

Denotation and Connotation

The dictionary definition or literal meaning of a word is **denotation**. A word’s denotation conveys a neutral tone, neither positive nor negative.

Many words have an underlying meaning, or **connotation**. The connotation of a word is an association people make with the word, usually a particular meaning or emotion that the word evokes. Connotations may be positive or negative.

Consider these synonyms for the neutral word *skillful*.

Deft adroit masterful slick

Deft, adroit, and masterful have positive connotations suggesting a high level of skill. Slick, on the other hand, can have a negative connotation. If a person is called slick, it might suggest that there is something misleading or false in his or her performance.

THINK: A professional magician performing card tricks may be considered deft, adroit, or masterful, but a gambler playing poker may be considered slick.

Look at these examples of words that are similar in denotation but have different connotations.

NEUTRAL	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Affect	influence	coerce
Rich	opulent	excessive
Praise	extol	flatter

Words that have meaning particularly strong connotations—emotionally “charged” positive or negative associations—are often called **loaded word**. Loaded words are common tools of persuasion writers and speakers, who understand the power of the implied meanings to influence an audience’s perceptions.

Shades of Meaning

Number your paper 1-16 and write the word. Then out from the word write—positive (+), if the word has a positive connotation; minus (-), if the word has a negative connotation; zero (0) if the word is neutral.

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| 1. Insidious | 5. Fortitude | 9. Unkempt | 13. Deploy |
| 2. Culinary | 6. Adulterate | 10. Extol | 14. Artifice |
| 3. Alienate | 7. Precedent | 11. Grimace | 15. Harass |
| 4. Verbatim | 8. Urbane | 12. Bereft | 16. Exhilarating |