



 Prestwick House

Free Lesson Plan

Connotative vs. Denotative Meanings

CCSS.ELA-Language.RL.11-12.3,4 | TEKS 110.31 (b)(1)(B)

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Objectives:

- Introduce students to the concept of “Connotative” vs. “Denotative”
- Teach students the three ways in which connotations add meaning.

Time:

45 Minutes or 1 Class Period

Materials:

1 copy of Handout—“Connotative” vs. “Denotative” Meaning

Procedure:

1. Begin the class by introducing the concept of denotative meaning. Then, explain connotations.

Everyone knows the saying that “A picture is worth a thousand words.” The opposite is true, also: “One word is worth a thousand pictures.” Most words have a dictionary definition that specifies what the meaning of that word is. For example, a “church” is a building in which people worship. That is its denotation.

Some people, though, may have an idea in their mind that a “church” is a place to receive comfort, or a building in which marriages are performed, or a place they were forced to go every Sunday as children. Those are the word’s connotations—meanings that are inferred by the person understanding the word “church” through different contexts. A connotation is what is implied by the word. People understand the connotations of words and sentences through their experiences with a specific word and how it has been used.

While the denotation of something does not change—the sky is the sky, regardless of the weather, the time, or the season—the connotation will change: The sky might be threatening if UFO’s are suddenly seen in it, or if there is a tornado approaching. It is vital to know both when you are reading and writing.

That’s why the English language has so many different words for the same thing. By developing a powerful vocabulary, you can add richness and depth to your ability to communicate.



2. Explain that there are three elements of “connotative” meaning.

1. *Shades of meaning—There are many connotations that depend on shades of meaning of a word. As an example: If you want to say that the weather outside is hot, but you don’t want to give the temperature an actual number, you might say that the air is baking, stifling, sweltering, equatorial, scorching, sizzling, boiling, or burning. Notice how the terms move from a mild form of hot to something that is positively dangerous.*
2. *Positive of negative associations – The second element of a word’s connotation is its positive of negative character. Many words have the exact same denotative meaning, but have very different connotative uses. The word “passionate” has the same denotative meaning as “zealous”—having or showing strong and earnest feelings on a topic—but the words have opposite connotative meanings. “Passionate” is generally used when describing something positively—eg., He loved his dog passionately— and “zealous” is used when describing something negatively—e.g., He guarded his money zealously. Note that neither adverb would work if it were substituted for the other, simply because of their connotations.*
3. *Personal Interpretation—A third aspect of connotative meaning is interpretation. People understand what a word means because of their background and their previous experience with the word. This allows each person to interpret words differently from the way other people do. “Strong” may bring about thoughts of a wrestler, or a storm, or even a smell or taste. “Dark” simply means the absence of light, which is its denotation, but “dark” has the connotation of fear, mystery, suspense, confusion, nighttime, gloom, shadows, and more. It all depends on the associations people have had with the word*

3. Give your students a list of the following six adjectives and ask them to rank them in order of level of severity from weakest to strongest in Part I of the handout.

Awful, Terrible, Bad, Abysmal, Poor, Shoddy

Explain how all of these words have the same definition, “of poor quality,” but each of them has a different connotative shade of meaning. People will invariably order the words differently.

Then, have them come up with a list of other adjectives that have ascending or descending levels of intensity. EX: interesting, absorbing, fascinating, enthralling, remarkable, intriguing, captivating

4. Give your students a list of the following 8 words and ask them to write them down on the positive or negative side of Part II of the handout.

Youthful/Childish, Skinny/Slim, Cocky/Confident, Boisterous/Noisy

Explain how each pair of words has a similar meaning, but a different positive or negative connotation.

Then, have students list other pairs of words that are near-synonyms, but have both a negative and a positive connotation.

EX: confident/self-centered, old/ancient, interrupt/disturb.

5. Introduce your students to the concept of personal interpretations

When we talk about something as multi-faceted as the ocean, there are many images and personal connections that determine the word’s connotations, some of which express all three elements that have been covered and which may or may not be related to each other in terms of interpretation.



Have students write nine words that relate to “ocean” on Part III of the handout. Then, discuss the words that your students came up with. They might think of words with peaceful associations like “the beach,” or they may talk about violent images like “storms” and “tidal waves.” They can see that depending on the word’s context and the reader’s personal experience, the word “ocean” can mean a variety of different things to different readers.

