

# ***Developing Vocabulary Skills***

***Irwin L. Joffe***



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***Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.***  
***Belmont, California***

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ISBN-0-534-00098-3

L. C. Cat. Card No. 72-167905

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—76 75 74 73 72 71

### ***Acknowledgments***

Materials in the text and exercises in this volume have been taken from the following books, with permission of the publishers.

Kenneth L. Briney, *Cardiovascular Disease*, © 1970 by Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.

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## **Opportunity for Skillful Reading Series**

**by Irwin L. Joffe, Phoenix College**

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- 1. Word Attack for College Students**
- 2. Developing Outlining Skills**
- 3. Finding Main Ideas**
- 4. Understanding Paragraph Relationships**
- 5. Understanding Maps, Charts, Graphs and Tables**
- 6. Developing Vocabulary Skills**
- 7. Understanding Figurative Language**
- 8. Locating Specific Information**
- 9. Following Printed Directions**
- 10. Remembering What You Read**

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## ***Foreword***

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The Opportunity for Skillful Reading Series offers unique advantages for students and instructors in college reading programs. These programs are usually organized in one of two ways: as a formal college course or as some type of reading "lab." In either case it is not enough to *tell* students about reading skills. Considerable *practice* in specific reading skills is necessary. However, different students have different reading problems. Some have difficulty in understanding key thoughts in paragraphs, some in understanding details; others are confused by figurative or idiomatic language; still others lack basic word attack skills.

This series meets the need to individualize instruction. Each book provides a method for achieving success in a particular skill, and also provides a great many practice exercises in that skill. When an instructor (or a student) determines that help in a skill is needed, he can read the rationale and then do as many practice exercises as is necessary to make him proficient. Although a group of students may meet in the same place at the same hour (be it classroom or lab), each student can work on the particular skill that meets *his* need. Thus, we have tailor-made, individualized instruction without the prohibitive cost of a one-to-one teaching situation.

Although the Opportunity for Skillful Reading Series is meant to be used with the parent textbook, *Opportunity for Skillful Reading*, it can also be used with any other reading textbook. The student can read the required book to discover the technique for achieving success in a particular skill and then practice the skill by using the exercises in the appropriate Opportunity for Skillful Reading Series book. These skill books provide more practice exercises than can usually be incorporated into a regular reading skills textbook.

Too often a vocabulary improvement book merely provides another list of words grouped according to certain special categories. Students are expected to memorize these words and then use them. Little or no attention is paid to providing students with a method for learning words, and sometimes context is given little more than lip service. *Developing Vocabulary Skills*, hopefully, avoids that error. The stress in this book is on learning the meanings of words as they are used in context. The author feels that it is not really possible to teach vocabulary improvement except by trying to make students sensitive to words as living tools of communication—living in the sense that words change

or add meanings and sometimes even die. (At least some meanings die or fall into disuse.) Even the method that is provided for learning and remembering a word incorporates context and multiple meanings as part of it.

*Developing Vocabulary Skills* begins by discussing the two keys to success in learning words—context and structure. Six types of context clues are discussed and illustrated with clearly explained examples. The place of prefixes, roots, and suffixes is also illustrated. This is followed by seven sets of practice exercises, each one designed to help students become more sensitive to words and word meanings. In Part Two a specific, step-by-step method for learning words is offered. This procedure takes into account the laws of memory, the psychology of college student behavior, and the laws of learning, as well as stressing context and structure. A list of words in context which had been used for exercise or illustration to that point in the book is then offered for practice in using this method.

Part Three is concerned with using the dictionary. The various services that dictionaries perform are discussed and illustrated. Such areas as pronunciation, derivation, spelling, parts of speech, and, of course, word meanings are covered. Practice exercises are provided to help students master this important tool.

I would like to extend my appreciation to Miss Sue McCarthy, a student at Phoenix College, for the many hours she spent in typing this manuscript and for providing a student's eye view of some of the points covered.

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# ***Contents***

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Foreword	vii
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## ***Part One***

Developing Vocabulary Skills	3
Practice Exercises	
Set I	13
Set II	19
Set III	23

## ***Part Two***

How to Learn a Vocabulary Word	27
Practice Exercises	
Set IV	29
Set V	31
Set VI	33
Set VII	35

## ***Part Three***

The Dictionary	39
Guide Words	39
Exercise 1	41
Pronunciation	43
Exercise 2	47
Derivation	49
Exercise 3	51
Exercise 4	55
Exercise 5	59



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# ***Part One***

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## ***Developing Vocabulary Skills***

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Too often students feel that the best way to improve vocabulary is to study a list of words, eight or ten or twelve at a time, memorizing a synonym for each one, until the list is learned. Too often you may feel if you learn a synonym for each of these words, you are truly improving your vocabulary. This is not so. Only by becoming sensitive to words and how they are used can you improve your ability to understand and use new words yourself. A word by itself really doesn't have much meaning. Even a simple word like *fire* cannot be understood until it is used in a phrase or a sentence (context). The word *fire* would probably give you a pleasant feeling if you think of a cold, snowy day and then visualize a *fire in a fireplace*. You would have a negative feeling if you thought that *a fire burned your house down* or that you were *fired from your job*.

