

## UNIT: DENOTATION & CONNOTATION

### LESSON PLANS: Introduction, Practice, Application, Poetry, Night, Quiz

#### A. CDE STANDARDS: 9 & 10 Reading/Language Arts

- 1.0 Word Analysis, Fluency, and Systematic Vocabulary Development
- 1.1 Identify and use the literal and figurative meaning of words
- 1.2 Distinguish between the denotative and connotative meanings of words and interpret the connotative power of words.

#### B. OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define and explore the concept of connotation
- Examine how word choice affects meaning
- Practice and apply the concept of connotation

### LESSON PLAN: INRODUCTION

Denotation: the dictionary and literal meaning of a word

Connotation: the emotional / contextual / cultural meaning attached to a word; shades and degrees of meaning

#### EXAMPLES:

##### 1. Home, House, Residence, Dwelling

**Denotation:** These words all mean a place in which someone lives.

**Connotation:**

Home: cozy, loving, comfortable, security, images or feelings of people you associate with it

It could also be opposite --depending upon a person's experiences. (Traditionally, the connotation is "cozy, loving," etc., and a reader should be aware of this and other connotations in a reading passage.)

House: the actual building or structure  
Residence: Cold, no feeling  
Dwelling: primitive or basic (picture a cave, etc.)

2. Vagrants, people with no address, homeless

Vagrants: nuisance  
People with no address: official, neutral, businesslike  
Homeless: object of pity/charity, not as negative as vagrant

3. Overweight vs. fat
4. Job vs. career
5. Student vs. scholar
6. Doctor vs. physician
7. Rich vs. wealthy
8. Immigrant vs. alien
9. Alien vs. illegal

## **LESSON PLAN: PRACTICE**

Read the following sentences.

**Annette was surprised.      Annette was amazed.      Annette was astonished.**

1. What is the general meaning of each of the three sentences about Annette? Do the words “surprised,” “amazed,” and “astonished” have approximately the same denotation?

2. What additional meanings are suggested by “astonish?” Would one be more likely to be surprised or astonished at seeing a ghost?

3. Which word in each pair below has the more favorable connotation to you? Circle your answer.

- |                                  |   |                       |
|----------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Thrifty    | - | <b>penny-pinching</b> |
| <input type="radio"/> Pushy      | - | <b>aggressive</b>     |
| <input type="radio"/> Politician | - | <b>statesman</b>      |
| <input type="radio"/> Chef       | - | <b>cook</b>           |
| <input type="radio"/> Slender    | - | <b>skinny</b>         |

4. The closer a word is to describing what an individual believes about him/herself, the more positive the euphemism becomes. Thus:

- I am a genius / You are a nerd / He is a show-off
- I am a brilliant conversationalist / You “talk a lot” / She “never shuts up”

## DENOTATION & CONNOTATION QUIZ

*Which connotation is more positive? Write the answer (the word) in the \_\_\_\_\_*

1. Our trip to the amusement park was \_\_\_\_\_.

- a) fine
- b) wonderful

2. \_\_\_\_\_ people rode on the roller coaster.

