

Denotation and Connotation

Lesson Objective	(Vocabulary) Students will identify denotation and positive or negative connotation of specified words.	
Vocabulary	<p>denotation: the dictionary definition of a word.</p> <p>connotation: an idea or feeling that is associated with a word in addition to its literal meaning.</p>	
Reviewed Vocabulary	convey, implied	
Instructional Materials	Teacher	Student
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Masters • Timer • <i>Denotation and Connotation Poster</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Booklet • Practice—dictionaries, one for each student or pair of students

Teacher Note

This lesson presupposes that students can use a dictionary to look up definitions of words. Also, if your students have previously learned the term “diction,” you may substitute this term for “word choice” in the lesson.

Preview

Writers choose specific words to convey, or communicate, a precise meaning, and writers create different layers of meaning through the words they choose. Words that connect to human emotions make writing come alive for the reader. Analyzing a text to understand the emotional impact of words—in addition to their dictionary definition—is essential to understanding the greater meaning of what you read. Sometimes the meaning of words are implied and do not match the dictionary definition exactly – in other words, the meanings are indicated or suggested without being explicitly stated. Often, you must look at words closely to discover their intended meaning. Today’s lesson will help you to begin analyzing the word choice of writers in poetry.

Engage Prior/Informal Knowledge

1. Students complete a silent warm-up.

Display the *TM#1: Engage Prior Knowledge—Silent Warm-up*. Direct students’ attention to their copies, *SB#1: Engage Prior Knowledge—Silent Warm-up*.

Look at the silent warm-up. You are going to circle the word in each row that you think is more positive. You have 3 minutes.

Set the timer for 3 minutes.

2. Review student responses (use the *TM#2: Engage Prior Knowledge—Silent Warm-up Answer Key* as needed).

When 3 minutes have passed, ask for students to share their responses. Encourage students to share why the word they selected has a more positive connotation. Record correct responses on the display, and have students make corrections or additions to their papers. Take no more than 2 minutes to share out responses.

Demonstrate

1. Introduce denotation and connotation. Display *TM#3: Denotation and Connotation Poster*.

We just looked at words in the warm-up and decided if they had a positive or negative connotation. Notice, denotation is the dictionary definition of a word. Connotation means an idea or feeling that is associated with a word in addition to its literal meaning. Many times authors choose words to convey emotions and feelings.

Look at the poster and think about the warm-up that we just completed. Often times, words can have positive, negative, or neutral feelings associated with them. This poster shows words that have nearly the same dictionary definition, but differ in connotative meaning. Notice that “slender” has a positive connotation, but “scrawny” has a negative connotation.

Now we are going to explore both the denotative and connotative meaning of words in poetry.

2. Explain the steps to identifying the denotation and positive or negative connotation of specified words by filling in the graphic organizer.

Display the *TM#4: Demonstrate—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry*.

I am going to read this passage aloud to you, and then I’ll show you a completed graphic organizer that identifies the denotation and connotation of the underlined words in the poem.

Read the passage aloud to the students. As you read, stop at each footnote and read the definition.

Here is an example of a completed graphic organizer. First, I re-read the underlined word and write a definition for the word in the box marked *Denotation* since denotation is the

dictionary definition of a word. If I know the word, I can use my own definition, or I can look it up in the dictionary.

The poem says, “his wing is bruised.” The definition of “bruised” in the dictionary is, “injured as a result of striking or pressing” so I wrote that in the box.

Next, I thought about whether the word brings up mostly positive or negative feelings most of the time and why. I write down my answer in the box marked *Connotation* because connotation is the emotion attached to the word.

I thought that normally bruises are bad, or negative because you get them when you’re hurt. So I wrote down, “negative feelings of hurt and abuse.”

Finally, I read what I wrote in the *Connotation* box and marked a plus sign for positive and a minus sign for negative, based on whether the word created mostly positive or negative feelings in the poem.

I marked a minus sign because “bruised” has a negative connotation in this poem. I read the lines above and below the word and looked for clues about what the word meant in the poem. I know the bird is “caged,” and the poem says, “when he beats his bars and he would be free.” I concluded that the bird’s wing is bruised from this because he is trying to get free, but cannot.

