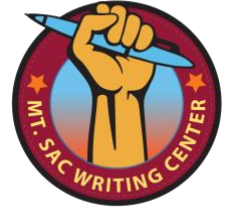


The Writing Center

DLA: Connotation and Denotation



This DLA is a writable PDF form. You can enter your answers directly into this document.

YOU MUST DOWNLOAD AND SAVE THIS FILE TO YOUR COMPUTER.

Do not complete this form in a web browser. You will not be able to save your work.

Student Name:

Important Note

To get completion credit for this DLA, make sure you complete all the required activities. If you'd like help while working on a specific DLA, you can meet with a specialist at the Writing Center. Keep in mind that you might need to schedule a second appointment to review your work, check your understanding, and get your completion credit. You can only review **ONE** DLA per appointment. (Check the last section of this DLA for information on making your appointment and receiving completion credit for your work).

Activities (approximately 1 hour)

Read the information, complete the activities that follow, and be prepared to discuss your answers when you meet with a tutor.

Understanding Denotation

Denotation is the literal meaning of a word. It's the definition you would likely find in a dictionary. For example, the words *house* and *home* have the same denotation. In other words, both mean "a place where people live," but the fact that they are synonyms doesn't necessarily mean that they are both used in the same contexts. In other words, they don't have the same connotative meaning (see below).

Understanding Connotation

Connotation refers to the emotional, social, and cultural associations attached to a word. For example, the words *house* and *home* have different connotative meanings. For instance, people tend to use the word *home* to refer to where they live since this word is generally associated with a place that usually offers comfort, love, privacy, etc. On the other hand, a contractor is more likely to use the word *house* when discussing projects that need to be done at someone else's home (since the contractor likely has no emotional attachment to a client's house).

Negative, Neutral, and Positive Connotation

The connotation of words can be more negative, neutral, or positive (in large part depending on the context). For instance, the words *child*, *brat*, and *kiddo* all refer to a "young person," but the connotation varies:

The word *child* usually carries a **neutral** connotation.

The word *brat* usually carries a **negative** connotation.

The word *kiddo* usually carries a **positive** connotation.

The connotation of the same word may also vary, though. For instance, depending on the context, the word *child* may have a negative—as opposed to a neutral—connotation (when being used to criticize an adult for behavior you consider to be immature, for example).

That *child* is very sweet.

(neutral)

I'm mad at my husband. He is such a *child*!

(negative)

It is also helpful to think of connotations in a spectrum since some words and their synonyms might carry varying degrees of negative connotations but not positive, and vice-versa.

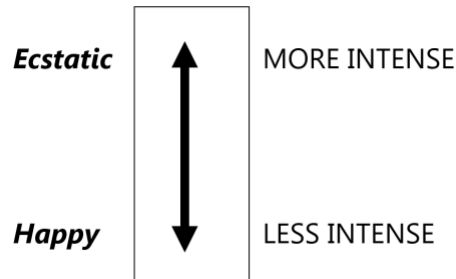
As you can see in the spectrum below, the synonyms *criminal*, *unlawful*, and *wrong* generally carry more or less negative connotations, but not positive.

criminal unlawful wrong



Intensity

Aside from negative, neutral, and positive connotations, words may also carry varying degrees of intensity.



While both of the synonyms *happy* and *ecstatic* generally carry a positive connotation, *ecstatic* is perceived as more intense than *happy* (“happier than happy”), as shown in the above spectrum.

Note that there are other spectrums that may apply to different words since there may be many subtle differences in meaning. Below are a few of many other factors to consider when choosing a word with the appropriate connotation.

Other Factors

Formality

The words *fashionable* and *cool* are listed as synonyms in dictionaries, but the level of formality socially attached to them is different. For example, a college student might use the word *cool* to describe a friend’s stylish clothes. On the other hand, when describing something stylish in a formal essay for a class assignment, that same student would need to use a more formal word which, in this case—if presented with the above two options—would be the word *fashionable*.

Gender

Although the words *beautiful* and *handsome* are synonyms, *beautiful* is normally used to describe females and *handsome* is used for males. The same goes for words such as *bombshell* (*used for women*) vs. *heart-throb* (*used for men*), *spinster* (*used for women*) vs. *bachelor* (*used for men*), etc.

Age/Maturity

While the word *cute* is often used to describe small children, it likely won’t be well received as a compliment to teenagers or adults. Teens and adults normally prefer to be complimented with words such as *beautiful*, *handsome*, *gorgeous*, *pretty*, etc. Other examples are *tummy* (*used by children*) vs. *stomach* (*used by adults*), *booboo* (*used by children*) vs. *injury* (*used by adults*), etc.

