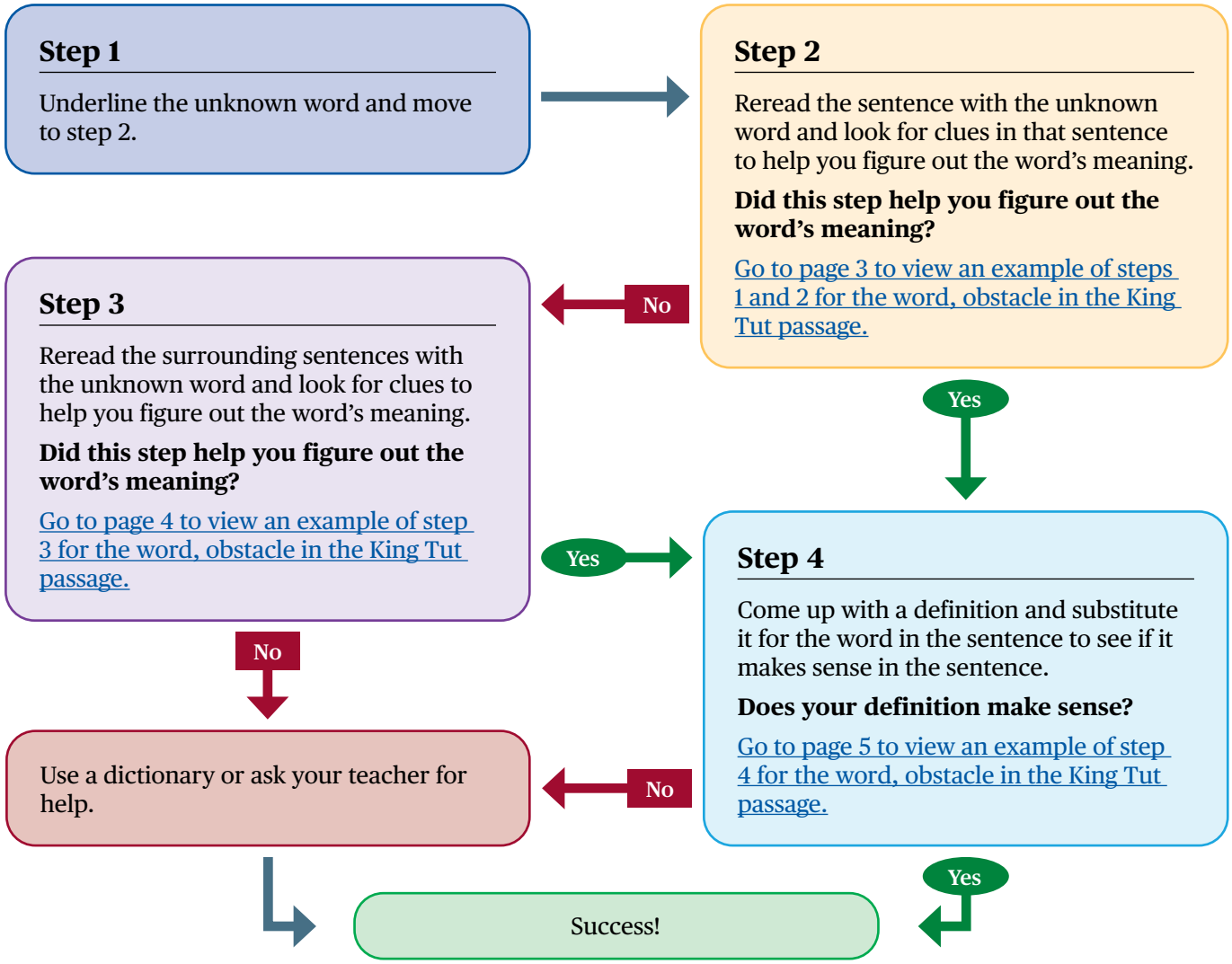
Steps for Using Context Clues to Determine Word Meanings

The goal is for students to be able to read and comprehend independently. One way to accomplish this is to have them engage in strategies such as using context clues while they are reading. The What Works Clearinghouse practice guide, *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4-9*, recommends using context clues as one strategy to help students determine the meaning of unknown words. This strategy consists of four simple steps that guide students to find clues in the text that may help them ascertain the meanings of words. The steps center around reading the sentence that contains the unknown word and/or the surrounding sentences (i.e., sentences before and after the sentence that contains the word) and looking for context clues that will lead students to figure out the word's meaning. This flowchart containing the four steps can be posted in the classroom as a reminder to students of how they might identify the meaning of an unknown word using context clues. If, after implementing the steps, the context does not provide enough information to determine the word's meaning, students can use a dictionary or ask an adult.

