

# Context Clues and Idiomatic Expressions



## Reading Skills

- Using context clues to define idiomatic expressions
- Responding to vocabulary lesson through writing

## Overview of the “Context Clues and Idiomatic Expressions” Strategy

The acquisition of vocabulary knowledge is mandatory for a learner to achieve success. The successful study of vocabulary must be dynamic and ongoing. We teachers need to show the students the connection between vocabulary knowledge and reading ability. We need to seed, feed, and weed good vocabulary acquisition. Then and only then will our students learn, nurture, and maintain a strong base of vocabulary knowledge.

One of the more challenging aspects of vocabulary acquisition is using context in order to clarify the meaning of a word or phrase. Quite often when confronted with an unfamiliar word within its context, students will skip over it and continue to read, or they will cease reading altogether. However, teachers can assist students’ independent learning styles by showing them how to obtain the meanings of unknown words through recognizing and applying context clues. In this lesson, students will use their knowledge of context clues to gain a clearer image of each character’s personality by studying the meanings of idiomatic expressions of Appalachia.

## Activities for the “Context Clues and Idiomatic Expressions” Strategy

1. Prepare the students for this exercise on idiomatic expressions by introducing them to the four types of context clues that assist in students’ reading comprehensively. These are highlighted on the blackline master shown on the next page.
2. Assist the students through practice with idioms. Explain to the students that an *idiom* is a group of words which, when used together, has a different meaning from the one which the individual words have. We use idioms to express something that other words do not express as clearly or as cleverly. For example, “hearing it straight from the horse’s mouth” suggests that one receives information directly from the person who performed an action. Idioms tend to be informal, allowing the reader the opportunity to obtain a more colorful perception of the characters and the region.
3. Use the blackline master on page 87 to help the students clarify idiomatic expressions. The first three sentences should be used as a warm-up activity before dividing the students into pairs in order to Think-Pair-Share. The first one is done as an example.

## Mastering Context Clues

The four types of context clues are:

### 1. Definition/Explanation Clues

Sometimes a word's or phrase's meaning is explained immediately following its use. Example:

*“Etymology, which is the study of the origin of words, finds many teachers taking the bull by its horns when unraveling the mysteries of vocabulary studies.”*

### 2. Restatement/Synonym Clues

Sometimes a challenging word or phrase is clarified in simpler language. Example:

*“Lou felt as though she had been sent to the doghouse when Louisa admonished her for fighting at school.”*

Because the phrase “being sent to the doghouse” means being punished, *admonish* could mean to disapprove or to scold.

### 3. Contrast/Antonym Clues

Sometimes a word or phrase is clarified by the presentation of the opposite meaning somewhere close to its use. Look for signal words when applying context clues. Example:

*“Lou thought that her mother’s recovery was futile, but Oz remained faithful to the course of his mother’s restored health.”*

The signal word *but* tells the reader that an opposite, contrasting thought is occurring. Consequently, *futile* must mean the opposite of remaining faithful to the course; therefore, it must mean giving up.

### 4. Inference/General Context Clues

Sometimes a word or phrase is not immediately clarified within the same sentence. Relationships, which are not directly apparent, are inferred or implied. The reader must look for clues within, before, and after the sentence in which the word is used. Example:

*“Dementia almost overcame Lou when she stepped off the train at Rainwater Ridge and felt as crazy as a betsy bug as she realized how different her new life would be.”*

*Dementia* can be defined as being insane because the phrase “as crazy as a betsy bug” indicates insanity. Another example:

The nurse in *Wish You Well* states that she would “...require a *free reign* in overseeing the children. These two need discipline, and I intend to provide it.”

The idiomatic phrase, “a free reign,” can be defined by looking for clues in the second sentence. The nurse wants the freedom to discipline the two children her way because she has noticed how undisciplined they already are, and she is determined to provide it all by herself.

## Analyzing Idiomatic Expressions

**Part 1.** Before we begin to analyze the meaning of various idiomatic expressions in David Baldacci's novel *Wish You Well*, we need to practice analyzing the meanings of some common ones. Read each statement and decide the meaning of the italicized phrase. The first one is done as an example.

1. He was *on the carpet* for not finishing his essay on Baldacci.  
Definition: *on the carpet* means in trouble.  
Explanation: Because he had not finished his essay on time, he was going to be in trouble.  
Context Clue: **Inference** (The words *not finishing* infer getting into trouble.)
2. Her impressive PowerPoint presentation on Appalachian dialect *swept the teacher off her feet*.  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:
3. Although getting lost caused the adventure into the woods to *get off on the wrong foot*, Lou and Oz ended up having a wonderful experience once Diamond found them.  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:

**Part 2.** In order to present a clearer image of Appalachian life during the 1930s, David Baldacci employs many idiomatic expressions in *Wish You Well*. Read each of the following quotations, and think about the definition of each italicized idiomatic expression. Analyze the expression by supplying its definition, explanation, and context clue. Then share your thoughts with your partner.

