



Understanding the meaning

Words with more than one meaning

- 1 Ask students what **accurate** means. Ask them to list as many things as possible that could be described as **accurate**: these could include *information, figures, data, measurements, records, estimates, predictions, equipment, instruments, methods, descriptions, accounts, translations*. Ask them if the meaning of **accurate** is exactly the same when it describes all these things. Are there any differences? Point out that *accurate information* is correct in every detail; an *accurate method* produces results that are correct in every detail.
 - a sense 3 in the dictionary
 - b sense 1 in the dictionary
 - c sense 2 in the dictionary

- 2 Now ask students what the general meaning of **reaction** is. Ask them if they know any disciplines in which **reaction** has a more specific meaning. When they have named as many as they can, ask them to look at the *OLDAE* entry for **reaction** and see if they can find any more. They will probably identify the *chemistry, medical* and *physics* senses.
 - a sense 3 in the dictionary
 - b sense 2 in the dictionary
 - c sense 5 in the dictionary
 - d sense 1 in the dictionary

Apart from the definitions, students should have made use of the subject-specific vocabulary in some of the sentences (allergic – medical, chemistry – chemical) and also, in sentence c, the following preposition (*reaction against*) should have helped to match it to sense 5, where the complement frame ~ (**against sth**) appears before the definition.

- 3 Ask students to read the text first without looking in the dictionary and then tell you anything that they have learned or can guess from it about the British East India Company. (When was it set up? What happened to it after 1700? Where did it trade? What did it trade?) Ask them to identify any words they would need to look up in order to understand more of the text. Students either check all 5 words, or you could divide the class into groups to look up one word each and explain it to the class: take into account that some of these terms (**shadow, yielded**) are probably more challenging than others.

shadow – sense 3 in the dictionary: ‘was coming out of the shadow of sth’ here means ‘was no longer dominated by/inferior to’

rival – noun (homonym 1) – in this case ‘an organization that competes with another in business’

yielded – verb (hom 1) – sense 2 – ‘stopped resisting’ in this case means ‘stopped trying to compete with’ – **gave way** is here a pretty exact synonym and could be substituted in the text

pioneered – verb (hom 2) – ‘were the first to’ import textiles from India

textiles – types of cloth (a term used especially in an industrial or business context)

Understanding idioms

Students are often told that we don't use idioms in academic writing and it is true that the more colourful idioms found in conversational English (*once in a blue moon, raining cats and dogs*) are rare in academic contexts. There are, however, many fixed phrases and expressions that are more common.

- 4 It can be difficult to decide where some idioms start and end, especially in longer phrases (*make a point of doing sth, go some way towards doing sth*), so this activity first focuses on identifying the idioms. Elicit the meaning of those idioms that are already familiar, then encourage students to check any that are unknown or uncertain in the dictionary. In these examples, the idiom can be found at the entry for the word in bold.
- a **after the event** – after sth has happened
 - b **under way** – having started
 - c **make a point of doing sth** – to make sure you do sth because it is important or necessary
 - d **in any case** – whatever happens or may have happened, here it emphasizes that the previous point (about the figures being out of date) is irrelevant because the figures are unreliable anyway
 - e **go some way towards doing sth** – to help a little in achieving sth
- 5 Finding idioms in the dictionary involves identifying the ‘key word’ in order to look up the correct entry. These simple guidelines should help students find idioms in the dictionary.
- Ignore short **grammatical** words like *for, under, any, the, etc.*
 - Some very **common** verbs like *go, get or make* are not used as key words.
 - If a word in an idiom is optional, like *in (actual) fact*, or can vary, it won't be the key word. Looking back at the examples a-e:
 - a, b and d start with grammatical words that can be ignored
 - c and e both start with a common verb (*make, go*) that is not used as a key word
 - e is variable – *go some/a long way towards* – so ‘way’ is the first fixed word

Practice

- 6 Most academic texts will contain examples of words with more than one meaning and some examples of idioms, even if they are very common phrases like *in fact, for example, etc.* For this task, students could find their own texts from their individual disciplines or you could choose sections of texts that you have used in class for students to work on in pairs or groups. They should then report back on their analysis, giving clear examples and evidence from the dictionary.

Understanding the meaning

Words with more than one meaning

Many words in English have more than one meaning. This dictionary explains all the meanings of a word that are used in academic writing, with the most frequent meaning first. It is important to look at the whole entry for a word to make sure that you have chosen the right meaning for the context.

- 1 These sentences all contain the word **accurate**, each with a slightly different meaning. Look up the entry for **accurate** in the dictionary and match each sentence to the correct definition.
 - a Miller's account offers the most accurate description of these events.
 - b This method produces extremely accurate estimates.
 - c The satellite contains a very accurate atomic clock.
- 2 Now match these sentences to some of the different meanings of **reaction**, which has seven different senses in the dictionary.
 - a Allergic reactions are rare.
 - b The ash does not undergo any further chemical reaction.
 - c The Romantic reaction against modernity was strongest in Germany.
 - d The speech provoked a furious reaction from her political opponents.

Apart from the definitions, what helped you to match each sentence?

- 3 Read this short text and explain the meaning of each of the words in bold, as they are used in this text. You can use your dictionary to help you, but try to guess each meaning first.

The British East India Company

By 1700 the British company was coming out of the **shadow** of its Dutch **rival**. It had **yielded** to the Dutch in the pepper and spice trades, but had **pioneered** the import of Indian **textiles** to Europe.

Source: Blanning, T.C.W. (2000). *The Eighteenth Century: Europe 1688-1815*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Understanding idioms

Some words can be used as part of a fixed phrase or **idiom** which has its own meaning as a single unit. These idioms have a separate definition and examples in the section marked **IDM** which appears at the end of the entry for the first key word. So the idiom 'for certain' appears at the end of the entry **certain**¹: without doubt: *It is impossible to say for certain if earthquakes were responsible for destroying the Mississippian temples.*

- 4 In these sentences, identify the idiom that includes the word in bold. Explain the meaning of the idiom, checking any you don't know in the dictionary.
- a We are often able to explain after the **event** why a car accident has occurred even though we could not have predicted it.
 - b Indeed, similar work is under **way** in many countries.
 - c The President makes a **point** of meeting the scholarship winners.
 - d Published figures for each country are soon out of date and, in any **case**, unreliable.
 - e The reforms ought to go some **way** towards addressing the backlog of cases.
- 5 Complete these guidelines for identifying the 'key word' and so finding the entry where an idiom is listed. Use the examples in 4 to help you.
- Ignore short _____ words like *for, under, any, the*, etc.
 - Some very _____ verbs like *go, get* or *make* are not used as key words.
 - If a word in an idiom is _____, like *in (actual) fact*, or can vary, it won't be the key word.

Practice

- 6 Now choose a short text from your own discipline. Can you find examples of:
- a Words with more than one meaning? Can you identify which meaning is used in this context?
 - b Phrases or idioms? Identify the idiom and the key word to look it up in the dictionary.