- a) Brave
- b) Foolhardy

3. We saw \_\_\_\_\_ animals in the animal house.

- a) fascinating
- b) weird

4. Some of the monkeys made \_\_\_\_\_ faces.

- a) hilarious
- b) amusing

5. Everyone had a \_\_\_\_\_ on his or her face on the way home.

- a) smile
- b) smirk

*Which connotation is more negative?*

6. We bought \_\_\_\_\_ souvenirs at the amusement park.

- a) cheap
- b) inexpensive

7. I ate a \_\_\_\_\_ sandwich.

- a) soggy
- b) moist

8. Mike \_\_\_\_\_ us to go to the funny house.

- a) nagged
- b) reminded

9. I didn't like the \_\_\_\_\_ on the jester's face.

- a) smirk
- b) grin

10. It made me feel \_\_\_\_\_.

- a) uneasy
- b) frightened

*Which is the best answer?*

11. Which is worth more?

- a) something old
- b) something antique

12. Which is better?

- a) to be skinny
- b) to be slender

13. Which would you rather be called?

- a) thrifty
- b) cheap

14. Which would a vain person be more likely to do?

- a) stroll
- b) parade

15. Which is more serious?

- a) problem
- b) disaster

16. Which is more polite?

- a) sip a drink
- b) gulp it

17. Which would you be if you hadn't eaten for several days?

- a) hungry
- b) starving

18. Which would you be after a walk in the mud?

- a) filthy
- b) dirty

## LESSON PLAN: POETRY

Since everyone reacts emotionally to certain words, writers often deliberately select words that they think will influence your reactions and appeal to your emotions. Read the dictionary definition (DENOTATION) below.

**cock roach (kok' roch')**, n. any of an order of nocturnal insects, usually brown with flattened oval bodies, some species of which are household pests inhabiting kitchens, areas around water pipes, etc. [Spanish cucaracha]

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1. What does the word cockroach mean to you?
2. Is a cockroach merely an insect or is it also a household nuisance and a disgusting creature?

\*\*See what meanings poets Wild and Morley find in roaches in the following poems.

### *Roaches*

Last night when I got up  
to let the dog out I spied  
a cockroach in the bathroom  
crouched flat on the cool  
porcelain,  
delicate  
antennae probing the toothpaste cap  
and feasting himself on a gob  
of it in the bowl:  
I killed him with one unprofessional  
blow,  
scattering arms and legs  
and half his body in the sink...

I would have no truck with roaches,  
crouched like lions in the ledges of sewers  
their black eyes in the darkness  
alert for tasty slime,

breeding quickly and without design,  
laboring up drainpipes through filth  
to the light;

I read once they are among  
the most antediluvian of creatures,  
surviving everything, and in more primitive times  
thrived to the size of your hand...

yet when sinking asleep  
or craning at the stars,  
I can feel their light feet  
probing in my veins,  
their whiskers nibbling  
the insides of my toes;  
and neck arched,  
feel their patient scrambling  
up the dark tubes of my throat.

--Peter Wild



*from Nursery Rhymes for the Tender-hearted*

Scuttle, scuttle, little roach-  
How you run when I approach:  
Up above the pantry shelf  
Hastening to secrete yourself.

Most adventurous of vermin,  
How I wish I could determine  
How you spend your hours of ease,  
Perhaps reclining on the cheese.

Cook has gone, and all is dark-  
Then the kitchen is your park;  
In the garbage heap that she leaves  
Do you browse among the tea leaves?

How delightful to suspect  
All the places you have trekked:  
Does your long antenna whisk its  
Gentle tip across the biscuits?

Do you linger, little soul,  
Drowsing in our sugar bowl?  
Or, abandonment most utter,  
Shake a shimmy on the butter?

Do you chant your simple tunes  
Swimming in the baby's prunes?  
Then, when dawn comes, do you slink  
Homeward to the kitchen sink?

Timid roach, why be so shy?  
We are brothers, thou and I,  
In the midnight, like yourself,  
I explore the pantry shelf!

--Christopher Morley

**Reread the dictionary definition.**

3. Which of the denotative characteristics of a cockroach both poets include in their poems?
4. What characteristics does Wild give his roaches that are not in the dictionary definition?
5. What additional characteristics does Morley give to roaches?

In each poem, the insect acquires meaning beyond its dictionary definition. Both poets lead us away from a literal view of roaches to a nonliteral one.

6. Which poet succeeds in giving roaches favorable connotations?



7. Which poet comes closer to expressing your own feelings about roaches?

## **LESSON PLAN: PRACTICE / APPLICATION**

### **Preparation**

1. During this lesson three students demonstrate the sentence "*She walked into the room.*" Before you begin the lesson, prepare these students by asking them to walk into the room in a particular manner:
  - Ask one student to walk in quickly, as if she is late. She's not to run, but she should seem rushed and hurried.
  - Ask another student to walk in at a fairly normal speed, but as if she is very happy and pleased. She might bounce in or float in dreamily.
  - Ask the last student to walk in very slowly, as if she really isn't interested in the class and has plenty of time to get into her seat.