For the word “free,” I went through the same process. First, the definition of the word “free” is, “enjoying personal right or liberty.” I wrote this down in the *Denotation* box. Next, I thought about whether there are positive or negative feelings attached to “free.” Normally, if you are free then you’re happy to be on your own so I wrote, “positive feelings of happiness” in the *Connotation* box. Finally, I marked a plus sign in the last column because “free” has a positive connotation in this poem. I read the lines above and below the word and looked for clues about what the word meant in the poem. The poem says the bird is “caged” and sings “not a carol of joy of glee.” I

conclude that the bird wants to, but cannot, be free. Although the overall poem seems negative, the word “free” is positive and shows the reader what the bird wants.

I went through the same steps to find the denotation and connotation for “flings.” First, the definition of “flings” is, “throws forcefully.” I wrote this down in the *Denotation* box. Next, I thought about whether there are positive or negative feelings attached to “flings.” Normally, if you throw something forcefully, you are trying to throw it a long distance, which can be positive. But given the bird’s pain and sorrow, I wrote “negative feelings of desperation” in the *Connotation* box. Finally, I marked a minus sign in the last column because “flings” has more of a negative connotation in this poem. But someone else may disagree, which is why connotations are so interesting. They are the feelings and emotions that the reader experiences when a word is read, and readers usually have different experiences that may affect their connotations associated with a word.

Practice

1. Complete the second graphic organizer with class input.

Display the *TM#5: Practice—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry*. Direct students’ attention to their copies, *SB#2: Practice—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry*.

I am going to read this poem excerpt aloud to you, and then we will complete the graphic organizer together as a class. This excerpt is from the poem, *Still I Rise*, by Maya Angelou.

Read the poem aloud to students. As you read, stop at each footnote and read the definition.

Now that we have read the poem we are going to go back and look at the three underlined words and identify both the denotation and connotation of these words.

**Watch
For**



Students might be confused and decide that the word has a specific feeling for them that does not match the correct answer. For example, they might think the word “hope” has a negative connotation because they personally are not hopeful. Explain that when thinking about connotation we think about it in terms of how most people feel about the word, and in terms of the context of the poem.

Point to each part of the graphic organizer while you explain the steps.

The first step is to identify the word. What is the first word?
(shame)

What is the next step? *(Write down the denotation.)*

Can anyone remind me what the denotation is and where we can find the denotation? *(Denotation is the dictionary definition of the word and we can find it in the dictionary or write down the definition if we know it.)*

What is the denotation of *shame*? *(Answers will vary. Possible answers may include: doing something bad, wrong, or dishonorable; this is a painful feeling.)*

Write the denotation on the display, and ensure that students do the same on their papers.

After we find the denotation of a word, we find the connotation. What does connotation mean? *(It means the emotions or set of associations attached to a word that is implied rather than literal.)*

Do most people get positive or negative feelings associated with this word? Why? *(They get negative feelings of pain. If students get stuck on why, have them read the denotation and emphasize the word painful—this is not a feeling most people like to feel.)*

When you read the lines above and below the word and looks for clues about what the word means, what do you find the word *shame* means in this poem? (*The text uses the word “history” and “past that’s rooted in pain.” This must mean something bad happened to the author in the past.*)

Write the connotation on the display, and ensure that students do the same on their papers.

Based on what we wrote in the connotation column what symbol best describes the connotation of this word? (*the minus sign*)

Complete the *TM#5: Practice—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry* with class input. Use the same guiding questions above, inserting the words “terror” and “hope.” Use *TM#6: Practice—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry Answer Key* to guide you. Have students complete their copies.

2. Have students work in pairs to complete the *SB#3: Partner Practice—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry*.

Remind students to use the footnote and dictionary as needed. Have students restate the directions and check for understanding. Set the timer for 10 minutes.

Circulate among the students, check for understanding, and provide corrective feedback as needed.

3. Review student responses.

When 10 minutes have passed, asked for volunteers to share their responses. Have students make corrections or additions to their own papers. Refer to *TM#7: Partner Practice—Denotation and Connotation in Poetry Answer Key* as needed.

Teacher Note

In addition to this partner practice or as an alternative option, teachers may choose their own poems or text excerpts to use as guided practice. Based on the level of your students, they can also be given a text and be asked to underline words that they choose that have strong connotations in the context of the poem.

Independent Practice

1. Have students complete the *SB#4: Independent Practice*.
2. Collect the materials, score the work using *TM#8: Independent Practice Answer Key* and check for mastery.

Teacher Note

Depending on the level of your students, you may choose to mention that word choice can help reveal the tone of the poem. Consider extending this lesson by examining how word choice reveals tone and/or can help signal shifts in tone. Another extension option is to have students revise their own writing, replacing words that do not have strong connotative meaning with more emotional language.