

## Basics

You use context to help you to understand meaning:

- Before you listen – taking into account the situation, any notes/titles/handouts, the other people present, the relationship you have with the speaker, what has happened previously, etc.
- While you are listening – paying attention to the speaker's body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, use of visual aids (photos, handouts, slides, graphs, headings), etc. While you are listening, you can also make educated guesses about the meanings of unfamiliar words.

## The academic context

In talks, lectures, workshops, tutorials and seminars, you can use the context to help you understand more of the meaning. For example:

- Before you listen, you will know what you have covered in the course up to now. Think about what came before – it will help you predict what comes next. You often also know something relevant about the speaker, like what their area of expertise is. Therefore, it is safe to predict that you will hear something related to that.
- While you are listening, you will notice the speaker's movements, facial expressions and choice of words. In addition, listen carefully to the speaker's tone of voice. Is the tone sincere, critical, doubtful, ironic, etc.? These will all guide you towards a better understanding of the meaning.

## Key features

### Ways of understanding individual words or phrases

- Identify the part of speech.

Feeling unable to serve his country and at the same time be true to himself, the king took the rare decision to **abdicate**.

Here, *abdicate* is clearly a verb – something a king does, apparently only in extreme circumstances, and it means he no longer serves his country.

- Think about prefixes, roots and suffixes.

The castle's **inaccessibility** meant that it had never been attacked.

The prefix *in-* is usually negative; *access* means *be able to reach*; and the suffix *-ability* forms a noun. So the word means the quality of *not being able to be reached*.

- Use logic or your knowledge of the subject to understand unfamiliar or 'unknown' words.

Their return journey involved a **perilous** climb down the mountain in thick fog.

Here, you can guess from your knowledge of mountains and weather that *perilous* probably means *risky* or *dangerous*.

- Use surrounding words to build up a context for 'unknown' words.

Peter was wearing two pullovers, a thick coat, a scarf, a hat and mittens, but he was still cold.

Here, we can work out that *mittens* are an item of clothing or an accessory (because he is wearing them); they are probably for cold weather (because of the other things he is wearing); and they are a plural noun – so they are probably either a kind of glove or a form of sock/shoe.

- Consider whether you are dealing with a phrasal verb or idiom.

Janice was feeling down and wasn't up to seeing anyone.  
Boris looked up to his uncle and always looked forward to seeing him.

Here, literal understandings of *down*, *up* and *forward* make no sense, so you can assume they are part of idioms or phrasal verbs.

## Listening for signpost words and phrases

As with other academic skills, it is helpful to listen for verbal 'signposts' – words or phrases that indicate the direction the speaker is taking. Listen particularly for:

- Examples

Anseriformes, such as swans and ducks, are birds that mostly live on or close to water.  
Peripherals, for example, screens, keyboards, mice and printers, can add a lot of money to the cost of buying a desktop computer.

- Definitions

Carnivores are animals that eat meat.  
'Hedging' is the term we use for protecting ourselves against financial risk.  
This bone in the knee is called the patella.

- Similarity

James thought it was possible that early humans worried about things in the same way as we do.  
The house has a porch supported on columns, like an ancient temple.

- Contrast

Unlike mammals, birds lay eggs.  
We can prolong life for sufferers of this disease, but a cure remains elusive.  
Although the project is possible, it is not very practical.

## Challenges / difficulties

As with a lot of listening skills, one challenge is the speed of delivery. People sometimes speak very fast, and that doesn't allow you enough time to work things out from the context.

The main difficulty, however, is when the vocabulary is too difficult for you. If there are too many 'unknown' words, it can be hard to make sense of what the speaker is saying.

## How can I develop this skill?

The Worksheet will help you practise. Then, learn to identify the words and phrases listed in the Key features section. This will help you get more meaning out of what you hear.

## Learning outcome

Learning to understand meaning from context means that you will get more information each time you listen. It will give you more confidence: you will realize that you can make educated guesses at the meanings of more and more 'unknown' words.

## Theory to practice

### 1 Tick the most likely meaning for the highlighted phrases.

- a** Nick **remonstrated** with the manager, but he only managed to get himself thrown out.  
☐ inferior; lower in importance  
☐ argued; protested
- b** It is **inconceivable** that the president didn't know the truth.  
☐ impossible to imagine  
☐ very likely
- c** It was an **arduous** walk through rough ground, with a heavy load to carry.  
☐ pleasant  
☐ difficult
- d** Once we had got the boat out of the water, we could see the damage to the **keel**.  
☐ part of the top of a boat  
☐ part of the bottom of a boat
- e** Sean realised he was not **cut out for** a career in the legal profession, so he resigned from the law firm.  
☐ suited to  
☐ invited to

### 2 Read the sentences and answer the questions after each one.

- a** Brass instruments, such as trumpets and trombones, and woodwind instruments, for example, flutes and clarinets, are supposed to be good exercise for the lungs.

Do you have a clear idea of what brass and woodwind instruments are?

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- b** The terms *beak* and *bill* – used to refer to the hard mouth parts of a bird – tend to be used synonymously.

What is a beak?

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- c** The bobcat shares some physical characteristics with a cat you might keep as a pet, but it is larger, with a much shorter tail, and its markings are more like those of a leopard or a tiger.

Could you mistake a bobcat for a normal cat?

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d

Unlike a specialist, a GP (General Practitioner) is a doctor with a wide knowledge of general illnesses. A GP's responsibilities include being able to refer the patient to the appropriate specialist in more complex cases.

Who would you go to if you felt ill but had no idea what was wrong with you?

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## Ways to get more practice

Listen to as many talks as you can (you can find a huge amount of material online). The more you listen, the more understanding meaning from context will become second nature to you. Very soon, you will be doing it without thinking about it.