PROBLEM: I teach in a sixth grade literacy lab at a large residential school for the Deaf and Blind. The literacy lab is intended to offer additional support in vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and writing to our Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. The students who attend the lab are reading at varying levels, anywhere from a Primer to 5th grade reading level. I have often found that one strategy struggling readers lack is the ability to use the context to decode unknown words while reading. The students would often use the first few letters of a word to guess the meaning without using the context of the reading passage. The words signed/voiced would not make sense within the passage and the students would continue to identify the words on the page, which is not truly reading. They showed no real comprehension of the text.

SOLUTION: Our school is located in a historical tourist town where the students often see horses and carriages. I begin my lesson on using context clues by discussing the horses downtown and why the horses use blinders. I use the analogy of the horse with blinders as a visual reminder of a way NOT to read. Page 3 explains the strategy in more detail. I first model reading with blinders on and block each individual word with my hands. I show how I am not making connections between words or sentences. I then model by reading several short passages showing how I would read without blinders by using the other words and sentences in the passage to help in decoding the unknown word. I begin by putting my hands on the sides of face, as if I were wearing blinders, I remove the blinders, in a big opening movement, to show that I can now read more than the individual words. This homemade “sign” of taking the blinders off has now become a visual cue. I think aloud as I decode the unknown words. I also show how I incorporate any background knowledge I may have that would help in understanding the given passage. My instruction then moves to guided practice, where the students gradually accept more responsibility for completing the task of decoding unknown words by using context clues. The students are then
engaged in **independent practice**, accompanied by my feedback, and finally they **apply the skill** in real reading situations. The visual cue of removing the blinders is eventually all I need to show the students when I see them make an unreasonable guess at an unknown word. The students realize the word they have guessed must be a “wild” guess and that they are reading with blinders.

**IMPACT ON STUDENTS:** I have seen a direct impact on student learning by teaching and continually using the visual cue of removing ones blinders while reading. What started out as an visual way to describe the strategy has become a “sign” that has carried throughout our middle school. The 7th and 8th grade teachers have come to me year after year saying that the students are talking about reading without blinders. Last year the reading specialist said that she had a high school student comment on our blinders strategy as she was working with her. Once the students learn the concept, the visual of taking ones blinders off is all that they need. When teaching context clues it is important to remember that the context cannot contain several unknown words or the students will not be able to use the skill. When first teaching the skill I have shown the one word I want them to decode in isolation. The students often make funny or strange guesses, which is perfectly acceptable because they have no other words to help them. It has been so exciting to watch their amazement and sense of satisfaction when they figure out the unknown word out by using the context. The students now want to make an attempt at figuring out an unknown word on their own. They now possess a strategy which helps them to become more independent in their reading.

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DON’T READ LIKE THIS!

Blinders on the horse means the horse CANNOT look around.

LOOK AROUND!

A good reader looks around while he is reading. He does not read with blinders. If you come to a word you do not know, LOOK AROUND. This means read the sentence again. Read the sentence before. Read the sentence after. Use your brain to think of a word that MAKES SENSE. This is called using context clues.

USING CONTEXT CLUES