

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Distinguishing Between What Is Said and What Is Meant

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6:

- Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Welcome

Authors do not always say exactly what they mean in a text. In fact, they sometimes say the opposite. Imagine a story where the main character misses a train on the way to an important meeting. Just as the doors close in her face, she exclaims, “Great, that’s just what I need!” Of course, it does not make sense for the character to truly feel this way, so what does this dialogue mean? In some cases, authors use literary techniques, such as irony and sarcasm, to add liveliness and nuance to a text. The woman’s response to missing the train is a way of showing her frustration in a comic way. To grasp an author’s point of view better, readers must pay close attention to context clues in order to distinguish between what is written and what is actually meant.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze and interpret styles of writer’s craft in conveying point of view, including sarcasm, satire, irony, and understatement.
- determine the literal and figurative meaning of words or expressions.

Review

Key Terms

- **Explicit** meaning is clear and specifically expressed.
- **Implicit** meaning is understood without being directly expressed.

Exploring the Standard

Authors sometimes manipulate text in a way that changes the meaning of the written words. If readers do not recognize the literary techniques used in a text, they might misinterpret or completely overlook something important. In order to detect and interpret techniques like sarcasm, readers must pay close attention to contextual clues. The first step is to identify an author’s tone as early in a text as possible. Once this is done, the reader can pick out the statements or descriptions that do not match up with it. For example, if a character says he despises laziness and is then shown napping on the job, the reader should take note. The author is likely using this discrepancy between word and deed to make the reader both laugh and think about how the character views himself.



A Closer Look: Analyzing and Interpreting Styles of Writer’s Craft in Developing Point of View

When trying to distinguish between what is written and what is meant, think about which of the following styles of writer’s craft the author could be using:

- **Irony** – a situation or statement is ironic when it is characterized by a difference between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, or what is expected or intended and what actually happens.

“I wrote a blog post this morning about how pointless blogging is.”

- **Sarcasm** – a sarcastic comment is a bitter or cutting remark that means the opposite of what is said, such as a comment that sounds like praise but is really an insult.

“When Arthur’s boss asked him to work late tonight, Arthur replied, ‘Oh, that’s a wonderful idea. That is exactly what I wanted to do tonight.’”

- **Satire** – a satirical piece of writing exposes and ridicules the failings or follies of an individual, group, society, idea, or institution, often in the hopes of correcting it.

“What’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and isn’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?” – from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*.

- **Understatement** – an understatement is a figure of speech used to intentionally make a situation seem less important than it really is for ironic effect; the opposite of hyperbole.

“The boy retrieved his homework from the dirty mud puddle and examined the splotchy, wet paper. ‘It doesn’t look too bad,’ he said.”

Watch!

Watch these explanations of the different types of irony:

- Dramatic irony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDxT2SU7RTo>
- Situation irony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGRfktLmkUE>
- Verbal irony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X7XKdjdNjl>

Watch!

Watch this recording of an English teacher explaining the difference between satire and parody:

- <https://www.opened.com/video/satire-vs-parody/98197>



Teaching Notes: Distinguishing Between What Is Said and What Is Meant

The goal of RL.11-12.6 is for students to understand and be able to explain how authors use various literary techniques, such as irony and satire, to develop a point of view, and how to distinguish between what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant. 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. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a literary text. Then direct their attention to several examples of sarcasm and irony in the text. Ask students to identify the purpose(s) of each example from the following list of potential uses:
 - to add humor
 - to insult or mock
 - to make a social criticism
 - to make writing more interesting
2. Ask students to work with a partner. Assign each pair a grade-appropriate excerpt from *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. Remind students that this is a work of satire in which the author often does not mean what is said and is poking fun at the subject. Then direct students to take turns identifying examples of irony, satire, understatement, etc. When they are finished, ask students to explain the examples they found, and how the examples help them grasp the author's point of view. Encourage students to find at least two examples each.

Writing Prompts

1. Review with students some of the ways that irony can be used to achieve humor or criticism. Then direct them to write an example of sarcasm or irony for the following:
 - An event or description that conflicts with prior information or defies expectation
 - Mismatched characterization that pokes fun at the discrepancies between perception and reality
2. Direct students to choose a topic and write a brief satirical piece, such as a speech, letter, or essay with the aim of correcting a problem. Ask them to use examples of irony and understatement and to identify where in the text they do so.

