



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Decoding Vocabulary

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One type of question that you frequently encounter is a vocabulary question. In addition, you will have to figure out the meanings of other important but unfamiliar words as you read the selections on the test. Often, you will be able to figure out the meaning of the word from its context, that is, from what comes before and after the word. These hints that the context gives you about word meanings are called context clues.

Sometimes a writer will clarify the meaning of a difficult word by using different words to state the same concept.

Conifers are common in the North Woods.

However, not all the are common in the North Woods. However, not all the trees of this area are evergreens. of this area are *evergreens*.

This type of context clue is called restatement. In a restatement, a meaning is repeated using different words. In this case, the concept *conifers* is repeated using a different word, *evergreens*, which means the same thing.

Sometime, a restatement appears immediately after the word that it is explaining and is set off by commas. Such a restatement is known as an apposition.

Conifers, or *evergreens*, are common in the North Woods.

Sometimes, an apposition is a whole phrase.

Conifers, *trees that do not lose their leaves in the fall*, are common in the North Woods.

Sometimes, a restatement is a synonym, a single word that has the same meaning. *Evergreen*, for example, is a synonym for *conifer*. Here is another example.

Shaw's Professor Higgins is sometimes described as a *misogynist*, but other critics claim that Higgins isn't really a *woman-hater*.

Misogynist and *woman-hater* are synonyms. Notice that a synonym does not have to appear immediately after a word.

Sometimes, two phrases or sentences contain parallel, or similar, ideas. If you know the meaning of one phrase, you can guess the meaning of the other. This type of context clue is called a comparison.

The first piece the orchestra played was ridiculously sad and mournful. The second piece was likewise *lugubrious*.

The word *likewise*, in the example, tells you that the first piece of music and the second piece are being compared. If one was "ridiculously sad and mournful," then the second one—*lugubrious*—must also be *sad and mournful*.

A similar type of context clue is contrast, in which two opposite ideas are stated.

Jubal's ideas were not very *pragmatic*; rather, they were idealistic.

Here, the contrast word, *idealistic*, is an antonym, or word with a meaning opposite to *pragmatic*, the word being contrasted.

Another way to discover the meaning of a word is through examples. If a passage provides examples of an unfamiliar word, try to figure out what the examples have in common, and from that you may be able to deduce what the word means.

Conifers, such as firs, spruces, pines, and cedars, are common in the North Woods.

Sometimes, the context of an unfamiliar word does not contain a simple, direct context clue.

Nonetheless, you can often figure out the meaning of a word by reasoning from the information that is provided by the context. Simply read the context and ask yourself what meaning would make sense given everything else that the passage tells you. The process of making such an educated guess is called inference.

Maria would not be able to see her friends or her parents for several months. No wonder she felt *melancholic*.

Even if you do not know what *melancholic* means, you can you can guess how someone might feel if she were unable to see her parents and friends for several months.