

Reading to Write: Learning Vocabulary from Context Clues

University students are often faced with an extensive bulk of reading material. This material is likely to be challenging, and yet there **may not be time** to look up all unfamiliar words and terminology or to re-read material several times. In addition, lectures and class discussions **may not explain** the reading material assigned for homework but may instead focus on **applying** what was learned in the reading to new material introduced in the lecture. In more advanced courses, students are required to read extensively on their own for **research** purposes; this reading material must be absorbed quickly and without an explanatory lecture. It is therefore important **not to become too dependent** on your dictionary or other sources of explanation. Practice teaching yourself the meaning of new words, terms, and concepts as you read, by paying attention to the **context** in which you encounter vocabulary. Here are some methods to apply in learning new vocabulary and terminology:

1. Read for as long as possible **without** consulting your dictionary. Mark words which do not seem essential but for which you would like a more precise definition, so that you can look them up later if you have time. Learn to trust your intuition.
2. Allow yourself to **guess** the meanings of new words from the **context** in which they appear. For example, if you read: "...a tray containing sake, pickles, radishes, mushrooms, and fish..." you may not know what all these items are, but you can guess they all relate to eating or drinking. This may be all you need to know at this point. Look for precise definitions **when you need them**.
3. Practice determining which words are explained by the text. For instance, look at the position of the word *vagaries* in this sentence: "...like all people who shape their existence around the agricultural cycle, Japanese peasants were accustomed to responding flexibly to the **vagaries** of their existence."* This is a good word to know but it is not essential, since if you understand the surrounding context you know that this life was unpredictable. The word also looks like "vague" which, while not exactly the same, is connected to the meaning.
4. If a word or term is **repeated** and seems **important** for understanding this text, look it up. If it is a term that is particular to this **discipline**, you may want to record it in a particular list for that purpose. If it's a general academic word, you may also wish to place it on a list, perhaps along with the **sentence** in which you found the word. Keeping this kind of **personal dictionary** is useful, yet many students find it too time-

consuming. Experiment to see what works for you. Remember that the more you read in a particular discipline, the more easily you will understand the meanings of new vocabulary from the context.

5. Use *Coxhead's online academic word list* (or other resources) to learn new vocabulary in **word families**:

<http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>

6. Knowledge of the **roots, prefixes and suffixes** that appear frequently in the vocabulary you encounter can be helpful (e.g. "audi" will have something to do with hearing). It is also helpful to know which endings commonly indicate a certain part of speech (e.g. -tion is a noun). Here is a link to an online list: <http://www.michigan-proficiency-exams.com/parts-of-speech.html>
7. Pay attention to the uses of common **transitional words and phrases**. These can provide helpful clues when reading difficult passages. Consult the list at: <http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>

*Walthall, Anne. "The Life Cycle of Farm Women in Tokugawa Japan." In Gail Lee Bernstein, ed., *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.