Authors often provide clues to the meaning of words in the context of their writing. If you are made aware of these clues, you will be more likely to notice them in reading. What are these clues to understanding vocabulary through context?

1. *Restatement—synonym.* Sometimes the author will provide a synonym in the same sentence in which an unknown word is used. The good reader will notice this and use it to help decipher the meaning of the word. What does the word *fallacious* mean in the following sentence? "My opponent's argument is fallacious, misleading—plain wrong." The construction of this sentence suggests that *fallacious* means something similar to the words following it: *misleading, wrong*. Read the following sentence: "A perambulator, or baby carriage, is very useful to mothers of young children." A perambulator is, of course, a baby carriage.

Read each of the following sentences, noticing the words in italics. Then, in the space provided, write the meaning of the word. Use the context only (each is restatement—synonym). Do not refer to a dictionary or other reference book.

- a. His *pertinacity*, or stubbornness, is the cause of most of his trouble.

#### 4 Developing Vocabulary Skills

- b. The girl was churlish—rude, sullen, absolutely ill-mannered.
- 

The answers are (a) stubbornness and (b) rude or sullen or ill-mannered. Do you see how a synonym for the word in question is given in the context? This is restatement—synonym.

2. *Restatement—antonym.* Sometimes an author helps you understand what he means by a word through using words that suggest an opposite meaning. Look at the following sentence: “Although some women are loquacious, others hardly talk at all.” The context of this sentence (particularly the words *although*, *some*, and *others*) suggests that a loquacious woman is other than silent—that she is talkative. What does *nocturnal* mean in this sentence? “Nocturnal rather than daytime insects are attracted to light.” The sense of this sentence suggests that nocturnal insects are nighttime insects.

Read each of the following sentences, noticing the words in italics. Then, in the space provided, write the meaning of the word.

- a. The girl who used to be very *vociferous* doesn't talk much any more.
- 

- b. Rather than be involved in *clandestine* meetings, they did everything quite openly.
- 

The answers are (a) talkative and (b) secret. Notice how the meaning is suggested by the opposite sense of the remainder of the sentence.

3. *Explanation.* Often the meaning of an unknown word is explained when it is used. Although the author may not actually define the word, clues to its meaning are provided by the context surrounding the word in question. What does *somnolent* mean in this sentence? “The patient is so *somnolent* that he requires medication to help him stay awake for more than a short time.” Do you see how the sentence tells you that *somnolent* means sleepy?

Read each of the following sentences, noticing the words in italics. Then, in the space provided, write the meaning of the word.

- a. He was so *parsimonious* that he refused to give his own sons the few pennies they needed to buy pencils for school. It truly hurt him to part with his money.
- 

- b. Because the *conflagration* was aided by the wind, it was so destructive that every building in the area was completely burned to the ground.
- 

The answers are (a) stingy and (b) fire. In each sentence the meaning of the word is explained by its context.

4. *Example.* Among the most helpful clues to understanding words is the example.

Celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars . . .

Piscatorial creatures, including flounder, mackerel, and sturgeon . . .

Although a celestial body could be many things to one who doesn't know its meaning, the example makes the meaning clear. You may have never heard the word *piscatorial* before, but the example leaves no doubt that it refers to fish.

Being sensitive to guide words can also be of help here. Words such as *for example*, *including*, and *such as* suggest that an example will follow.

Read each of the following sentences, noticing the words in italics. Then, in the space provided, write the meaning of the word.

- a. *Pedagogical* institutions, including high schools, kindergartens, and colleges, require community support if they are to function effectively.
- 

- b. *Ecclesiastics*, such as priests, ministers, pastors, and reverends, should set models of behavior for their congregants.
-

## 6 Developing Vocabulary Skills

The answers are (a) having to do with teaching and (b) clergymen. Notice the use of the guide words in these examples.

5. *Definition.* Occasionally, a word is defined without further ado.

A tropism in moths is a tendency to fly toward the light.

A pentagon is a five-sided figure.

When a word is being defined it is usually quite obvious. This is often done in textbooks or other formal fact-giving reading materials.

