

Basics

One of the difficulties with reading that can cause anxiety for readers is unknown or confusing vocabulary. Worrying about new words can slow down readers and demotivate them.

There are three ways to deal with unknown vocabulary. The first is to ignore it and continue to read, and especially with skim reading this can be a good strategy. The second technique is to find out the meaning from a dictionary or another student. Sometimes, the full meaning of a word is needed – but not very often. The use of a dictionary will slow down the reading process. The third way of dealing with unknown vocabulary is to use the words that are around the unknown word to understand the meaning. This is called using the context to understand meaning.

The academic context

Academic texts can be very complex, and having a strategy for dealing with unknown vocabulary is very important for academic reading.

Key features

There are a number of ways of understanding the meaning of words from the surrounding words. The ideas below can help you understand the meaning of unknown words. The unknown word is highlighted:

- Use your knowledge of the world to understand the text.
*Coal mines are a long way underground, so it's always **pitch black**.*
- Look for definitions using words such as *means* or *called*.
*All the gases that cars create are called **emissions**.*
- Look for comparisons such as *likewise* or *as well as*.
*Petrol, as well as **paraffin**, pollutes a lot.*
- Look for example phrases such as *for example*, *such as* or *including*.
***Toxic** gases including carbon monoxide are produced.*
- Look for contrast phrases such as *but*, *on the other hand* or *although*.
*Reduction of pollution is possible, but **elimination** is harder.*

Look in the text in the **Theory to practice** section for an example of each feature.

Challenges / difficulties

It is not always possible to understand the word from the context. If you cannot, either ignore the word or, if you feel it's critical, use a dictionary.

How can I develop this skill?

Try working with a partner to read a difficult text. Choose a paragraph, and together, decide on which unknown words you need to understand; then try to work out the meanings. Remember to be selective; you don't usually need to understand every word. You could also take turns using a dictionary: one student suggests the meaning of a word, and the other checks it in the dictionary and confirms or provides a clue. Then swap roles.

Learning outcome

Students will be able to demonstrate some of the techniques that can help in understanding the meaning of unknown words in a text from the context.

Theory to practice

Look at this text and try to understand the meanings of the highlighted words from the context. Your teacher will discuss the answers in the lesson.

Traffic pollution

We all know that cars **emit** lots of poisonous gases, and these include **greenhouse gases** such as carbon dioxide. The problem is much worse with large groups of cars, called **traffic jams**. Fast traffic is a problem, but slow-moving as well as **stationary** traffic is very dangerous. Petrol and diesel are both very bad pollutant fuels. **Hydrogen**, on the other hand, is not.

Ways to get more practice

As you read texts, always look for examples that will help you understand unknown words from the context. Discuss the techniques you used with another student.