



Reading Skills Overview: Define

Define: Give/explain the meaning of words in context

The verb 'Define' is the root word of the noun 'definition', which itself means to state the exact meaning of a word, typically used in a dictionary.

When we define something, we can:

1. *'state or describe exactly the nature, scope, or meaning of something'*
2. *'give the meaning of a word or phrase'*
3. *'make up or establish the character or essence of someone/thing'*

(Oxford Dictionary, 2019)

However, there is more to the skill than just being able to provide a dictionary definition.

Within KS1, children must be able to 'draw on vocabulary to understand texts'.

Within KS2, children must be able to 'give/explain the meaning of words in context'.

(National Curriculum, 2014)

To achieve a full understanding of any new vocabulary, it is important that children understand the words they encounter within the context in which they appear. By developing this skill, children will be able to make links between words they recognise and those they don't, using the word's context to help them interpret its meaning.

Teaching how to define words or phrases needs to be both explicit and implicit.

Explicit teaching is useful in a Guided Reading pre-read session. Prior to the session, teachers may identify vocabulary that they predict children will find challenging, perhaps because it is very specific to the text or subject. Children will need to learn the meaning of these words in advance to enable them to gain an overall comprehension of the text. This can be achieved by presenting a word in multiple different contexts to construct meaning. Please see our vocabulary resources for ideas and strategies for this.

Implicit instruction is where teachers use techniques to check and consolidate the children's understanding of words *as* they are modelling, using specific defining skills to identify the meaning (see below).

The skill

There are a number of skills that come under the umbrella of the 'Define domain'. Often, readers will use a variety of these when reading day to day material to interpret meaning. It



is important that the skills are modelled by the teacher first, before the children practise and apply them throughout a range of different texts.

Pupils should be given age-appropriate texts, with the degree of challenge appropriately pitched, to ensure they can read and successfully apply these skills. Chosen texts need a range of challenging 'tier 2' vocabulary to facilitate practise and application.

Please see our vocabulary resources for more support on how to teach vocabulary using texts.

The strategies:

There are a number of strategies that can be used to support children with understanding new vocabulary. Each skill will need modelling and children then should be given the opportunity to practise and apply these skills through a range of contexts. They should also be encouraged to use these skills across the curriculum and in everyday reading.

- 1. Context clues** – there are sometimes words or phrases that surround an unfamiliar word within the same or adjacent sentences. Often children we will be able to get a general feel for the context from the surrounding information and are able to make an educated guess - something experienced readers do naturally. Generally, however, authors are not taking into consideration different reading abilities. They have selected language for effect and are writing for a purpose. This can become confusing for an inexperienced reader as sentences can lack any context clues. Teachers should only model or direct children to this skill if the words are within a helpful context.

Example:

Question: When Jenny found out that her sister had carelessly smashed her phone screen, Jenny was **vexed** and let her sister know it. What does the word vexed mean in this sentence?

Answer: If someone carelessly smashes something, it means that they did it casually and without caring. Phones can often be quite expensive, so vexed might mean that she is really annoyed about the situation.

For differentiated questions like the example above, visit the website below:

<https://www.ereadingworksheets.com/free-reading-worksheets/reading-comprehension-worksheets/context-clues-worksheets/>

- 2. Definition** - sometimes the author provides the exact definition of an unfamiliar word within the sentence. Usually this is provided within non-fiction pieces and the vocabulary is very technical and specific to a subject, i.e. tier 3 vocabulary.



Example:

A **terrapin** is a reptile which has a thick shell covering its body and which lives partly in water and partly on land.

Another example of this is where the definition is placed after the word and separated by commas:

e.g. In the winter you can see **icicles**, long pointed pieces of ice, hanging from guttering.

Definitions of words within the sentence context can be found on Collins online CoBuild dictionary - www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english

- 3. Substitution** - Teaching children that unfamiliar words can sometimes be substituted by others with a similar meaning, will help them check their understanding of new vocabulary. It is important to allow children to explore possible synonyms for original words, to enable them to make links between meanings. Teaching them that synonyms are words that have a similar but not the same meaning as the original word will allow them to replace a word in a sentence with another. They can then check if the sentence still makes sense, allowing links to be made between words and their meanings through the use of synonyms, helping them make an educated guess at the meaning of the original word.

Example:

The ground had not received rain for months and was **thirsty** and dry. It was so **parched** that it had also cracked.

- 4. Antonym** – sometimes the author might use two words within a sentence that have opposite meanings, and this can help children infer meaning. The use of the conjunction helps children understand that the meanings are opposite.

Example:

I thought the lion would be **fierce**, however it turned out to be quite **tame**.

Key words – but, however, though, unlike

- 5. Etymology** – the study of the origin of words. Understanding how words are formed and their relationship with other words will strengthen a child's vocabulary by enabling them to make links, allowing them to infer a word's meaning. Knowing a word's root will help them understand the meaning of other words with a similar root. It is important that children are taught the meaning of root words, prefixes and suffixes and their impact on the meaning of a word. Children should learn where words originated from and how to modify their meaning.



Prefixes and suffixes – the author uses prefixes and suffixes to alter the meaning of familiar root words.

E.g. He could rebuild the bridge - rebuild has the prefix 're' which means to do again. The root word is 'build' so it means to build again.

Root words – can be identified within words to help identify its meaning.

E.g. What is Cardiology? 'Cardio' means relating to the heart and 'ology' means 'the study of', so it must mean the study of the heart.

Our vocabulary resources have additional tools to support the understanding and use of etymology.

- 6. Categorise** – to enable children to gain a deeper level of understanding of vocabulary and to be able to make secure links, they need to be able to categorise vocabulary and draw upon prior knowledge. This needs to be developed across the curriculum to gain a wide range of vocabulary.

Example:

Knowing that 'Jupiter' and 'Saturn' are both planets, or 'exhilaration' and 'enthusiasm' are both feelings of excitement will help them understand links within their vocabulary and their importance.

To model the strategies clearly for children and to have a guide for them to use independently, see our content skill ladders for a step by step approach to assist their learning.

Questioning

It is important for teachers to read extracts prior to the lesson to identify and select specific vocabulary that they want pupils to discuss and define.

'Define' questions would normally include words or phrases such as:

- What does the word _____ suggest?
- Tell us _____
- Define the word _____
- Which synonym _____
- Synonym _____
- Meaning _____
- Means _____
- Describes _____
- The same as _____



It is likely that questions that assess children's understanding of vocabulary may only require one piece of information for the answer. However, the answer will not always be literally within the text, children will be expected to draw upon their knowledge of a wider vocabulary, often having to recall synonyms to help identify meaning. They may also be expected to use more than one reading skill, such as inference, in order to provide the correct response. Therefore, they may need experience of this beforehand.

'Define' questions are sometimes represented in different formats. Often, they require a short response, such as 'find and copy one word' and this will need additional teacher modelling. Other times they are written in a 'tick box' or 'matching' format.

The quality of answers expected:

Questions should be clear and require an accurate or specific answer. Often questions that assess this skill only require one piece of information, with children usually needing to make links between synonyms.

If the question requests the pupil to 'write one word' then this is the expected outcome and anything else should be deemed incorrect.

E.g. 'Find and copy one word'.