

Grade 6 Playlist: Determining Figurative Meanings

Aligns with *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.4*:

- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

Welcome

“The second longest river in North America, the Missouri River has a number of fingers that extend for more than 2,000 miles and touch several U.S. states.” Is this a confusing sentence? When read literally, it is extremely hard to understand. Rivers do not have fingers—so why would a writer describing a river claim that one does? What the Missouri River *does* have is many tributaries, or smaller rivers that extend from it. Looking at a map or aerial photograph of the Missouri River, one might say that it resembles a hand, with each extending tributary as a finger on that hand. And, like a person’s fingers, these smaller rivers *touch* the states whose land they flow through. Comparing the Missouri River’s tributaries to fingers gives the reader a different but still accurate perception of the river.

Objective

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative meanings.

Review

Key Terms

- **Figurative language** uses words and phrases in nonliteral ways. Instead of stating facts the way they are, figurative language exaggerates or alters the definitions of words.
 - **Personification** is a type of figurative language that uses human characteristics to describe non-human objects, such as animals, plants, or nonliving things.
 - **Simile** and **metaphor** are two types of figurative language that compare two things that are not alike in order to make the reader notice similarities he or she might not have seen. Similes use the words *like* or *as*, while metaphors do not.

Exploring the Standard

This playlist discusses ways to determine the meaning of figurative language when it is used in a text. Literary texts often use figurative language to describe fictional characters or settings. This type of language can also be used in informational texts to help readers picture real-life people, places, things, and events. It also can make an informational text more interesting and engaging to readers.



Watch!

Watch this video to learn more about how figurative language functions:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=3vfxs9P7hT4

Example

This informational text describes a phenomenon called the aurora. It uses figurative language to help the reader imagine what an aurora looks like. While reading, try to determine what the author is trying to express with the underlined phrases.

¹Two of nature's most beautiful offerings are the Aurora Borealis and the Aurora Australis. Also called the Northern and Southern Lights, respectively, the Aurora Borealis is visible to those near the North Pole, while the Aurora Australis can be seen from near the Earth's southernmost point. Caused by complex physical reactions at the very roof of the Earth's atmosphere, the Northern and Southern Lights create a show of spectacular color and brilliance; shining, flashing ribbons of blue, green, red, purple, and every other color of the spectrum dance and mingle to the spectator's delight.

²These visual displays fill the skies and can be seen for hundreds of miles in every direction. But they are caused by some of the smallest particles in the universe, electrons. When these tiny specks of energy collide with molecules of nitrogen and oxygen, they transfer the energy they contain. And eventually, this energy must be released. When the energy is let go, a giant umbrella of vivid color expands to light up the bleak sky like a giant neon sign.

³Why do these phenomena only occur near the North and South Poles? The electrons that collide to cause the auroras are attracted to the Earth's magnetic fields, which are strongest near the poles. Storms in outer space can disrupt these fields, and when this happens the auroras can be seen in places that are further away from the poles. Sometimes the Northern Lights are visible as far south as the northern United States! But if you want to get a good view of the magic that is the aurora, you will need to travel northwards—or very far southwards. Alaska, Canada, and Scandinavia are good places for viewing the Aurora Borealis, while the Aurora Australis is best seen from Australia, Chile, and Argentina.

- at the very roof of the Earth's atmosphere: Where is a house's roof located? It is at the very top of the house, and it covers the house's walls. Likewise, the "roof" of the Earth's atmosphere is at its very top, and it covers the atmosphere (which, in turn, surrounds the Earth). In other words, if someone were to stand anywhere on the planet's surface and look straight up, he or she would be staring at "the very roof of the Earth's atmosphere." So, the author uses a metaphor to show that the top of the Earth's atmosphere is like an actual roof because it functions the same way.
- shining, flashing ribbons of blue, green, red, purple...: The author is using a metaphor to describe the lights. In other words, the author is comparing the lights to ribbons. A ribbon is a long, thin piece of cloth. The author is not using the literal definition of *ribbon* in this text. The lights of the aurora have certain qualities that make them like ribbons: they are long, thin, and brightly colored.



Teaching Notes: Determining Figurative Meanings

This playlist discusses RI.6.4, with a focus on the use of figurative language. Students should be able to identify figurative language in an informational text and use context clues to determine the author’s meaning of words as they are used in the text (which may not be the same as a dictionary meaning).

Types of Figurative Language

Briefly describe each type of figurative language that is discussed in the playlist, giving examples like those in the chart below, and explain how each type might help a reader comprehend nonfiction concepts in an informational text.

Personification	Halley’s Comet can be seen sprinting across the night sky once every seventy-six years.
Simile	Halley’s Comet is bright and showy, but it comes like a thief in the night, quickly and often without warning.
Metaphor	Halley’s Comet is a hare in a crowd of tortoises as it shoots across the galaxy’s motionless stars.

Practice! Answer Key

1. The winds are the first thing visitors notice in Dover. A greeting is given as soon as a visitor arrives—usually by a person, but in this case by cold winds.
2. The Andes Mountains resemble the continent’s spine. The Andes Mountains create a ridge along one side of the continent, just as a person’s backbone does along his or her back.
3. Tornadoes and bulldozers perform the same actions. While bulldozers and tornadoes may both be loud, the similarity given involves the way they plow through everything they find in their path.

Additional Teaching Resources

These resources should be helpful in teaching about figurative language and its meanings:

- <http://woub.org/readwritetell/figlangext.htm>
- http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/figuratively-speaking-exploring-how-metaphors-make-meaning/?_r=0