### **Instruction and Activities**

1. Write the following sentence on the board or overhead projector, "She walked into the room."
2. Discuss the meaning of the sentence. What can we really tell about what the student did? Point out to students that the sentence is rather bland, because we cannot visualize anything about the action.
3. Send the three students you've prepared into the hallway, and ask them to enter one at a time, following your instructions.
4. Think aloud as you revise the sentence—write your new version under the original as each student enters so that you have four sentences on the board once all the students have entered:

How could we replace the verb, so that we get a better understanding of the person entering the room? If I change the sentence to "She rushed into the room," how do the verb's connotations help to see not only what she looked like, but also what type of person she is? Or maybe I should say that "She hurried into the room"? I'm not sure. Maybe I'll write both.

Okay, here comes another student. "She walked into the room" doesn't really capture what she's doing either. Hmm. What about "She bounced into the room." Or instead of just the verb, maybe I should add an adverb that tells the reader more: "She bounced happily into the room." Okay. That's better.

Last student. Wow. She's walking very slowly. Looks like she doesn't even want to be here. I wonder if I should revise the sentence to say "She meandered into the room." Or maybe add an adverb and leave the verb alone: "She walked slowly into the room."

5. Once you've created three revised sentences, ask students to think about the differences between the original sentence and the new versions. Pay particular attention to the way connotation and word choice changed the meaning.
6. Ask students to suggest other verbs for the sentence and discuss the related connotations. Possible words include the following: strutted, slithered, pranced, oozed, and marched. Ask students to consider how the verb choice affects the mental image that we form of this person and how effective word choice can affect writing. If time allows, students might dramatize some of these word options as well.
7. When you are confident that students are prepared to consider the word choice in their own writing, ask students to choose a paragraph in their writer's journals or a paper that they are working on to revise, paying particular attention to connotation.

### ***APPLICATION***

If students need more examples before revising their own writing, work as a whole class or in small groups to revise several paragraphs for more vivid detail. You can either use the Connotation Revision handout (ATTACHED), or ask a student to volunteer a passage from his or her writing for the class to consider.

8. Ask students to rewrite the paragraph to create a vivid effect, so that the reader can see what is happening and see the setting where the action occurs.
9. Monitor student progress to ensure that writers are comfortable with the task.
10. Once the mini-lesson is complete, ask students to explore the pieces that they are writing (RESOURCE: READER'S/WRITER'S NOTEBOOK) for additional places where they can add more vivid details. Students may work during their in-class writing time or complete the revisions as homework.

## Connotation Revision Passage

It was a hot day. The sun was shining and the insects were humming. He located the tracks and began to follow them.

The tracks went up a small hill. He walked up the hill, prepared to shoot at any second. Something made a noise in the bushes and he stopped to listen. He pointed, but did not shoot. A squirrel climbed up a tree, stopped to look at him for a second, and then climbed out of sight.

He breathed heavily for a moment, and then looked back at the tracks, which went into the underbrush up ahead. He walked toward the bushes and then knelt down to see where the tracks went. He found himself looking into the eyes of a big snake. The snake stuck out its tongue, and then crawled away. He began to crawl through the bushes, following the tracks.

The underbrush opened out into a large clearing with a big tree in the middle. The tracks went across the clearing. He walked across and sat under the tree. The sun was shining and the insects were buzzing. The breeze blew and he felt it on his face.

He got up and followed the tracks back into the forest. He stepped over logs, ducked under branches, and climbed over rocks. The tracks stopped at a stream. He bent over and got a drink. Suddenly he felt a shadow over him and looked up. The bear was standing over him. He grabbed his camera, aimed, and shot several pictures.