Context Clues

Have you ever been reading a really good book, gotten deep into the story, and then run across a word you just don’t know? It can be frustrating. Many readers skip the word, pretending like it doesn’t exist, which creates a black hole in the sentence and in your understanding, but there is a better way.

Most writers build clues in to the sentence surrounding the word so that you can figure it out, or at least get a good idea of what it might be. Using the sentences surrounding the mystery word is called using context clues. It is a skill good readers use to understand text.

Here’s how it works:

Let’s say you have a word you don’t know in the book you are reading. You’ve NEVER heard this word before, and you are starting to panic. The word is “undulate.” It looks pretty intimidating. Let’s look at what you can do:

Reread that sentence—Rereading the sentence with the mystery word can give you clues to what the word might mean. Our sentence is:

“Watching the smooth movement of the ocean waves as they undulate back and forth across the ocean floor relaxes me.”

Determine what you know—I know the word is talking about water. I also know it is an action, so it must be a VERB. It is talking about the ocean waves moving, and the ocean water moves in a wavy, bendy way, so I think it is means to move like a wave.

TADA! I figured it out.

Why this is great—stopping in the middle of your reading to look up words you don’t know is a pain, and it makes reading hard. It becomes almost impossible to make meaning of the text when you are continually having to stop and start over again. Using Context clues is less disruptive. You can pause for only a few seconds, figure it out, and move on. It’s easy, and it helps you stay in the story while still understanding things you might not have gotten if you skipped the passage altogether.

What to do if this doesn’t work—Sometimes even the context clues don’t help you understand what a word means. When that happens, consider how necessary knowing the word is. If you don’t need to know exactly what it means right away, jot it down and look it up later. If you do need to know, it may be worth pausing your reading to figure it out. Keep a dictionary by you just in case. Knowing the complicated words of a text is an important skill that can often add all new layers of meaning.