

Understanding the Meaning of Unknown Words

Academic Reading – Unknown Words

Studies have shown that when reading in a foreign language, we immediately abandon our mother tongue reading skills; **skimming, scanning and reading for detail.**

Instead, most language learners, when reading try to understand every single word and tend to stop reading as soon as they encounter an **unknown word** to look it up in a dictionary.

This not only makes them lose track of what they're reading, but also makes them focus on the unknown word instead of the general **comprehension** of the text, which in many cases may lead to frustration.

By learning how to use **context, parts of speech and word order,** readers will be able to **understand the meaning of unknown words** without having to interrupt their reading to check in a dictionary.

This, along with accepting from the very beginning, that when reading a foreign language we will **always** come across unknown words.

CONTEXT

1. Check if the word sounds **familiar or similar to a word in your native language.** There are often many words that sound alike in different languages.
2. Ask yourself if the word **looks to any other word** you do know in English. Sometimes you know the word, it's just being conjugated differently. (EX: Speak, speaking, spoke).

3. Check the **meaning of the words surrounding the unfamiliar word**.
Meaning, the other words in the sentence.
4. Take the paragraph where the unfamiliar word is and ignoring that word try answering **what is happening, where it's happening, when it's happening, and to who is it happening to**. **Circle, underline or take note** of the word. That's all. Once you do, keep going.
5. Only circle, underline, or take note of **key words**: verbs, adjectives, nouns, etc. Most **short words** are usually pronouns, prepositions or interjections. These are not indispensable for general comprehension.
6. Use the dictionary to check the meaning only if the word is **constantly being repeated** or is part of **a title or a heading**.
7. Finally and after following the steps above, **make a prediction** of the meaning of the word. Does the sentence **make sense**?

PARTS OF SPEECH

1. Guess **what type of word** the unknown word is (revise the list below).
2. If it's a **short word** and looks like a pronoun, preposition or interjection, ignore it. These are not indispensable for general comprehension.
3. What does the sentence look like **without the unknown word**?
4. Does the sentence **make sense** without this word?
5. What does the unknown word add to the sentence? (**function** of the word)
6. What type of word is the **word before** and the **word after** the unknown word?

Part of speech	Function	Examples	Example sentences
Verb	Action (lexical verbs) or state (auxiliary verbs)	<i>to be, have, do, dance, think, eat.</i>	I work in the mornings.

Noun	Thing or person.	<i>Bogota, university, chair, bird, Angelica.</i>	This is my book.
Adjective	Describes a noun.	<i>Tall, thin, pretty, ugly.</i>	My sister is very tall.
Determiner	limits or determines a noun.	<i>A, an, the, some, many, 1, 2, 3.</i>	This is a present I bought for you.
Adverb	Describes a verb, adjective or adverb.	<i>Quickly, silently, badly, very, yet, just.</i>	I haven't had lunch yet.
Pronoun	Replaces a noun.	<i>I, you, he, she, they.</i>	Tara is Indian. She is beautiful.
Preposition	Describes a place, movement or time.	<i>To, on, in, inside, at.</i>	The movie starts at 8:00pm.
Conjunction	Joins clauses, sentences or words.	<i>And, but, while, because, then, so, as.</i>	I'd rather eat a chocolate ice cream than a vanilla ice cream.
Interjection	Short exclamation expressing a feeling.	<i>Oh!, ouch!, hi!</i>	Ouch! I hurt myself.

<p>Active voice typical word order.</p>	<p>Subject (the doer) + verb+ new information (which is the focus).</p> <p>Focus is on the action and the new information.</p>	<p><i>Marco has written four successful novels.</i></p>
<p>Passive voice omitting who the doer is.</p>	<p>New information + verb, no doer</p> <p>Focus is on the action.</p>	<p><i>Four successful novels were written.</i></p>
<p>Passive voice placing the doer in a prepositional phrase after the verb.</p>	<p>New information + verb + doer</p> <p>Focus is on the doer.</p>	<p><i>Four successful novels were written by Marco.</i></p>
<p>Passive voice omitting who the doer is.</p>	<p>New information + verb, no doer</p> <p>Focus is on the action.</p>	<p><i>Four successful novels were written.</i></p>
<p>Passive voice placing the doer in a prepositional phrase after the verb.</p>	<p>New information + verb + doer</p> <p>Focus is on the doer.</p>	<p><i>Four successful novels were written by Marco.</i></p>