

Connotation

Getting the Idea

All words have their dictionary definition, or denotation. **Connotation** is the emotional weight a word carries, or the set of associations implied by the word.

Consider the verb *work*. One definition of *work* is “to engage in purposeful activity.” For most people, the word *work* has a neutral or positive connotation. However, some synonyms for *work* create negative feelings. What feelings do the following sentences evoke?

- I **worked** in the yard this weekend.
- I **toiled** all weekend in the yard.
- I **plugged away** until the yard was mowed.

Worked, *toiled*, and *plugged away* generally mean the same thing, but their connotations are very different. While *worked* creates the sense of purposeful activity, *toiled* has the added meaning of strenuous, continuous labor and *plugged away* connotes persistence. The shades of meaning are what give each word its unique connotations.

Notice how the following words change in shades of meaning, from positive or neutral connotations to negative connotations.

- proud → confident → arrogant → haughty
- young → childish → immature
- reserved → timid → withdrawn → inhibited

Authors choose their words very carefully to create specific feelings and reactions in the reader. Read the following passages. Notice how the italicized words have different connotations in the passages.

Positive Connotations	Negative Connotations
James <i>opened</i> the kitchen door. The <i>aroma</i> of stew <i>wafted</i> in the air. As a <i>curious</i> James <i>peered</i> into the <i>simmering ragout</i> , he could see the <i>slender</i> carrots he had grown this fall.	James <i>flung open</i> the kitchen door. The <i>odor</i> of stew <i>hung</i> in the air. As a <i>nosy</i> James <i>glared</i> into the <i>roiling concoction</i> , he could see the <i>scrawny</i> carrots he had grown this fall.

Notice that the words with negative connotations depict James as angry. The word *scrawny* suggests he is disappointed with the carrots. The words *odor* and *hung* give the reader the feeling that the stew smells rather unpleasant.

Pay attention to the connotation of words when you read. It will enhance your understanding of the text and even of the author. For instance, an editorial describes a new government policy as *ill-advised*. Obviously, the author does not agree with it. Now, imagine that the author calls the policy *foolish* or *rash*. These words connote a stronger disapproval and possibly anger. The word *idiotic* would go even further to illustrate the author's contempt.

Thinking It Through

Read the following paragraph, and then answer the question that follows.

When Gautam met Jennifer, he found her honesty refreshing. He had never met anyone who could be so candid, even when it might be easier to lie. Once, Gautam wore a shirt Jennifer didn't like. "You look like a clown!" she said, with a laugh. Another day, Gautam asked Jennifer if she thought that Sonal might be interested in him. "Not a chance!" she replied with her usual frankness. Then one day, when they were out with their friends, Gautam sprinkled too much garlic on his pizza. Again, Jennifer's criticism was straightforward. "Someone give this guy a breath mint!" she exclaimed. That's when Gautam realized that being blunt was overrated.



How does the connotation of blunt differ from synonyms of the word used in the passage?

Hint Look for words with a similar meaning to *blunt*.

Coached Example

Read the passage and answer the questions.

Are you waiting for a new breakfast food that's more than just a cereal? Your wait is over. *Verve!* is a new morning meal that tastes great and is easy to prepare. *Verve!* was created with cutting-edge science to ensure you get all the healthy vitamins and minerals you need to get your day started. But unlike most “healthy” cereals, the taste of *Verve!* is exceptional.

Verve! is not only flavorful, it is made from the best whole grains and protein available on the world market. Whole grains and brown rice give *Verve!* its crunchy, crisp texture. Then we added nature's sugar—coconut milk—and blended it with dark, robust cinnamon from Asia. The blend of flavors and textures is something you will not forget.

Verve! is easy and convenient. Its bold, all-natural taste will get you going on the right foot! So be adventuresome—add some energy to your morning. Add *Verve!* You'll be delighted you did!



1. What is the connotation of the word dark in the passage?
 - A. murky
 - B. somber
 - C. deep and rich
 - D. not light in color

Hint The word *dark* is used to describe the cinnamon.

2. The author uses words with positive connotations because
 - A. people who eat cereal are healthier and happier.
 - B. the author wants people to buy the cereal.
 - C. it is the only cereal the author eats.
 - D. every cereal tastes delicious.