6. Review how word choice makes a difference in meaning.

Explain that these two paragraphs tell nearly the same story, but word choice makes them entirely different. It’s all in the connotations. Ask students their impression of each of the paragraphs.

- I.** When the young marshal strolled onto the filthy main street of 1885 Tombstone, Arizona, he worried that a hidden killer might be lurking behind the pile of broken wagon parts on the left, so he walked slowly and carefully. He looked cautiously, staring, squinting through the noonday sun’s glare. Nothing! A light film of summer dust clung to his leather boots; the ever-present particles in the air made him cough quietly. A sudden movement to his right startled him, and his gun left his holster quickly, but he saw only a scrawny mutt digging in the dust for a previously chewed bone. He grimaced and hesitantly put the revolver back.
- II.** The experienced lawman sauntered through the muddy main street of 1885 Tombstone, Arizona. He knew that a killer might be waiting around the next corner, so he took his time. He glanced warily, keeping his eyes half-shut in the noonday sun. Nothing bothered him, not even the constant dirt that covered his worn leather boots. He coughed from the dust in the air. A quick movement to his right caught his eye and made him turn quickly. The gun flew out of his holster in an instant. A thin dog was scrounging through the dirt trying to locate its old worn-out bone. He smiled and confidently put the six-shooter back.



Connotative vs Denotative Meaning Handout

Part I: Shades of Meaning

Order the words provided by the teacher from the weakest to the strongest.

WEAKEST										STRONGEST
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Part II: Negative of Positive Aspects

Write the provided words in the positive column if it has a positive connotation or in the negative column if it has a negative connotation.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Part III: Interpretive Meaning

Words related to "The Ocean"

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____



Homework:

Write four pairs of sentences that have the same denotative meaning, but different connotative meanings.

Example:

Marisol lost a ton of weight, and now she's looking very skinny

Marisol is looking very slender after her diet.

Standards:

Common Core Standards: Language

CCSS ELA-Language: 11-12.3

CCSS ELA-Language: 11-12.4

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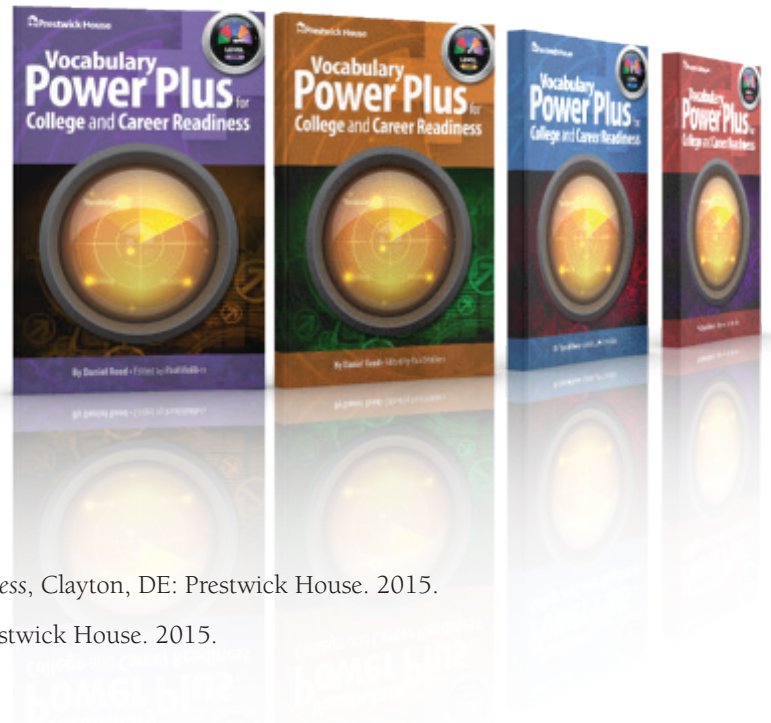
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Sources:

Reed, Daniel. *Vocabulary Power Plus for College and Career Readiness*, Clayton, DE: Prestwick House. 2015.

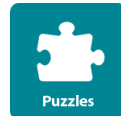
Grudzina, Doug. *AP Language and Composition*, Clayton, DE: Prestwick House. 2015.



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