

Word meaning

See Units 12, 14 and 17



Understanding word meaning

Without an understanding of words, effective reading is impossible. As Lemov (2016)¹ remarked, 'Successful reading relies on a reader's capacity to understand both a large number of words as well as the subtleties and nuances of those words, even when words change their meaning according to the setting'. Learning to define words in context is an important skill, and one that confident readers use regularly.

It is crucial that children do not simply learn to 'define' individual words, like a dictionary, but that they understand the vocabulary they encounter in the context in which it appears. The National Curriculum (2014) requires children in Key Stage 1 to understand texts by 'drawing on what they already know or on background information or vocabulary provided by the teacher', while children in Key Stage 2 must check that a text makes sense to them by 'explaining the meaning of words in context'. Developing this skill helps children to make links between known and unknown words and teaches them to use the context of a word to interpret its meaning.

Word meaning in Complete Comprehension

The teaching of vocabulary can be divided into two key types: explicit and implicit instruction.²

Explicit instruction is the teaching of specific words and phrases that are necessary to either comprehend a specific text or comprehend meaning more generally *in advance of reading*.

Implicit instruction is the teaching of strategies that help learners assess their understanding of words *as they read*.

Word meaning is the target skill of several teaching units in each **Complete Comprehension** book. In addition, both types of vocabulary instruction are addressed in every teaching unit: explicit instruction is the focus of the **Get ready** session, in which **Key vocabulary** terms are taught before reading the comprehension passage. Implicit instruction underlies the work done in the subsequent **Explore** and **Skills focus** sessions (see pages 8 to 11 for a full description of the teaching sequence).

Word meaning questions usually require children to make links between synonyms. In **Complete Comprehension**, questions may be worded as follows:

- Which word is closest in meaning to...? Tick **one**.
- Explain what the word(s) ... tell(s) you about...
- What does the word ... mean in this sentence/line?
- Underline the word which tells you that...
- Draw lines to match each word to its meaning.
- Find and copy **one** word/a group of words that means the same as...

Often, questions that assess the skill of word meaning only require the child to find out one piece of information. However, this information does not usually come directly from the text but must be deduced using vocabulary knowledge. Word meaning questions thus sometimes require the use of other comprehension skills, such as inference (see page 20) to reach the correct answer.

Key challenges

As they read, many children skip over words they do not understand, losing meaning in the process. Teaching children to note down and ask about any vocabulary they do not understand when reading is therefore crucial.

Many children have relatively shallow vocabulary knowledge, only understanding a word when it appears in a familiar context. For example, many will have no trouble with 'It was *raining*' but will struggle with 'The money was *raining down*'. It is important to provide opportunities for children to deepen their knowledge by investigating words in a range of contexts.

Children with less secure vocabularies may also struggle to generate linked vocabulary (e.g. knowing that 'repeat', 'redo' and 'recycle' are all connected by the prefix 're-', which refers to doing something again). Incorporating the etymology and categorisation strategies described on page 15 when you are teaching will support the children to make these connections.