

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Analyzing the Impact of Word Choices

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

Every word in a text is there for a reason. Authors choose their words with care to help create interesting, engaging texts. By manipulating language, they are able to shape a text that will be pleasing to the reader. The language in a text can be beautiful in its own right, but word choice can also affect meaning and advance the plot of a story. Skilled readers are able to better appreciate an author's use of language by analyzing the impact of specific word choices in a text.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze how specific word choice creates lively, aesthetically pleasing text.
- determine how word choice affects meaning or advances the plot.

Review

Key Terms

- **Connotations** are the suggestions or associations that surround many words, apart from their literal meanings.
- **Figurative language** employs one or more figures of speech to say something other than what is literally meant.
- **Tone** is the author's attitude toward the topic or event of the text.

Exploring the Standard

Striking language and figures of speech add variety and richness to a text. They can also be used to convey complex ideas or feelings with just a few words. Being able to interpret figurative language and recognize the impact of word choice are important skills for readers to learn. To do this, readers must also pay attention to the context in which the words are used. By examining an author's word choice and the reasons behind it, readers can gain insight into how language can be manipulated to achieve specific effects.



Watch!

Watch this video about determining the meaning of words and phrases and how they affect the text and tone of the text.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4TPtcFiggY>

A Closer Look: Choosing Words to Create Fresh, Engaging Text

Creating engaging text can be as simple as replacing a common word like “ran” with a more vivid word like “dashed” to add a bit of excitement to a sentence. However, figurative language also allows for larger effects, like adding fresh and bold images to a text and creating a richer, more pleasing experience for the reader.

There are many types of figurative language at a writer’s disposal. Take a look at the following examples of common techniques in the works of William Shakespeare, an author renowned for his originality and rich, expressive imagery:

Example 1

Hyperbole is a type of figurative language in which the author or speaker makes an exaggerated statement that isn’t intended to be taken literally.

JULIET: I must hear from thee every day in the hour, / For in a minute there are many days: O, by this count I shall be much in years / Ere I again behold my Romeo!

Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene 5

Juliet uses hyperbole when she exaggerates the length of time she must spend apart from Romeo. This language grabs the reader’s attention and shows how passionately Juliet feels toward Romeo. She misses him so much that a few days of separation feel like several years to her.

Example 2

Personification is a technique used to attribute a human quality to an animal, object, or idea that is not usually associated with the trait.

ANTONY: ... Draw that thy honest sword, which thou hast worn / Most useful for thy country.

Antony and Cleopatra, Act 4, Scene 14

Antony uses personification when he attributes the trait of honesty to his enemy’s sword. Because an object like a sword cannot actually be honest, the reader must determine what is meant by the phrase. It could be that the sword has been a dependable weapon for its bearer, which is why Antony imagines it as trustworthy or “honest.”



Teaching Notes: Analyzing the Impact of Word Choices

The goal of RL.11-12.4 is for students to be able to determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings, and to be able to analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, particularly focusing on language that is fresh, engaging, or beautiful. 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. Direct students to conduct research, finding three texts that use different kinds of surprising figurative language. For example, Shakespeare's plays use plenty of similes and expanded metaphors, while Mark Twain makes good use of idioms and other regional expressions in his stories. Ask students to think about how the specific words and phrases used by the authors reveal the beliefs and conventions of a character, society, region, or time period. Encourage them to conduct additional research if they come across a word or phrase for which they lack historical context.
2. Ask students to bring in a piece of poetry that uses language they find fresh, engaging or beautiful. It could be a poem or song from any book, film, or music album. Have students provide examples of specific words and phrases they find pleasing and ask them to think about what makes them react that way. Direct students to define or explain the connotative meanings of words or expressions as needed.

Writing Prompts

1. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a short story, play, or poem that contains a broad range of words. Ask students to identify the words with multiple meanings or connotations. Direct students to analyze the context in which each word is used and to assemble a short list of possible meanings. Then ask students to write a sentence for each word they find, explaining which meaning is being used and how they were able to determine this through context.
2. Review with students some of the types of figurative language that Shakespeare commonly employed in his sonnets. Explain the sonnet structure used by Shakespeare and direct students to write their own sonnets using striking word choice and figurative language. Ask students to write about a time they felt scared or depressed and how they were ultimately able to overcome those negative feelings. What was the catalyst for their improved outlook? Encourage students to use three or more types of figurative language and at least two words or phrases that have multiple connotations.

