Guessing Vocabulary in Context

There are many ways to help you guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context. Read the explanation below and study the examples.

1. Definition
A definition gives the meaning of a word. The writer may use words, phrases, or statements to define something. The writer uses key words, or signal words to identify a definition, so the reader needs to look for them. See examples of key words below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is/are</td>
<td>means/mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is/are called</td>
<td>what this means is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is/are known as</td>
<td>consist of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is/are defined as</td>
<td>refer to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is/are described as</td>
<td>may be seen as</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

e.g.
Inflation means a rise in the general level of prices you pay for things you buy.

an unfamiliar word = inflation
signal word = means
the definition = a rise in the general level of prices you pay for everything you buy.

2. Restatement
The writer may use other words, phrases, or sentences to provide the meaning of a difficult word. It is called “restatement”; the writer repeats the word again or describes it in a different way. Signal words for restatement are below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that is to say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in other words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e. or that is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

e.g.
The surface of Africa consists mainly of plateaus, or large flat areas, although these occur at different levels.

an unfamiliar word = plateaus
signal word = or
meaning = large flat areas

3. Punctuation marks
Punctuation is used to describe the meaning of an unfamiliar word. The writer writes unfamiliar words and then uses punctuation with words, phrases, or sentences to explain the meaning of the new words. Such punctuation is below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>, commas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>, , appositive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( ) parentheses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- - dashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>; semicolon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>: colon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
e.g.
The use of computers to handle text, or word processing, was foreseen in the 1950s.

an unfamiliar word = handle text
signal punctuation = ,,
meaning: handle text = word processing

4. Examples
Examples help the reader to understand the meaning of new words without definition. See key words or signal words used for showing examples below:

Key words
such as
like
for example, …
for instance, …
is / are

e.g.
Use navigation buttons, such as, the “Next” button, the “Previous” button, the “Menu” button, and the “Exit” button, to go back and forth or jump to other topics while you are using your English software.

unfamiliar words = navigation buttons
signal word = such as
meaning = buttons on computer program that are used for turning on pages

5. Contrast
The reader can guess the meaning of new words by using signal words of contrast. These indicate the opposite meaning of the new words. See key words or signal words of contrast below:

Key words
but / instead of / even though / in contrast to
yet / in spite of / although / as opposed to
unlike / despite / however / on the other hand
whereas / while / still / provided that

e.g.
Although Dara and Vipa are very close friends, they are very different. Dara spends a lot of money to buy things while Vipa loves to economize.

a) spend more money  b) save money
c) buy more things than before  d) keep things in a safe place

6. Similarity
The reader can guess the meaning of new words by using signal words of similarity. These refer to the words or phrases mentioned formerly. See key words or signal words of similarity below:

Key words
like / similarly / in the same way
as / the same as / just as

e.g.
Indonesia is producing Ford cars and trucks. Soon, Thailand and Vietnam will be producing the same products with, no doubt, the same quality.

What does the phrase “the same products” mean? ___________________________
What is your clue? _____________________________________
Exercises
First, study the example and then continue with the exercises below.

Sample sentence:
The snake *slithered* through the grass. It was hunting.
You must discover what *slithered* means by using logic. Here are your choices, and the analysis:

a) stopped moving
   INCORRECT: the sentence above says THROUGH the grass. “Through” means there is some movement.

b) slept in the grass
   INCORRECT: the sentence above says it was hunting. Snakes don't sleep when they hunt.

c) ate something
   INCORRECT: the sentence above says it was hunting. Snakes don't eat when they are hunting. They eat AFTER they hunt.

d) moved or traveled
   CORRECT ANSWER: the sentence above says THROUGH the grass. “Through” means that there is some movement.

Now, READ each sentence and CHOOSE the correct answer.

1. The tiger’s *roar* could be heard in villages far away.
   What does *roar* probably mean?
   A) food a tiger eats  B) a tiger’s dream  C) a sound a tiger makes

2. The thought of eating a rat is *abhorrent* to most people.
   What does *abhorrent* probably mean?
   A) fun, lively  B) horrible, repugnant  C) sweet, sugary

3. My *absent-minded* teacher loses his keys, his book and his chalk almost every day!
   What does it mean to be *absent-minded*?
   A) be hateful  B) not pay attention  C) be intelligent  D) not like someone

4. You can trust the salesmen at that store because they always conduct business in an *aboveboard* manner.
   What does *aboveboard* probably mean?
   A) honest, open  B) sneaky, dishonest  C) horrible, repugnant  D) strange, unusual
5. Petra has so many friends because she is a **gregarious** person.

What does **gregarious** probably mean?

A) introverted, self-contained  
B) shy, quiet  
C) friendly, outgoing  
D) rude, hostile

6. The lovely **egret** is in danger of extinction because clothing manufacturers use their long, beautiful tail feathers to make ladies' hats.

What is an **egret**?

A) a small child  
B) a type of food  
C) a sound a tiger makes  
D) a type of bird

7. I can't believe it! Right in the middle of our conversation, Peter turned around **abruptly** and walked out of the room!

What does **abruptly** probably mean?

A) formally  
B) slowly, in no hurry  
C) suddenly, without notice  
D) quietly, in an unusual manner

8. After the harvest, we had an **abundant** amount of apples. We made apple pie, apple sauce, and apple juice because we had so many apples!

What does **abundant** probably mean?

A) a shortage  
B) not enough  
C) very red  
D) plentiful

9. When Sara was sick, her voice was almost **inaudible**. We couldn't hear what she was trying to say clearly.

What does **inaudible** probably mean?

A) very loud, easy to hear  
B) very soft, hard to hear  
C) very strange, uncommon  
D) very shy, introverted

10. The hill was too **arduous** for us to climb. We had to walk our bicycles up the hill.

What does **arduous** probably mean?

A) tall, soft  
B) fun, exciting  
C) easy, not challenging  
D) difficult, steep
Answer Key
Exercises