

# Six Kinds of Context Clues

**1. Definitions and Synonyms:** The author gives a definition or uses a similar word immediately after or close to the unfamiliar word. A definition or synonym follows a comma, a dash, or words such as *or*, *is called*, *that is*, and *in other words*.

**Example:** From *Terrible Typhoid Mary* by Susan C. Bartoletti: *In her wake are many cases of typhoid fever, she having unwittingly **disseminated**—or as we might say, **sprinkled**—germs in various households.*

**2. Concrete Examples:** The author offers an example that helps you figure out the word’s meaning. Examples can be found in the sentence, in a new sentence or following these words or phrases: *for example*, *such as*, and *especially*.

**Example:** From “Isaac Newton and the Day He Discovered the Rainbow” by Kathleen Krull: *A **refracting substance**, such as a prism, could bend each wavelength of light by a different angle or amount.*

**3. Restated Meanings:** Sometimes the author defines a difficult word by restating its meaning in simpler terms. Often commas set off the word from the meaning. You’ll also find the meaning of a word stated after words and phrases such as *or*, *that is*, and *in other words*.

**Example:** From *Tales From the Top of the World* by Sandra Athans: *To keep from getting sick on Everest, climbers must **acclimatize**, or adjust, to the low oxygen levels.*

**4. Comparison:** The author uses a comparison to help you understand a tough word.

**Example:** From *Drowned City* by Don Brown: *The police were as **stranded** as the people who need their help* (p. 34).

**5. Words or Phrases That Modify:** Modifiers such as adjectives, adverbs, or relative clauses can have clues to a word’s meaning. A relative clause begins with *who*, *which*, *that*, *whose*, or *whom* and often explains or extends an idea or word in the main part of the sentence.

**Example:** From “Isaac Newton and the Day He Discovered the Rainbow” by Kathleen Krull: *He [Newton] observed that the beam spread out into colored bands of light, which he called a **spectrum**.*

**6. Conjunctions That Show Relationships and Link Ideas:** Coordinating and subordinating conjunctions show relationships and help you link unknown words and ideas to known words and ideas. *And*, *but*, *or*, *not*, *for*, and *yet* are coordinating conjunctions. Common subordinating conjunctions are *when*, *if*, *since*, *whenever*, and *because*.

**Example:** From “New Horizons in Space” by Seymour Simon: *Planet earth **and** the many thousands of asteroids circling the sun in our solar system were all created from the same basic material **when** the solar system was formed.*

In addition to the vocabulary demands of nonfiction, students will find that knowledge and understanding of text features and text structures can also support recall, comprehension, and analytical thinking.