

## Clues to the Meaning of Unfamiliar Words

**Companion Text:** Night Symphony, written by Lara Binn, and illustrated by Valia Ovseyko

**Subject Area & Grade Level:** Language Arts, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade

**Materials:** Children's dictionaries

### *Objectives*

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Point out context clues in a sentence to decode the meaning of an unfamiliar word
- Reference illustrations to decode the meaning of an unfamiliar word
- Describe the pros and cons of looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary

### *Pre-Reading Activities*

Ask students to suggest “big” words they know the meaning of, and write them down as they are called out. Pick one from the list that you think most students do not recognize. (If you do not get enough good words to choose from, ask instead for suggestions of “strange,” “new,” or “unique” words.) Create a sentence with the word involving as many context clues as you can to the meaning of the unfamiliar word and write it so all students can see. Read the sentence out loud, and ask for suggestions about the meaning of the new word (from anyone except for the student who suggested it). As students suggest definitions, do not at first give away whether or not they are correct, but instead ask them how they figured it out. Guide them into pointing out other words in the sentence that gave them clues about the unfamiliar word, and talk about each one and how it gave hints to revealing the new word's meaning. Eventually, tell students the correct meaning of the new word, and double-check with the student who originally suggested the word to see if it was what he or she thought the word meant. (It's not uncommon for students to be wrong about the meanings of words they suggest.) Ask students whether they thought this method for determining the meaning of a new word was easier or harder than looking the word up in a children's dictionary. Lead them into noticing that, while dictionary look-up might be more direct, and in some cases more accurate, it takes more time than using context clues, and might not help them after all if the words given in the definition are also unfamiliar.

### *During Reading Activities*

Read the story once through without stopping. Then, read the story a second time, asking students to point out any unfamiliar words or phrases on each page. Ask students to point out other words on each page that might help them figure out the meaning of the unfamiliar words or phrases. Guide students to selecting words in the body of the text, such as “a capella,” “the blues,” and “symphony.” Onomatopoeic words can present a special challenge in this exercise, since they are words meant to sound like the things they are referencing and not necessarily words with independent meaning. When onomatopoeia is unfamiliar, steer students back to the objects or people being referenced for context, and to infer meaning. You might also guide students toward using the illustrations as a context clue, a concept further explored in the following post-reading activity.



## ***Post-Reading Activities***

Point out to students that, in addition to looking for other words that can help them to figure out what a new word means, it can also be very helpful to look at an accompanying picture. Sometimes, all the clues you need to figure out a new word come from the other words in a sentence, but sometimes the best clues to meaning are in the illustrations that complement a text. In order to practice this point, have students create and illustrate a sentence involving an unfamiliar word. Then, have students try to guess the meaning of each other's words by looking at the illustrated sentences.

Begin by having each student choose a word from the list generated in pre-reading, or give them a word from the list of suggested words below. Recognizing that first-graders span the spectrum of early reading, some may be more familiar with the vocabulary used in this lesson than others. For this final activity, try to make sure that each student has a word they do not know. For higher-level readers, give them a verb or an adjective instead of a noun.

Have students find the meanings of the words they were given by asking a friend or looking it up in a children's dictionary. Then, have each student write (or dictate to you if they are not yet writing) and illustrate a sentence using their new word, adding as many other "clue words" in the sentence as they can. As an added feature, you can have students trace over the new word in the same color that the reference object or action is drawn in the picture. See the example below.

### ***Suggested Words for Post-Reading Activity***

country	embarrassed	tiara
cousin	dilemma	liberty
cleats	explosion	ardor
neighbor	landlord	fortunate
schedule	ancestor	mannequin
agility	famished	rubbish
badger (verb)	willow	twister

### ***Example of Post-Reading Activity***



When it is wet outside, I wear galoshes to keep my feet dry.

