Using Context Clues

Many times, students encounter an unfamiliar word in a textbook. When this occurs, the students may seek a dictionary to look up its meaning. This process is not only time-consuming but also distracting. A better, more efficient way to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word is to use context clues within the reading to find its meaning. A **context clue** refers to the word or words that come before and after the unfamiliar word. Context clues include:

- examples, which may be preceded by cue words, e.g., *such as*, *like*, or *including*. Examples may also be set apart by punctuation such as a colon, dash, or parenthesis.
- synonyms and definitions. Sometimes the author will include a synonym (a word with the same meaning) for the unfamiliar word in the text. Other times, the unfamiliar word will actually be defined.
- antonyms, which are words that are the opposite of the unfamiliar word.

Most often, students can determine the meaning of a word by inserting a word or words in place of the unfamiliar word. To do this, the students should read through the entire passage to get a sense for its meaning. They should look at the previous sentences, locating words that clarify understanding. Tell them to imagine there was a blank line in place of the unfamiliar word. In the blank, they can substitute a familiar word that makes sense.

Using Context Clues

To Teach students to use context clues, use Graphic Organizer 15 and Selection 11. You may want to make a copy of the graphic organizer to use as you lead students through a discussion of the steps in the left column.

1. Give the students a copy of Selection 11.

2. Have them read the excerpt, noting the words in bold. (These words are considered the unfamiliar words.)

3. Have students write the sentence(s) that precede the unfamiliar words, if appropriate.

4. Ask students if there are any prefixes or suffixes that help determine the word's meaning.

5. Ask students if there are any synonyms, antonyms, examples, or punctuation clues that help to define the word.

6. Write the unfamiliar words in the first column in the chart. Then opposite each unfamiliar word, write a familiar word that means the same thing.

Using Context Clues to Determine Meaning

1. Read the excerpt.

2. Underline any unfamiliar words.
(conservative, self-serving, self-sufficient, infrastructure, agendas)

3. What sentence(s) precedes the unfamiliar word? _____

Not Appropriate _____

4. Does the unfamiliar word have any prefixes or suffixes that might help you determine its meaning? _____

If so, what are those clues? _____

_____

5. What words in the excerpt might help you to determine the meaning of the unfamiliar word?

Synonyms: _____

Antonyms: *infrastructure is followed by examples: roads, bridges, ports* _____

Examples: *conservative is followed by a parenthesis that has a definition; self-serving is followed by a comma, followed by a definition* _____

Punctuation: _____

6. What familiar word would you use in place of each unfamiliar word?

Unfamiliar Word	Familiar Word
conservative	*traditional*
self-serving	*selfish*
self-sufficient	*independent*
infrastructure	*roads, ports, bridges*
agendas	*interests*

To apply the context clues strategy, have students read selected excerpts from the textbook, use Graphic Organizer 15, and repeat the process they used in the practice session to determine the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary.

To extend the strategy, give students a reading using the Cloze method. In the reading, do not give students words to replace. Rather, leave blanks for students to fill in with words that make sense in the paragraph

Using Context Clues

Selection 11 - The Constitutional Convention

The fifty-five men who attended the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention were, for the most part, a well-educated group of wealthy landowners. Forty-one of them had served in the Continental Congress, and a number of others had served in state government, including eight who were governors. The delegates were relatively young. The average age was forty-two, but a number were under thirty.

The delegates were more **conservative** (favoring traditional values and reluctant to make changes) than some others who supported widespread change. Charles Beard, a noted nineteenth-century historian, described the delegates as practical men who wanted to protect property and encourage business interests. Beard even suggested that the delegates might have been **self-serving**, more interested in furthering their own interests.

In reality, the delegates had experienced the problems of the weak national government under the Articles of Confederation first-hand. No one state was **self-sufficient** enough to fend for itself against a foreign foe. Nor could a single state build the **infrastructure**, for example roads, bridges, and ports, to increase travel and commerce throughout the nation. Working together, however, a group of united states could accomplish these goals. Whatever their own **agendas**, the delegates put personal feelings aside and worked together to create an endurable form of government for all people.

Using Context Clues to Determine Meaning

1. Read the excerpt.

2. Underline any unfamiliar words.

3. What sentence(s) precedes the unfamiliar word? _____

_____

4. Does the unfamiliar word have any prefixes or suffixes that might help you determine
   its meaning? _____

   If so, what are those clues? _____

_____

5. What words in the excerpt might help you to determine the meaning of the
   unfamiliar word?

   Synonyms: _____

   Antonyms: _____

   Examples: _____

   Punctuation: _____

6. What familiar word would you use in place of each unfamiliar word?

Unfamiliar Word	Familiar Word