Grades 9-10 Playlist: Cumulative Impact of Word Choices

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4:

- Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Welcome

Writers use word choices to convey meaning and set the tone of a text. For example, word choice helps to communicate information about the setting—the time and place—of a story. In order to do this, writers consider a word's figurative and connotative meanings. In this playlist, readers will think critically about how an author's word choices affect meaning and tone as well as how they evoke a sense of the relationship between characters, time, and place.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze the impact of word choices on meaning and tone.

- think critically about how the cumulative effect of word choices evokes a sense of time, place, and the relationship between characters.
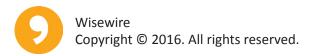
Review

Key Terms

- The **tone** of a piece of writing is the author's attitude toward the work.

- The **connotative meaning** of a word is its contextual meaning; it encompasses the meanings the word has accumulated over time. Connotative meanings often help to develop the tone of a passage because they evoke certain emotional, contextual, and descriptive associations.

- The **denotative meaning** of a word is the most general and widely accepted meaning of the word. This is the meaning of the word found in a dictionary.

Exploring the Standard

Different word choices communicate different emotions and help to set a tone. For example, there are many ways to say that a character opened a door. Some of those ways will create a sense of suspense, others will evoke fear, and still other ways of communicating the same action will leave the reader with no emotional experience at all. Below are two excerpts, the first from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and the second, a modified version of the same excerpt. Each describes the same set of events, but one evokes a sense of suspense while the other does not. Which excerpt is more suspenseful? How is this tone accomplished?

Excerpt 1

He turned a dreadful smile to me, and as if with the decision of despair, plucked away the sheet. At sight of the contents, he uttered one loud sob of such immense relief that I sat petrified. And the next moment, in a voice that was already fairly well under control, "Have you a graduated glass?" he asked.

Excerpt 2

He glanced at me and smiled. Making a decision, he pulled away the sheet. When he saw what was under it, he cried in relief. The sound made me sit still in my seat. Then, with a controlled voice, he asked me, "Have you a graduated glass?"

In the first excerpt, words like *plucked* and *sob* create a sense of urgency and drama. These words were replaced with *pulled* and *cried* in the revised excerpt. While these changes do not affect the reader's ability to understand what is happening in the scene, they do affect his or her understanding of the tone or emotion of the excerpt.

Notice how words and phrases from the first excerpt, such as *dreadful smile, plucked, uttered,* and *sob*, help to build a suspenseful and fearful tone. Describing the man's smile as dreadful makes him seem strange and frightening. The word *plucked* implies that he quickly moves the sheet, which shows the urgency. The word *uttered* implies that he could not hold back his sob when he sees the contents. In turn, the tone helps to develop meaning: Whatever the man wants is incredibly important to him.

The revision of this excerpt excludes these words, and the overall impact of reading it is very different. The character no longer seems sinister since he is described as smiling and then simply pulling the

sheet. He is described showing his relief when he sees the contents, but there's no intensity in his reaction. This scene no longer seems to show anything particularly important to the overall story.

Watch!

For more information about denotative and connotative meanings of words, watch this video:

- http://www.watchknowlearn.org/Video.aspx?VideoID=52937

Read!

For more information about tone, go through this PowerPoint presentation, located toward the bottom of the page. Click on "Tone Lesson|PowerPoint":

- http://www.ereadingworksheets.com/free-reading-worksheets/tone-worksheets-and-lesson/

Teaching Notes: Cumulative Impact of Word Choices

One of the goals of RL.9-10.4 is for students to analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on the meaning and tone of a literary text. The information below pertains to how this playlist may be implemented in a classroom setting.

Activities

1. In this playlist, students are learning to think critically about why authors make certain word choices. They are asked to consider how these word choices affect the way a reader understands and experiences the text. Students are invited to consider two passages. Both passages describe the same event using different words and phrases, but one excerpt evokes a sense of suspense while the other does not. Encourage students to mark words that seem to evoke a specific image or emotion. After students have had the opportunity to read through each passage, allow them to discuss their findings.

2. It may be the case that not all students will agree about how certain words function in the text. This means that students may not always make the same contextual associations or understand the connotative meaning of a word in the same way. To help students better conceptualize the importance of context to the connotative meaning of a word, choose one or two words to focus on and ask students to think of as many associations as they can for these one or two words. A concept map is a good visual tool for an activity like this. Below is an example of a concept map for *pluck*, one of the words in the first passage.

Wisewire