Hint The words an author chooses often reflect the author's purpose.

Lesson Practice

Use the Reading Guide to help you understand the passage.

Reading Guide

A word's connotation is the feelings associated with it.

Which words with a more positive connotation could the author substitute for *satisfactory*?

excerpted and adapted from

My Antonia

by Willa Cather

- 1 I first heard of Antonia on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America. I was ten years old then; I had lost both my father and mother within a year, and my Virginia relatives were sending me out to my grandparents, who lived in Nebraska. I traveled in the care of a mountain boy, Jake Marpole, one of the “hands” on my father’s old farm under the Blue Ridge. He was now going west to work for my grandfather. Jake’s experience of the world was not much wider than mine. He had never been in a railway train until the morning when we set out together to try our fortunes in a new world.
- 2 We traveled in day-coaches, becoming more sticky and grimy with each stage of the journey. Jake bought everything the newsboys offered him: candy, oranges, brass collar buttons, and for me a *Life of Jesse James*, which I remember as one of the most satisfactory books I have ever read. Beyond Chicago we were under the protection of a friendly passenger conductor, who knew all about the country to which we were going and gave us a great deal of advice. He seemed to us a worldly man who had been almost everywhere.
- 3 Once, he sat down to chat and told us that in the immigrant car ahead there was a family from “across the water” whose destination was the same as ours.
- 4 “They can’t speak English, except one little girl, and all she can say is ‘We go Black Hawk, Nebraska.’ She’s not much older than you, twelve or thirteen, maybe, and she’s as bright as a new dollar. Don’t you want to go ahead and see her, Jimmy? She’s got pretty brown eyes, too!”
- 5 This last remark made me bashful, and I shook my head and settled down to *Jesse James*. I was sleeping when we reached Black Hawk. Jake roused me and took me by the hand. We stumbled down from the train to a wooden siding, where men were running about with lanterns. In the red glow from the fire-box, a group

Does the word *ferocious* have a positive or negative connotation?

What feeling do you get from the word *sinister*?

of people stood huddled together on the platform, burdened by bundles and boxes. I knew this must be the immigrant family the conductor had told us about. The woman wore a fringed shawl tied over her head, and she carried a little tin trunk in her arms, hugging it as if it were a baby. There was an old man, tall and stooped. Two half-grown boys and a girl stood holding oilcloth bundles, and a little girl clung to her mother's skirts.

6 Presently, a bantering voice called out: "Hello, are you Mr. Burden's folks? If you are, it's me you're looking for. I'm Otto Fuchs. I'm Mr. Burden's hired man, and I'm to drive you out."

7 I looked up with interest at the new face in the lantern-light. He might have stepped out of the pages of *Jesse James*. He wore a sombrero hat, with a wide leather band and a bright buckle, and the ends of his moustache were twisted up stiffly, like little horns. He looked lively and ferocious. A long scar ran across one cheek and drew the corner of his mouth up in a sinister curl. He told us we had a long night's drive ahead of us and led us to two farm-wagons. The foreign family crowded into one of them. The other was for us. Jake got on the front seat with Otto Fuchs, and I rode on the straw in the bottom of the wagon-box, covered up with a buffalo hide. The immigrants rumbled off into the empty darkness, and we followed them.

8 I tried to go to sleep, but the jolting made me bite my tongue, and I soon began to ache all over. When the straw settled down, I had a hard bed. Cautiously, I slipped from under the buffalo hide, got up on my knees and peered over the side of the wagon. There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

Answer the following questions.

1. The author uses the word interminable in paragraph 1 to suggest that the journey is
 - A. tiresomely long.
 - B. infinitely interesting.
 - C. not long enough.
 - D. without end.
 2. Which word in paragraph 2 has the MOST positive connotation?
 - A. grimy
 - B. sticky
 - C. advice
 - D. worldly
 3. What feeling do you get from the word clung in paragraph 5?
 - A. excitement
 - B. anger
 - C. joy
 - D. fear
 4. Which replacement for the word hard in paragraph 8 has a more positive connotation?
 - A. firm
 - B. stiff
 - C. rigid
 - D. unyielding
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5. What feeling do you get about the family from the word burdened in paragraph 5?