Go to page 2 to view the 4 step process applied to a passage on King Tut.



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King Tut Passage

In 1922, Howard Carter and his crew found King Tut's tomb. Many archaeologists searched for the tomb, but Carter and his team were the first to find it. They came across many obstacles while trying to find the tomb. One was that the daily temperature reached as high as 120 degrees. Another was that the tomb is in the desert, where nothing grows, and there is nothing to protect people from the extremely hot sun. To make things worse, there was a lot of sand and rocks around the tomb that were difficult to remove because the summer sun made them very hot to touch.

Think Aloud: I do not understand what the word obstacle means in this paragraph. So, I am going to try to use the surrounding sentences to try to figure out what it means. Let's look at the steps that are on the bulletin board.

1. Underline the unknown word.
2. Reread the sentence with the unknown word and look for clues in that sentence to help you figure out the word's meaning.
3. Reread sentences surrounding the sentence with the unknown word and look for clues to help figure out the word's meaning.
4. Come up with a definition and substitute it for the word in the sentence to see if it makes sense.

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Step 1: Underline the unknown word.

Think Aloud: Step 1 says to underline the word you do not know. In this paragraph, the unknown word is obstacle. I'll underline it.

Step 2: Reread the sentence with the unknown word and look for clues in that sentence to help you figure out the word's meaning.

Think Aloud: Step 2 says to read the sentence with the unknown word and look for clues to help you figure out the word's meaning. I will reread the sentence with the word, obstacle in it and look for clues to help me figure out what it means. "They came across many obstacles while trying to find the tomb."

That sentence just tells us that they came across obstacles but does not tell us what an obstacle is. I will move on to Step 3.

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Step 3: Reread sentences surrounding the sentence with the unknown word and look for clues to help figure out the word's meaning.

Think Aloud: Step 3 says to reread the sentences that surround the sentence with the unknown word to look for clues about the word's meaning First, I am going to read the sentence that comes before the sentence with the unknown word: "Many archaeologists searched for the tomb, but Carter and his team were the first to find it."

That sentence doesn't give me any clues. It just tells me that Carter was the first to find King Tut's tomb.

Now, I am going to read the sentence that comes after the sentence with the unknown word: "One was that the daily temperature reached as high as 120 degrees."

Ah, here the author tells us that one obstacle was very high temperatures. Being that hot would stop or slow down their work.

In the next sentences the author gives us even more clues to help figure out the meaning of obstacle: "Another was that the tomb is in the desert, where nothing grows, and there is nothing to protect people from the extremely hot sun. To make things worse, there was a lot of sand and rocks around the tomb that were difficult to remove because the summer sun made them very hot to touch."

In these sentences, the author gives us two other obstacles:

1. no shade from the sun, and
2. rocks and sand that were hard to move because they were too hot to touch.

I remembered they were doing their work in the desert. These sentences make me think that an obstacle is something that is interfering or standing in the way of getting something accomplished. I think obstacle means something that interferes or gets in the way or makes something difficult. Because I think that's what it means I am going to go to step 4.

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Step 4: Come up with a definition and substitute it for the word in the sentence to see if it makes sense in the sentence.

Think Aloud: Step 4 says to come up with a definition for the unknown word and substitute the definition for the word in the sentence to see if it makes sense in the sentence.

With all of this information, I think obstacles means things that make it difficult for you to do something because the examples the author gave us were things that made it difficult to explore King Tut's tomb that was in the desert.

I am going to substitute my definition into the sentence to see if it makes sense: They came across many things that made it difficult while trying to find the tomb.

My definition does makes sense in the sentence.

We were able to figure out the meaning of this word. If we couldn't, you can use a dictionary or ask an adult to help you.

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