

## Grades 9–10 Playlist: Diction, Meaning, and Tone

*Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY RI.9-10.4:*

- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

### Welcome

When reading, it is important to develop the ability to analyze the overall language patterns or style of a technical text. This will allow readers to form a deeper understanding of informational texts. A skill that helps readers accomplish this task is to use context clues to determine the meaning of words, how those words affect the tone of the text, and how that tone reflects the author's overall purpose, audience, and context of the text. In essence, readers must analyze diction to understand how such word choices affect their reading experience and comprehension.

### Objective

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze how specific word choices impact meaning and tone of text.

### Review

#### Key Terms

- A word's **connotation** refers to the suggestions, associations, or emotional response that surround most words and extend beyond their literal, or **denotative**, meaning.
- **Diction** simply refers to a speaker's (or author's) word choice.
- **Tone** refers to the attitude of the author toward the reader, audience, or subject matter of a literary work.

### Exploring the Standard

Authors' use of diction refers to their specific word choices that influence or create the meaning and tone of the text. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. was an influential and effective public speaker because of his ability to orate his claims and inspire people to advocate for change during the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, the Constitution of the United States is regarded as America's rule of law because its diction embodies an extremely formal tone, while also laying out the foundational concepts and philosophies on which the country was built upon. While some of these texts may be difficult to decode or understand, readers can grasp the meaning and purpose through analyzing the word choices that also help readers know how they are to receive or feel about the text.



**Watch!**

Watch this video to learn how to use context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words through synonyms and antonyms:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEPFNLODwT0>;

In addition, watch this video about using context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr1SvtUODOI>

**Example 1**

The following is an excerpt from President George Washington’s Farewell Address that was delivered at the end of his final term in 1796. Being the first President of the United States, he was a key developer of the Constitution, and therefore set the foundation for the American government, advised on how it shall remain intact, and stressed its importance for maintaining liberty and order.

<sup>1</sup>To the efficacy and permanency of your Union, a government for the whole is indispensable. No alliance, however strict, between the parts can be an adequate substitute; they must inevitably experience the infractions and interruptions which all alliances in all times have experienced. Sensible of this momentous truth, you have improved upon your first essay, by the adoption of a constitution of government better calculated than your former for an intimate union, and for the efficacious management of your common concerns. This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.

George Washington’s choice of words throughout this excerpt helps to develop his meaning and its significance. Looking at Washington’s specific word choices, readers immediately can discern his formal yet passionate and powerful tone. Washington believes in what he is saying and wants his audience to believe, too.



## Teaching Notes: Diction, Meaning, and Tone

The goal of RI.9-10.4 is for students to determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; and analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper). 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. Have students read an informational brochure that advertises a company's or organization's purpose, mission, or services provided. Then have students indicated through circling, underlining, or listing words the author chose that embody the tone such a document should embody. Choose a few students to share their findings with the class, and discuss how the author's overall use of diction helped them understand the meaning of the text.
2. Task students with finding an informational text on their own, and have them evaluate the author's use of diction that influenced the tone and meaning of the text. Examples could include an advertisement, a speech, or other informative nonfiction document.

### Writing Prompts

1. Assign students to read Patrick Henry's speech to the Second Virginia Convention, "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death." Have students identify and list unfamiliar words while using context clues to determine their meaning. Then have students assess and summarize the tone of the document, and provide direct examples from the text as a means of supporting their idea(s). Finally, have students explain how the author's word choice impacted their reading experience and comprehension.
  - The full transcription can be found here: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/patrick.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp)
2. Assign students to read and analyze Frederick Douglass' "The Meaning of July Fourth to the Negro," which is said to be among his most moving speeches. Have students reflect on the tone and meaning of the speech as it relates to the historical context. The full text can be found here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html>. Use the following questions as a guide for their responses:
  - How does the tone reflect the significance of the speech, given the social climate of the mid-1850s?
  - How does the author's diction influence and shape reader comprehension?

### Additional Resources

Consider these additional resources that offer sample lesson plans and texts to teach RI.9-10.4:

- <https://www.engageny.org/ccls-ela/ri9-104>
- <http://www.ohiorc.org/standards/commoncore/ela/resources.aspx?id=6338&parent=0>

