

DEALING WITH UNFAMILIAR WORDS

Whether sitting the IELTS test, studying at university, reading a work-related document or simply conversing, it is likely that you will come across words or phrases whose meaning you may not know.

Consider the sentence: *His claims are only theoretical, so they will now need to be tested empirically.* If unfamiliar with the word *empirically*, knowing that grammatically it's an adverb and that the linking word 'so' is used to show a result, and the meaning of *theoretical* must be somehow contrasted with *empirically* will give you sufficient information to deduce the approximate meaning of the word.

STUDY TIPS

Deduce the meaning of new and unfamiliar words or phrases by using context clues or grammar. This allows you to concentrate on the general sense of what it is you are listening to or reading without interruption.

These are some of the **strategies** used to effectively and efficiently deal with the meaning of **unfamiliar vocabulary** in the absence of a dictionary.

Strategies to deal with the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary

It is not always possible to access a dictionary or even necessary to have to always rely on a dictionary, teacher or friend for the meaning of an unfamiliar or unknown word, phrase or expression you meet. Developing strategies for dealing with unknown vocabulary is helpful and will stand you in good stead. Two strategies, which are examined here, include:

- using your knowledge of grammar
- using context

Using your knowledge of grammar

Knowing the exact meaning of a word or phrase is not always necessary to gain an understanding of what is meant, and in many instances, an approximate meaning usually suffices. This level of information can be determined by identifying what kind of word it is and how it is being used. Is it a noun, adjective, verb, adverb, etc.

Strategy	Using knowledge of grammar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ look at the grammatical structure of the sentence ▪ note the position of the word in the sentence ▪ check the form of the word – singular, plural, past tense, etc. ▪ decide the grammatical function of the word ▪ think of any related forms of the word 	

For example:

During the **intervening** years John completed his studies and moved to Sydney to take up a job.

The word **intervening** occurs before the noun 'years' and after the article 'the'. It is, therefore, an adjective. Determining this information narrows down the range of possible meanings of the word, and gives an approximate meaning it is a description of the kind of years.

The *-ing* ending tells us that it is a participial form, and when used as an adjective these forms have similar meanings to active verbs. Finding related forms of the word, such as the verb form is another strategy to use. For example:

Related forms

adjective	noun	verb
intervening	intervention	intervene

Knowing the meaning of either the noun or verb would further assist in providing more information. The verb *intervene* means 'to happen in the space of other events' or 'to happen between two points in time'. So **intervening** in this sentence must refer to a period of time between two points: the years between which he completed his studies and got a job.

Using context

Linking words and phrases or discourse markers are used to connect opinions, facts or ideas in spoken and written English. Knowing the meaning of these markers helps to understand how facts and ideas are linked, providing a further clue, which can help more accurately figure out the meaning of an unknown word or phrase. For example:

Unfortunately, the new version of the agreement is **ambiguous** compared with the previous one, which was crystal clear.

The linking phrase 'compared with' tells us that a comparison is being made to show how different something is. In this case, the new and old version of an agreement is being compared. Since the previous one was 'crystal clear', we can guess that the new version must be unclear by comparison, and hence work out the meaning of **ambiguous**. The linking word 'unfortunately', which carries the meaning of regret or disappointment, further supports this meaning.

On the following page is a list of some common linking words and their meaning. The meaning of the word in bold can be deduced from the context and the linking word.



STUDY ENGLISH

IELTS PREPARATION

Meaning	Linking words	Example
		Explanation
contrast	however, whereas, in spite of this, despite, but, nevertheless, on the other hand, in contrast to	<i>Whereas</i> Jim's attendance in the business communications course is sporadic , his sister's is regular.
		sporadic is contrasted with 'constant' using the linking word <i>whereas</i>
reason	because, because of, since, for	Assistance had to be given <i>because</i> they were living in dire poverty.
		The situation had to be serious if assistance was given.
cause-effect	causes, leads to, results in, is due to, is produced by, can result from	Carbon-dioxide emissions from cars and factories into the atmosphere <i>can result from</i> traffic congestion and pollution.
		result = carbon-dioxide emissions ; cause = traffic congestion and pollution
comparison	compared with, similarly, more than, less than, yet, while, unlike, like	<i>Unlike</i> Winston's inappropriate and ill-chosen examples, Margaret's selection was quite felicitous .
		The marker <i>unlike</i> allows you to gain an understanding of the word felicitous by comparing the description of the examples.
rephrasing/ clarification	in other words, that is to say, I mean, actually	The situation became inflamed quickly. <i>In other words</i> , the mob erupted violently and took to the streets to protest the shooting.
		The meaning of inflamed is understood from the clarification provided after the marker <i>in other words</i> .
examples/ explanation	for instance, for example, in particular	There are many therapeutic techniques , which have become popular over the last decade. <i>For instance</i> , acupressure, aromatherapy, herbalism, homeopathy, reflexology and others.
		The examples provide an understanding of different kinds of therapeutic techniques .