1. "They's the toughest things God ever made, and them durn critters keep grudges *till kingdom come*. Don't never forget one smack of the whip, or slip of a shoeing nail."  
Analyze the idiomatic expression *till kingdom come*:  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:
2. "'Because I'm tired of dirt and mules and manure and hauling water,' said Lou. She patted her pocket. 'And because I've got twenty dollars I brought with me from New York that's *burning a hole in my pocket*,' she added, staring at him."  
Analyze the idiomatic expression *burning a hole in my pocket*.  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:
3. "And most of the businesses here rely on those people spending those mining dollars. If that goes away, then it might not seem so prosperous anymore. *A house of cards falls swiftly*."  
Analyze the idiomatic expression *a house of cards*:  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:

4. “Lou said, ‘Diamond, tell me why you put horse manure in that man’s car.’  
‘Can’t tell you, ‘cause I ain’t do it.’  
‘Diamond, come on. You as good as admitted you did to Cotton.’  
‘Got me *oak ears*, can’t hear nuthin’ you saying.’”  
Analyze the idiomatic expression *oak ears*:  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:
5. “‘They have more fields and livestock than we do,’ Lou said. ‘So how come they don’t have anything to eat?’  
‘Cause their daddy want it that way. Tight with a dollar. Didn’t let none go till *his feet wedged agin root*.’”  
Analyze the idiomatic expression *his feet wedged agin root*:  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:
6. “The barn was fully ablaze. Lou and Oz hauled buckets of water from the springhouse, but Lou knew it was like *trying to melt snow with your breath*.”  
Analyze the idiomatic expression *trying to melt snow with your breath*:  
Definition:  
Explanation:  
Context Clue:

**Part 3. Writing:** With your partner, compare/contrast the way in which Diamond, Lou, Oz, Cotton, and Eugene celebrate Independence Day to the way the two of you normally experience July 4. Use four idiomatic expressions when describing the two celebrations.  
(Teacher’s note: Use the following rubrics to score the writing.)

## Secondary English Writing Rubrics

(adapted from the Virginia Secondary English Writing Rubrics shown on pages 110–111)

	Score 4	Score 3	Score 2	Score 1	Score 0
<b>Composing</b>	<p>Writer demonstrates consistent control of composing domain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea is sharply focused with key examples, illustrations, reasons, events, and/or details.</li> <li>Transitions logically connect above elements both within paragraphs and across entire piece.</li> <li>Organization is strong and apparent.</li> <li>Unity of elements occurs with consistent point of view and without digressions.</li> <li>Logic is evident.</li> <li>Introduction and closure are strong.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates reasonable control of composing domain but has some inconsistent features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea is clearly focused and partially elaborated with key examples, illustrations, reasons, events, and/or details.</li> <li>Transitions are appropriate.</li> <li>Organization is somewhat apparent.</li> <li>Unity is present but occasionally lacks coherence and cohesiveness.</li> <li>Shifts in point of view and digressions from the topic are few.</li> <li>Introduction and closure may lack sophistication.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates inconsistent control of composing domain and has weaknesses in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea lacks focus and shows little elaboration. Instead it lists general, undeveloped statements or a skeleton of a narrative.</li> <li>Reasons are unelaborated.</li> <li>Organization is weak.</li> <li>Unity is lacking.</li> <li>No central idea is evident.</li> <li>Introduction and closure may be present but are ineffective.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates little control of composing domain and has weaknesses in all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central idea lacks sufficient focus.</li> <li>Organization is not apparent.</li> <li>Writing jumps from point to point with no elaboration.</li> <li>Details are haphazardly presented.</li> <li>Introduction and closure are not present.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates no control of the composing domain. There is/are no</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>central idea</li> <li>organization</li> <li>elaboration</li> <li>details</li> <li>introduction</li> <li>conclusion.</li> </ul>
<b>Written Expression</b>	<p>Writer demonstrates consistent control of this domain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information is very precise.</li> <li>Vocabulary is enhanced, and word choice is highly specific.</li> <li>Tone is purposeful.</li> <li>Writer's voice is present.</li> <li>Figurative language is appropriately used.</li> <li>Varied sentence length and subordinated ideas create a rhythmic flow.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates reasonable but inconsistent control of this domain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information is clear with word choice specific.</li> <li>Figurative language is occasionally present.</li> <li>Tone and voice are present but somewhat flattened.</li> <li>Figurative language is occasionally present.</li> <li>Word order is effective.</li> <li>Sentence length is varied and rarely awkward.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates many weaknesses in this domain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information is uneven. Word choice is imprecise and bland.</li> <li>Writer's voice rarely emerges.</li> <li>Sentence variety is generally non-existent.</li> <li>Some awkward sentence constructions distract from meaning.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates little or no control in this domain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information is general with vague word choice and repetition.</li> <li>Sentence variety is non-existent.</li> <li>Tone and voice never emerge.</li> <li>Awkward constructions distract from meaning.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates no control of this domain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information is sketchy.</li> <li>Word choice is bland and repetitive.</li> <li>Sentences lack variety.</li> <li>Tone and voice are flat.</li> <li>Awkward constructions prevent meaning from emerging.</li> </ul>
<b>Usage/Mechanics</b>	<p>Writer demonstrates consistent control of domain's features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usage and mechanics as are thoroughly demonstrated.</li> <li>Correct capitalization, punctuation, usage, sentence formation, and structural principles of spelling are present.</li> <li>Mistakes do not detract from writing performance even though a few errors may be present.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates reasonable but inconsistent control of domain's features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usage and mechanics are basically demonstrated.</li> <li>Correct capitalization, punctuation sentence formation, and structural principles of spelling are present to the expectation of high school students.</li> <li>Most errors are not elementary ones.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates an inconsistent control and significant weaknesses in several domain features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usage and mechanics show frequent errors in capitalization, punctuation, sentence formation, and structural principles of spelling.</li> <li>This inconsistency may also show a lack of control, making it difficult to follow the writer's thoughts.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates little or no control of most of domain's features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usage and mechanics show frequent and severe errors, making the paper difficult to understand.</li> <li>Density and variety of errors overwhelm performance and keep the paper from meeting standards of competence.</li> </ul>	<p>Writer demonstrates no control of domain's features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usage and mechanics show severe errors. The paper is not understandable.</li> <li>In some cases, not enough has been written for the writer to demonstrate control of this domain.</li> </ul>