

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Impact of Figurative Language on Meaning and Tone

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4:

- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

Welcome

How does word choice contribute to the meaning and tone of a text? More specifically, how does figurative language contribute to the meaning and tone of a text?

In this playlist, students will practice identifying several common types of figurative language and learn to think critically about how figurative language and descriptive language impact the tone of a passage and help to shape a text.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- identify several common forms of figurative language.
- analyze how an author's choices about language shape a text.

Review

Key Terms

- **Figurative language** is the term applied to language that has a meaning other than its most obvious or literal one. Similes and metaphors are types of figurative language, as are hyperbole, personification, and metonymy.
- The **emotional tone** of a passage is the mood it embodies and evokes.

Exploring the Standard

Writers use figurative language to communicate certain elements of a story such as emotion and theme. Figurative language can take many forms, and the way an author chooses to use it affects the shape the piece takes. For example, if an author chooses to use hyperbole, or exaggerated language, this will often have a comic effect. Including an extended metaphor, however, can make a piece of writing seem more serious because extended metaphors are often associated with highly stylized and poetic texts.



Watch!

As a start, watch this video about how imagery adds to a text. Pay particular attention to how Christopher Hanlon explains the way that imagery works to set tone and create emotional associations in literature.

- <http://www.watchknowlearn.org/Video.aspx?VideoID=41458>

A Closer Look: Figurative Language and Meaning

The following selection is from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” by Washington Irving. While reading, look for instances of descriptive and figurative language and begin to think about how they contribute to the meaning of the story.

The gallant Ichabod now spent at least an extra half hour at his toilet, brushing and furbishing up his best, and indeed only suit of rusty black, and arranging his locks by a bit of broken looking-glass that hung up in the schoolhouse. That he might make his appearance before his mistress in the true style of a cavalier, he borrowed a horse from the farmer with whom he was domiciliated, a choleric old Dutchman of the name of Hans Van Ripper, and, thus gallantly mounted, issued forth like a knight-errant in quest of adventures. But it is meet I should, in the true spirit of romantic story, give some account of the looks and equipments of my hero and his steed. The animal he bestrode was a broken-down plow-horse, that had outlived almost everything but its viciousness. He was gaunt and shagged, with a ewe neck, and a head like a hammer; his rusty mane and tail were tangled and knotted with burs; one eye had lost its pupil, and was glaring and spectral, but the other had the gleam of a genuine devil in it. Still he must have had fire and mettle in his day, if we may judge from the name he bore of Gunpowder. He had, in fact, been a favorite steed of his master’s, the choleric Van Ripper, who was a furious rider, and had infused, very probably, some of his own spirit into the animal; for, old and broken-down as he looked, there was more of the lurking devil in him than in any young filly in the country.

The narrator uses descriptive and figurative language to introduce the reader to the main character of the story, Ichabod. The language in blue creates a picture of Ichabod that changes as the passage develops. Initially, Irving uses the word “gallant” and employs a simile to compare Ichabod to a knight-errant, but he also uses descriptive language like “suit of rusty black” and “broken looking-glass” to paint a picture of a poor knight-like character. At this point in the passage, Ichabod appears to be the kind of protagonist who will prove to share the qualities associated with a knight, like courage and nobility, and use these qualities to overcome the hardships brought on by his penurious state. A little less than halfway through the passage, however, the language and subject begin to shift. Now a horse is being described, but there is something sinister about this horse, conveyed through phrases, such as “glaring and spectral” and “lurking devil.” This shift in language helps to develop the meaning of the story because the language describes something dark and potentially dangerous. So the shift alludes to a darker meaning that will slowly be unveiled as the story progresses.

Practice!

Pay attention to imagery and figurative language while reading the above passage. What similes and metaphors are used? Are there instances of similes and metonymies, for example? How do they function in the passage?



Teaching Notes: Impact of Figurative Language on Meaning and Tone

The goal of RL.11.12.4 is for students to understand and be able to explain how **specific word choice** affects the **meaning** and **tone** of the text. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities:

1. Pick a grade-appropriate fictional text that has five to eight examples of figurative language. As a class, read the excerpt. Then, ask students to volunteer to identify examples of figurative language and how they affect the overall text.
2. Assign each student a tone that they should convey in an original poem. Then instruct students to share their poems with the class. Students will try to identify the tone of the poem and use supporting details to defend their response.

Writing Prompt

1. Instruct students to analyze the figurative language in a grade-appropriate short story. Students should answer the following question in an essay: How does the figurative language throughout the story build on itself to help convey the meaning of the story?

Answer Key

and a head like a hammer	Simile; this example of figurative language helps to make the horse seem intimidating.
there was more of the lurking devil in him than in any young filly in the country.	Metaphor, metonymy; this example shows there is something sinister about the horse.
Still he must have had fire and mettle in his day	Metaphor; this shows that the horse was once energetic.

it breathed forth an atmosphere of dreams and fancies infecting all the land	Personification; the contagion is given human-like qualities, which creates a sense of fear.
and mourning cries and wailings heard and seen about the great tree where the unfortunate Major André was taken, and which stood in the neighborhood.	Descriptive language; the choice of words creates a ghostly, terrifying vision.
was often heard to shriek on winter nights before a storm,	Descriptive language; the choice of words create a ghostly, terrifying vision.

