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Tackling unfamiliar words or jargon

Read the passage below. Some of the more unusual or difficult words have been highlighted. How many can you think of a replacement word or phrase for?

Gliding is a recreational activity and competitive sport in which pilots fly unpowered aircraft known as gliders (sailplanes) using rising air to gain **altitude** or speed. The word soaring is also used for the sport.

While many glider pilots merely enjoy the sense of **achievement**, some **competitive** pilots fly in races around pre-defined courses. These test the pilots' abilities to make best use of local weather conditions as well as their flying skills. Local and national events are organized in many countries and there are also biennial World Gliding Championships.

Glider pilots can stay airborne for hours by flying through air that is **ascending** as fast or faster than the glider itself is **descending**. Common sources of this rising air are:

- **thermals** (updrafts of warm air);
- ridge lift (found where the wind blows against the face of a hill and is forced to rise); and
- wave lift (standing waves in the atmosphere, analogous to the ripples on the surface of a stream).

When soaring conditions are good enough, experienced pilots can fly hundreds of kilometres before returning to their home airfields, and occasionally flights over 1,000 kilometres are made. However, if the weather **deteriorates**, they may need to land elsewhere.

Although inconvenient and often mistaken for "emergency landings", this is a routine event in cross-country gliding. The pilot has to choose a field where the glider can be landed safely, without damaging property such as crops or **livestock**.

Source: Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gliding>

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There are a number of ways to tackle these unfamiliar words without resorting to a dictionary. For example:

- Context
- Root and compound words

Using Context

Look at the following example:

Gliding is a recreational activity and competitive sport in which pilots fly unpowered aircraft known as gliders (sailplanes) using rising air to gain **altitude** or speed.

The unfamiliar word here is **altitude**. You may already know that this means **height** but if you didn't you could look at the clues in the paragraph. It mentions **aircraft** and the "use of rising **air**" so you might realise that it's talking about how gliders "get up and stay up".

You might also think about daily experience – common sense suggests that any glider pilot is going to be very interested in both how fast a glider is going (speed as mentioned) and how high off the ground it is!

Another example of this kind of approach can be found in the sentence:

When soaring conditions are good enough, experienced pilots can fly hundreds of kilometres before returning to their home airfields, and occasionally flights over 1,000 kilometres are made. However, if the weather **deteriorates**, they may need to land elsewhere.

The "However" tells us that there's going to be a change of topic or a different viewpoint. The rest of the paragraph is positive so here comes the bad news...

The paragraph talks about a change in the weather forcing the glider to land. Both the paragraph and common sense therefore suggest that **deteriorates** means "gets worse".

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Using Root Words

Long words may be formed from a root word that you already know.

While many glider pilots merely enjoy the sense of **achievement**, some **competitive** pilots fly in races around pre-defined courses.

These two words are made up from root words.

Achievement – from the verb **achieve**

Competitive – from the verb **compete** (which you may also have seen in the word **competition!**)

Some words also include prefixes or suffixes from the Latin or Greek origins of our language and the meaning can be deduced.

Glider pilots can stay airborne for hours by flying through air that is **ascending** as fast or faster than the glider itself is **descending**. Common sources of this rising air are:

-cend originally meant **climb** and **de-** is a prefix meaning **down**.

The context also gives us clues here – they're clearly opposites, and the paragraph mentions 'rising air' again.

thermals (updrafts of warm air);

therm means **to do with heat** (as in thermometer). In this case the actual explanation is also provided in brackets – so always read on if there's an unfamiliar word. The meaning may become clear later on.

Finally, some longer words look tricky at first sight, but are made up of two smaller words joined together. These are compound words. For example:

The pilot has to choose a field where the glider can be landed safely, without damaging property such as crops or **livestock**.

Livestock means animals – literally the living products of the farm – 'live stock'! Context also gives a clue here.

So remember...

- Read on
- Think about context and what makes sense
- Look for familiar words-within-words or root words