SOS: Finding the Meaning of Unknown Words

RI 3.4 Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.

You can often figure out the meaning of a word by seeing how it is used in a sentence or paragraph. Such **context clues**, along with what you already know about a topic, can help you figure out what a word means.

Some words have a special meaning when they are used in texts about certain subjects. For example, in a science passage about bears, you might read the word *hibernate*, which means "to spend the winter in a sleeping state."

Read the paragraph below about cats in ancient Egypt.

Cats played an essential role in ancient Egypt. They were prized pets. But they were also useful. For example, cats killed dangerous snakes. They caught mice and rats to protect stores of grain. Some cats even helped gather food. Egyptian hunters trained them to bring back birds and fish from the marshes.

Now read the paragraph again. This time, circle any words you don't know.

Were there any words you didn't know? The word *essential* in the first sentence might have been one. Context clues can help you figure out the meaning of *essential*.

Read the chart below. It shows one way to figure out the meaning of *essential*.

Unknown Word: *Essential*		
Context Clues	**What I Already Know**	**What the Word Means**
• cats killed dangerous snakes • cats helped protect grain • cats helped gather food	• Some animals can be trained to help people. • It's very important to find and protect food and to keep people safe.	The word *essential* means "very important."

When you don't know the meaning of a word, look around in the text for context clues. They will help you figure out what the word means. The more words you know, the more you will enjoy and understand what you read.