

## Denotations and Connotations

**Brief:** While choosing words to include in a speech, it's important to consider both denotation and connotation.

**Learning Objective:** Know how to apply an understanding of the denotation and connotation of words to the process of word choice.

**Key Terms:**

- **Connotation:** The associated meaning of a word beyond its literal definition.
- **Denotation:** The literal, dictionary definition of a word.
- **Synonyms:** Words that have similar denotations.

### Understand the Denotation and Connotation of Words

As you choose the words in your speech, consider both the denotations and the connotations of those words. This is especially important for key words that will support your main points and sub-points.

A word's denotation refers to its literal, dictionary definition. Its connotation is the associated meaning of the word beyond its literal definition.

#### ***Potential Problems with Denotations***

You might wonder, "How can relying on a word's denotation possibly create a problem?" After all, what's more straightforward than the dictionary definition of a word?

Actually, a word's dictionary definition isn't so straightforward. Take for example the word master. How do you think it's defined? A person who has perfected a particular skill? An original document? An advanced degree? In fact, all of these meanings—and more—are included in the dictionary definition. The full list is amazingly long:

1. Someone who has control over something or someone.
2. The owner of an animal or slave.
3. (nautical) The captain of a merchant ship; a master mariner.
4. (dated) The head of a household.
5. Someone who employs others.
6. An expert at something.
7. A tradesman who is qualified to teach apprentices.
8. (dated) A schoolmaster.
9. A skilled artist.
10. (dated) A man or a boy; mister. See Master.

11. A master's degree; a type of postgraduate degree, usually undertaken after a bachelor degree.
12. A person holding such a degree.
13. The original of a document or of a recording.
14. The primary wide shot of a scene, into which the closeups will be edited later.
15. (law) A parajudicial officer (such as a referee, an auditor, an examiner, or an assessor) specially appointed to help a court with its proceedings.
16. (engineering, computing) A device that is controlling other devices or is an authoritative source.
17. (freemasonry) A person holding an office of authority, especially the presiding officer.
18. (by extension) A person holding a similar office in other civic societies.

The word master is only one example of the many words that have multiple dictionary meanings. Remember, for every word you choose your audience will be faced with the task of decoding that word to retrieve your meaning. When that word has multiple dictionary definitions, how will your audience know which meaning you intended? To avoid audience confusion, it's not enough to simply choose the best key word. As a public speaker, you also have to provide context for that key word by supporting it with other words and phrases that help define its meaning.

### ***Potential Problems with Connotations***

Words can also hold meanings outside of the definitions found in a dictionary. Words have connotations, also referred to as associated meanings, that trigger negative, positive, or neutral emotions. Synonyms, words that have similar denotations, may have different connotations. For example:

- “Youth” = positive connotation
- “Juvenile” = negative connotation
- “Adolescent” = neutral connotation

Here's another example, on the other end of the lifespan:

- “Senior” = positive
- “Old” = negative
- “Elderly” = neutral

In addition, some words take on a connotative meaning unrelated to the denotative meaning of the word:

- Snake: An evil, devious or immoral person.
- Chicken: A coward.
- Pig: A vulgar person or slob.

Again, it's important to remember that your audience will be faced with the task of decoding the words you choose to retrieve your meaning. If you share a word—intentionally or unintentionally—with a negative connotation, members of your audience will feel the impact of that word and have an emotional reaction. Audience members may feel uncomfortable, become distracted, or tune you out completely. Therefore, in most cases, your best word choices are words with neutral or positive connotations.

## From Concept to Action

Choose two words: one word that you like and one word that you dislike. You might like or dislike what they mean, their associations, or how they sound when you say them. After you've chosen your words, look them up in a thesaurus. Do your words have lots of synonyms or only a few? Do those synonyms vary in their connotative meaning? Would you choose to use your words in a speech or are there synonyms that would be a better choice?

### OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Connotation vs. Denotation." Lumen Learning. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/howardcc-devenglishandreading/chapter/connotation-vs-denotation/>. Accessed 17 May 2019. [CC BY-SA 4.0]

"master." Wiktionary. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/master>. Accessed 17 May 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]