6. *Situation.* Very often words with several possible meanings can be better understood if the reader is sensitive to the circumstances in which they are used. Read the following statement:

Tom was looking forward to his *date* with Sue. He would wear his best blue *suit* and a dark *tie*.

Let's assume that you do not know what the italicized words mean and that you have consulted a dictionary and discovered several possible meanings for each of the words:

### *DATE*

- a. The fruit of a palm tree
- b. An appointment
- c. A statement specifying a point of time

### *SUIT*

- a. An action in law
- b. Wearing apparel
- c. To please

### *TIE*

- a. To join together
- b. A support to which rails are fastened
- c. Neckwear

How do you know which of the definitions applies in this particular sentence? The first word, *date*, refers to something that Tom is to share

with Sue. He could conceivably look forward to sharing a piece of fruit or a February 15; but the context suggests something more important than a piece of fruit and more specific than a general point of time. Therefore, *an appointment* seems the most plausible choice. What about *suit* and *tie*? The word *wear* makes clear that both words refer to wearing apparel. But even without that clear clue, we would rule out “to please” for *suit* and “to join together” for *tie*, because action words (verbs) would not fit into the sentence (the word *his* signals a noun); we would then rule out “an action of law” and “a support to which rails are fastened,” because such things don’t belong in the situation described here—a situation in which Tom is looking forward to sharing something with Sue.

Notice that in *situation* we are often concerned about choosing the correct meaning from the many meanings that a common word may have. Your past experience and the logic of the situation should help you here. Notice that referring to a dictionary is *not helpful by itself*. The dictionary will supply you with the various meanings for the word, but you must decide which of these multiple meanings applies to the particular context in which the word is used. Also, you should realize that *situation* can often be combined with the other types of context clues (restatement—synonym, restatement—antonym, explanation, example, and definition) in arriving at a correct meaning for a word.

In each of the following sentences, determine the meaning of the word in *italics* from among the choices given. Circle the number to the left of your choice. In each case, the choices are actual dictionary meanings for the word.

- a. His office is his *base* of operations.
  1. the bottom of something
  2. the main ingredient
  3. the locality
  4. a station on a baseball field
- b. A new class will be *formed* next semester.
  1. to shape
  2. to constitute or make up
  3. to acquire (as a habit)
  4. the appearance of something

The answers are (a) 3, the locality, and (b) 2, to constitute or make up. Notice how you must choose the correct meaning from among those

## 8 Developing Vocabulary Skills

given by using your knowledge and background and by the logic of the context in which the word appears.

Another way to recognize the meaning of an unknown word is to be sensitive to its structure. An understanding of the meaning of word parts can be extremely helpful. What are these parts?

**Roots.** Roots of words (as the word *root* suggests) are the basic parts of words—"basic" because they either stand alone (*port*) or give vital support to prefixes (*import*) and suffixes (*portable*). The root CRED means "to believe." When a story has CREDance, it can be believed. If it is inCREDible, it is unbelievable. Your CREED is your political or religious belief. When you receive CREDit, someone believes in you.

**Prefixes.** Prefixes are syllables that can be attached to a root word to give it a special meaning; they appear at the beginning of the word. BI is a prefix meaning *two*. A BIcyclē has *two* wheels. To BIsect means "to cut into *two* parts." Into how many parts do you divide something which you TRIsect? How many angles are there in a TRIangle and how many children are TRIplets? The answer to each of these questions is, of course, three.

Can you use the context to help you figure out the meaning of INTER in the following words?

We rested during *intermission*.

Do not *interfere* in the argument.

Do not interrupt me.

Did you guess that INTER means *between*? If so, you are beginning to become sensitive to word meanings.

**Suffixes.** Suffixes are similar to prefixes except that they appear at the end of a word. ABLE or IBLE means *able*. If one is employABLE, he is able to be employed. If what he says is believABLE, it is able to be believed. The suffix LESS means *without*. A person who is hatLESS has no hat. One who is speechLESS cannot speak; and when an astronaut is weightLESS, he is without weight.



### **Developing Vocabulary Skills**

1. Words should be learned through context clues:
  - a. Restatement—synonym: A synonym appears in the same sentence as the word.
  - b. Restatement—antonym: The clue to meaning is provided through the use of contrast.
  - c. Explanation: The meaning of the word is explained.
  - d. Example: A specific example is given which acts as a clue to meaning.
  - e. Definition: The meaning of the word is defined.
  - f. Situation: The correct choice from among multiple meanings can be discovered through the context in which the word is used.
2. Words are learned by a study of their structure:
  - a. Roots
  - b. Prefixes
  - c. Suffixes

Following is a list of often used word parts and their meanings, and sample words. Study them carefully. Later in this book you will find practice exercises that will provide various opportunities for you to learn word meanings through both word structure and context.