



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

THE DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION OF A WORD  
*The Difference between literary and figurative meanings*



Figure 2 An image showing "The Mona Lisa" and Leonardo Da Vinci meshed together.

Often, words in English have double meanings. One word can have a both a “denotation” and a “connotation”. These are called “figures of speech”.

**DENOTATION:** The direct definition of the word that you find in the dictionary.

**CONNOTATION:** The emotional suggestions of a word, that is not literal.

**Exercise:**

Annie: “What a **scrawny** guy!”

George: “Really? I think he is pretty **svelte**.”

Annie: “Well, he is a **small fry** compared to my boyfriend.”

What do you think of the guy Annie and George are talking about? Do they have a difference in opinion? Can you describe him? What adjectives did you use?

Do you know the difference between the words, ‘scrawny’ and ‘svelte’?

Do you know what the word, ‘small fry’ means?

**Scrawny** – gaunt, emaciated

**Svelte** – lithe, slender, suave, urbane

**Small fry** - child, unimportant person

### Example:

In the example on the previous page, Annie calls the guy in question, “scrawny.” Because of its literal definition or “denotation,” Annie is using this adjective in a negative way.

[Think about it: “emaciated” means “bony.”]

Compare “scrawny” with “svelte.” The *denotation* for “svelte” is “slim.” Because of its denotation, George is using this adjective to say that the guy is not too skinny, but just slim.

Now look at the last word used. “Small fry” is a noun and used to describe a small person. Annie is using the word here to compare the guy to her boyfriend. We can infer then that her boyfriend is bigger than this guy.

Still confused? Fret not. Here are some examples to cue you in on the difference.

Let’s take the word, “juvenile.”

DENOTATION: pertaining to young people

CONOTATION: childish, immature, youthful criminal

### Exercise:

Read the following article excerpts, and understand the usage of the word, “juvenile”.

#### Article One: **Monitoring Juveniles**

She decided to identify every juvenile under 18 who lived in Brownsville public housing and had been arrested for robbery, anywhere in the city. The result was a list of 106 teenagers linked to 132 robbery arrests in 2006. Only 24 percent of the robberies occurred on housing property — a distinction that was important to Chief Jaffe, because stopping these teenagers in Brownsville would have a beneficial impact throughout New York City.

#### Article Two: **The Boy With a Thorn in His Joints**

A month after our first appointment, we went to see Philip Kahn, a pediatric rheumatologist at NYU Langone Medical Center, who gave Shepherd a diagnosis of juvenile idiopathic arthritis (J.I.A.), an autoimmune disease that causes painful swelling in the joints. J.I.A. can lead to stunted growth, disability and, rarely, blindness.

### Article Three: **When will GOP stop acting juvenile and govern?**

This is no way for a 2-year-old to act, much less the self-proclaimed "world's greatest deliberative body." And speaking of juvenile behavior, I would be remiss not to mention how Rep. Darrell Issa of California and his GOP colleagues in the House are embarrassing themselves by straining to turn Obama administration missteps into Watergate-style scandals.

#### **Reflection:**

1. How is the word "juvenile" used differently in these articles?
2. What feeling do you get of the "juvenile" people? Does this change your attitude(s)?
3. Perform an Internet search with the word 'juvenile'. What uses of this word do you find? Is there a trend or commonality in the uses?

Exercise: Poets often play with connotations and denotation to incite emotion from their readers.

Read the poem below and try to determine the connotation and denotation of the word,

**Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Eagle"**

*Close to the sun in **lonely** lands,*

***Ringed** with the **azure** world, he stands.*

*The **wrinkled** sea beneath him crawls;*

*He watches from his **mountain** walls,*

*And like a thunderbolt he falls.*

\*The bolded words are up for interpretation. Look up their meanings and write down their denotation using a dictionary. Try to guess their connotations since these are more of a feeling.

1. Word: lonely

Denotation: a depressing feeling of being alone.

Connotation: Desolate, isolated lands where there is no one.

2. Word:

Denotation:

Connotation:

3. Word:

Denotation:

Connotation:

4. Word:

Denotation:

Connotation:

5. Word:

Denotation:

Connotation:

## Exercise:

T.S. Eliot - *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

...And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that **slides** along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

After reading the above excerpt by T.S. Eliot, find the verbs that have double meanings. Then, interpret why the poet used these verbs. The first verb has been bolded for you.

\*Hint: Yellow smoke does not usually “slide” along a street. What emotion do you get from reading this? This is connotation in practice.

*This Handout uses information from the following sources:*

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