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# HOW TO GUESS THE MEANING OF AN UNFAMILIAR WORD IN READING COMPREHENSION

There is no doubt that vocabulary is one of the key elements of any entrance examination. However, despite extensive preparations, a student can still fall short of vocabulary practice and encounter a word that is unfamiliar. Such a situation may arise while reading a passage and may pose difficulties in answering given questions.

Students can often understand the story of the passage skipping the unfamiliar word but at times, a word may become crucial for understanding the passage. Moreover, there is a possibility that a direct question appears around that unfamiliar word. This is a place where the test taker can get stuck. Thus, it becomes important to understand the meanings of words given in a reading comprehension passage.

But, can you really understand the meaning of a new word when you do not have access to a dictionary? Yes, you can! How? You can use contextual clues.

Just as you guess the name of a movie in the game of **Dumb Charades** through the clues given by the Dumb person, you can use **contextual clues** given by the familiar words that surround the new word, to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar word in a passage. It may not be possible for you to guess the exact meaning but you can be pretty close. Let us take one example, to make the process clear.

Read the passage below:

"He decided that all the farm dogs were **cowards** because they were afraid of a certain animal with White Stripes" .

If we assume that you don't know the meaning of the word "Coward", can you guess the meaning by contextual clues given by surrounding words?

**Clue:** because they are afraid ... **your understanding:** Dogs are [fearful](#)

So, can we say that coward can mean being fearful? Brilliant! You are very close

Dictionary meaning of Coward is "excessively afraid of danger or pain"

But such clues cannot always be so direct. So, let's proceed further with the passage:

"You are a pussy cat and I can lick you." said Scott to Dogs,... "I can lick the little animal with White stripes too"... So the farm dogs took the Scotty to little animal with white stripes...Scotty closed on him, [growling](#) and [slashing](#).<sup>1</sup>

## Contextual Clues

## Your Understanding

Scotty says that he can lick dogs as well as the little animal who these dogs are afraid of

Scotty wants to say that he is not afraid of little animal

He growls and slashes

Scotty has done something to prove that he is not afraid of little animal

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**The Logic:** If Scotty wants to prove that he is not afraid of someone, what do you expect him to do? Shout or slap that someone? rightly, growl and slash may mean, "[Shouting and slapping](#)". Again, you are pretty close.

Dictionary meaning of Growl is "*(of an animal, especially a dog) make a low guttural sound of hostility in the throat.*" and Slash means "*Cut with a wide, sweeping movement, typically using a knife or sword.*"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts taken from a short story "The Scotty Who Knew Too Much" by James Thurber

<sup>2</sup> Meanings taken from Oxford Dictionary