*boat, box, fish, fun, ham, hand, lamp*) Then call out words randomly and have children point to each word.

4. Using a Dictionary

Purpose: Find words in a dictionary and use a dictionary to learn about the meanings of words

Materials: Children's dictionary(ies), (optional) photocopies of dictionary entries

If available, distribute multiple copies of the same dictionary to children. If not, make photocopies of entries you want to discuss. Choose a simple word, such as *apple*, that has one meaning, as well as more difficult words, such as *skate* and *tie* that have multiple numbered meanings, or *bat*, *pitcher*, *stick* that have multiple entries (because the words have different origins). Discuss a few challenging words whose meanings children don't know, such as *habitat*.

Review the purpose of a dictionary and the information it contains. Ask children what they know about dictionaries. Tell them a *dictionary* is a book with words listed in alphabetical, or ABC, order, so the words that begin with the letter *a* are at the front of the book, followed by words beginning with the letter *b*, and so on. Explain that people use dictionaries to check how a word is spelled, find out what the word means, and figure out how to pronounce, or say, the word correctly.

Demonstrate how to find the word *apple*. Say the word and ask a volunteer to write it. Ask if *apple* would be found at the beginning, middle, or end of the dictionary and why. (*beginning; Apple begins with a and words that begin with a are near the front of the dictionary.*) Have children open their dictionaries to the first page of *a* words or observe as you do it. Show them how they can run their fingers down the dark words to look for *apple*. Tell them to look for the letters that spell *apple* and not to read any other text. (Have older children look at the first two letters of *apple*, quickly flip through the *a* pages, look at the last word on each page in search of words that begin with *ap*, and then scan those words for *apple*. For advanced learners, model how to use the guide words at the top of the pages to find *apple* more quickly.)

Make sure everyone has found the word *apple* (or distribute photocopies of the entry for this word). Discuss the parts of an entry. Dictionary formats vary, but most include the entry word in bold, a pronunciation in parentheses, the word's meaning(s), its part of speech, other forms of the word, and sometimes context sentences and pictures. Read or have children read the definition for *apple* and discuss questions they have about it. Have children check the volunteer's spelling of *apple* against the dictionary entry.

Help children look up other words and discuss their meanings. Point out the numbers next to words that have multiple meanings, such as *tie*. Read or have children read the meanings. Give a context sentence for one meaning of the word and have children tell which meaning of the word you used. Ask another child to say a sentence that uses another meaning of the word. Do the same for words that have multiple entries, such as *bat*. Look up an unfamiliar word, such as *habitat*. Point out that sometimes a difficult word such as *habitat* actually has a pretty simple definition.

Variation 1 Name other simple words. For each word, have children tell if it would be found at the beginning, middle, or end of a dictionary. Have them give reasons for their answers. Write the words on the board and help children use an alphabet chart to figure out the answers. Have them look up the words to confirm their answers.

Variation 2 If children have difficulty understanding the children's dictionary, help them use a picture dictionary that simply lists words in alphabetical order and shows a picture next to each word.

TIP: Choosing dictionaries to use The difficulty level of children's dictionaries can vary widely. Look for a dictionary that includes lots of visual support, good context sentences, and child-friendly explanations. Children might still need lots of guidance using them.