

Denotation and Connotation

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

denotation: a word's dictionary meaning or literal meaning

connotation: shades of meaning conveyed by a word; the emotional associations a word has for most readers or listeners

synonym: a word that has the same or almost the same meaning as another word

context: the words or sentences that surround a word; may help the reader figure out both its denotation and connotation

HERE'S HOW

Step 1: Recognize when a word's meaning is unfamiliar. Consider whether a word has more than one meaning, or denotation. In the following example, the word *bold*, which can mean *courageous*, must have a different meaning. If you try substituting *courageous* for *bold*, the example makes no sense. You must find a new meaning.

EXAMPLE The young boy's parents punished him for being too *bold*.

Step 2: Check a word's denotation(s) in the dictionary. Looking up *bold* in a dictionary reveals that it has several **denotations**, or literal meanings, one of which will work best in a given sentence.

EXAMPLE **denotations of bold:** 1.courageous.2.shameless, brazen.

Step 3: Examine context to determine a word's connotation. A word's connotation, or emotional association, goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Look for **context** clues-such as other words in the same sentence-to determine whether a word's connotation is positive or negative. For example, *cautious* may connote either commonsense or fear.

EXAMPLE **Positive connotation:** The scout was **cautious** and *alert*.

Negative connotation: The scout was **cautious** and *timid*.

Step 4: Choose words carefully, noting their connotations. Words with the same meanings may have a wide range of positive, neutral, or negative feelings. The example shows several synonyms for *bold*, each with its own connotations-some positive, some negative.

EXAMPLE **Positive:** The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *daring*.

Positive: The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *brave*.

Negative: The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *rash*.

Negative: The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *foolhardy*.