

Evaluating Possible Meanings of a Vocabulary Word

Most words have multiple meanings and can be used in very different ways. When you're given a list of vocabulary words to go along with a book or assigned reading, it might not be the best idea to simply look up each word and write down the first definition that appears. The author might not always use the word that way. Vocabulary words are meant to help readers understand the reading. You can compare the different possible meanings of a vocabulary word to the way the word is used in the book, and evaluate which meaning is the best, or most accurate.

Follow these three steps to evaluate the different meanings for each vocabulary word you look up: **Read. Read. Compare.**

1. **Read** the full definition—from the dictionary— vocabulary word. Most words will have multiple meanings, and function as different parts of speech (eg. Verb, Noun, Adjective). Notice how the meaning of a word can change depending on how it functions in the sentence.
2. **Read** a sentence from the book (or assigned reading) that contains the same vocabulary word. In order to understand how the word is being used, you might have to also read the sentence before/after the sentence containing the vocabulary word. Notice how the author is using the word, what part of speech it appears as in the book.
3. **Compare** the different meanings from the dictionary's definition to the way the author uses the word in the book. You'll make your evaluation by choosing which of the possible meanings best fits the meaning implied by the author.

Let's see the three steps in action!

We'll use the following two vocabulary terms from Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Wakefield" (1835) as examples: Rusted, Haunt. The definitions for the following examples have been limited to the part of speech the vocabulary word functions as: the word rusted is used as a verb in the short story, so only the verb-meanings are listed.

RUSTED (used as a verb)

1. **Read the full definition:**
 1. To form rust; to oxidize
 2. To lose—by inactivity—physical or mental qualities that are considered normal
 3. To turn a reddish-brown color
 4. To corrode

2. **Read a sentence from the book that contains the word:**

She, without having analyzed his character, was partly aware of a quiet selfishness, that had **rusted** into his inactive mind; of a peculiar sort of vanity, the most uneasy attribute about him.

3. **Compare and Decide:** The sentence from the short story containing the vocabulary word also contains the words inactive and mind, which correspond to the second meaning: inactivity, mental. Because a mind can not literally rust, we can assume that the meanings referring to oxidization, corrosion, or changing color are probably too literal to match the meaning implied by the author. It'd be safe to decide that the second meaning (to lose mental qualities from inactivity) is the best out of the possible meanings.

HAUNT (used as a verb)

1. **Read the full definition:**

1. a.) to visit frequently, to frequent a location
b.) to constantly seek the company of (someone)
2. a.) to have a troubling or harmful effect on (someone/something)
b.) to happen or occur constantly and spontaneously (showing up sporadically)
3. to linger
4. to visit as a ghost
5. to appear regularly in a location as a ghost

2. **Read a sentence from the book that contains the word:**

We must leave him for ten years or so, to **haunt** around his house, without once crossing the threshold, and to be faithful to his wife, with all the affection of which his heart is capable, while he is slowly fading out of hers.

3. **Compare and Decide:** We can immediately eliminate the last two possible meanings from the full definition because we know from the story that Wakefield is alive and not a ghost. You might have noticed that a lot of the remaining possible meanings are similar to one another: they all have to do with repeatedly showing up, hanging around, but not interacting with anyone or anything. The third possible meaning (to linger) seems to sum it up the best.