Aside from the above, there are many other differences in connotative meanings that affect our word choice.

The Importance of Connotation

- When communicating with others, we need to be able to express ourselves with clarity and precision. To do so, it is important to know when a word carries a negative, neutral, or positive connotation because, for instance, you probably wouldn't want to offend a parent by calling his or her child a *brat* when you were actually trying to be nice and really just meant *child*.
- Moreover, when writing, your *diction* (choice of words) generates different effects or emotions on readers. If you use the right connotation to express the meaning you want, your writing will be much more effective and you won't run the risk of confusing, offending, or alienating your readers.

Let's say for instance that you are writing an informational paper, and you don't want to influence the reader to favor or disfavor a theory. In this case, you might choose to use words with a neutral connotation. On the other hand, if you are writing an argument and you want the reader to disfavor a certain theory, then you will likely use words with negative connotations when referring to the opposing view and words with positive connotations when referring to your views. Look at the examples below and notice the different effect that words with different connotations have on the overall meaning of the sentence and the reader's perception of the information.

1. My sister is a very *determined* girl.
2. My sister is a very *stubborn* girl.
3. Tom *made* a series of *mistakes*.
4. Tom *committed* a series of *crimes*.

As it has probably become clear to you in the above examples, the use of the word *determined* in sentence 1 carries a more positive connotation while the use of the word *stubborn* in sentence 2 leads readers to form a more negative image of the girl. Likewise, in the second pair of sentences, the words *made*, and *mistakes* are less negative than the words *committed* and *crimes*. After reading sentence 4, a person might have a much more negative impression of Tom and the situation than after reading sentences.

Determining Which Word to Use in a Specific Context

When you use a new word in your sentence, and you are not sure if it has the correct connotation you are seeking, search for it in different sources and see how it is used in contexts that are similar to your context so that you get a sense of its connotative meaning. In other words, see how others have used it in sentences they wrote so that you understand whether the word generally carries either a negative, neutral, or positive connotation and whether or not it has the exact meaning you want to express. You can do that by looking through printed materials, talking to others, or searching for the word on the web [preferably on reliable websites such as those created by educational institutions (.edu), the government (.gov), or reputable news sources such as [newyorktimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)—especially if you are writing something formal].

If you find that the word has the right definition but not the correct connotation you want, then search for synonyms in a thesaurus and follow the above process again to find out the connotation of your new word.

Some good online dictionaries are the [Learner's Dictionary](http://www.learnersdictionary.com/) (<http://www.learnersdictionary.com/>) and [Longman Dictionary](https://www.ldoceonline.com/) (<https://www.ldoceonline.com/>), which are great for English learners, or [Merriam Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/) (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>). You can download dictionary and thesaurus apps to your phone to make it easier to look up words.

Now use the lines below to indicate whether the synonyms in each of the sentences you wrote above carry a more positive, negative, or neutral connotation.

- a.
- b.
- c.

Choose activity 4a or 4b below.

4a. Apply What You Have Learned to Your Own Writing

Collect some of your written work. Find sentences with words exemplifying different connotations and write them below. Once you write each sentence, underline the word with the requested connotation. Then answer the questions that follow.

Positive connotation:

Neutral connotation:

Negative connotation:

Are the words you chose for each of your above sentences the most appropriate for the meaning you intended? For instance, did you choose the words with the correct connotation and level of formality? If not, which word(s) would have been more appropriate for the context and why? Answer in the space below.

If you do not have sentences from your own writing to work with, please complete the supplemental activity below (4b).

□ 4b. Write Your Own Sentences

Write a sentence of your own in A below. Then choose one of the words in the sentence you wrote and look up two synonyms for that word. Write a sentence with each synonym in B and C below. Underline the synonyms and be prepared to explain to the tutor the connotation of each synonym in your sentences. Don't forget to utilize the strategies explained on this handout when looking up words.

a.

b.

c.

□ 5. Review the DLA/Receive Completion Credit

1. Go to [EAB Navigate](#) and make an appointment (online or in-person).
2. Attend your session and be prepared to explain your understanding of the information you've learned in the DLA. Consider the main concept you learned and how you might use this in your future assignments/classes.
3. If your professor asks you to provide proof, you can review the "appointment summary report" through EAB Navigate (app or desktop). You will find all Writing Center appointments under "appointment summary reports" (app or desktop). Look for the summary report for your DLA appointment. This is where your writing specialist will indicate the title of your DLA and state whether it is "completed" or "not completed." If it is marked as "not completed," book a follow up appointment to complete.

Note: Appointment summary reports are also sent weekly to your instructor on record. If there is an issue, please contact us at writingcenter@mtsac.edu or (909) 274-5325.

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