Reading: contextual meaning, structure and point of view

Original skill preparation; versioned source scope

ACT Reading: Contextual Meaning, Structure and Point of View

- Explain the meaning of a word or phrase in context, including its **connotation** 内涵色彩 and any **figurative language** 比喻性语言.
- Describe how a passage is structured and what a part of it does.
- Identify the **point of view** 叙述视角 and the **tone** 语气.
- Support each answer with **evidence** 证据 from the text.

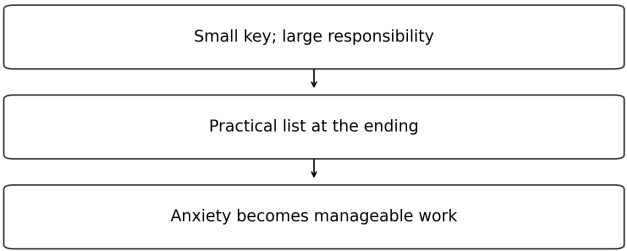
Meaning in context

- Read the whole sentence, and the one before it, before choosing a meaning.
- **Figurative language** compares or imagines: "as though the labels might continue his explanations" does not mean the labels talk.
- **Connotation** is the feeling a word adds: "earnestness" suggests seriousness, perhaps a little too much.

Structure

- Track how the passage changes: a feeling at the start, an event, a response, a reflection.
- Endings often answer or change the opening. Compare the first and last paragraphs.
- Ask what a scene does for the story: shows a problem, a relationship, a change.

Figure: Structure



- Worked steps: Small key; large responsibility → Practical list at the ending → Anxiety becomes manageable work
- Match each part of the diagram to the text.

Point of view and tone

- A first-person narrator knows their own thoughts but can only guess at others'.
- A narrator looking back may understand more than they did at the time.
- Tone comes from word choice and can be mixed: warm and uncertain, amused and respectful. Avoid extreme answers unless the words are extreme.

Practice passage

- Original literary passage — The spare key
- When I returned to the workshop after my uncle retired, the key felt too small for the responsibility attached to it.
- He had left the drawers neatly labelled, as though the labels might continue his explanations in his absence.
- I turned on the overhead light and read “washers”, “pins”, “springs”.

Worked example: figurative wording

- "As though" marks an imagined comparison, not a fact.
- The labels seem to carry on the uncle's teaching after he has retired.
- This prepares a contrast: the labelled drawers explain objects, but nothing labels the cup mark, which holds the narrator's attention for a personal reason.
- In paragraph 1, "the key felt too small for the responsibility" contrasts a small object with a large feeling.

Worked example: structure and tone

- Opening: a small key and a large, vague responsibility. Ending: a practical list, "a washer that could be found, a safe repair, and enough empty space for the next person to work".
- The structure moves from anxiety to manageable work, and the narrator's expectation of "replacing his habits" gives way to choosing which habits to keep.
- Tone towards the uncle is not hostile: the narrator remembers how he adapted his tools and makes room for his cup. It is respectful and a little uncertain, since the narrator "could not tell" what his smile meant.

Common errors

- Reading **figurative language** literally.
- Choosing a word's dictionary meaning without the context.
- Describing a passage's topic when asked for its structure.

Common errors (2)

- Giving the narrator knowledge of other characters' thoughts.
- Choosing an extreme tone, such as bitter or joyful, for mixed feelings.

Key terms

- **connotation**: The feeling or idea a word suggests beyond its basic meaning.
- **figurative language**: Words used to compare or imagine, not to state literally.
- **point of view**: Who tells the story and what they can know.
- **tone**: The attitude that word choice shows.

Check yourself

- In "The shelves lost some of their symmetry", is the narrator mainly praising or describing a cost?
- From whose point of view is the passage told, and what limit does that create?
- What does the final paragraph do in the structure of the passage?