

Distinguishing Between Literal and Figurative Language

CA Content Standard 1.1: Identify and use the literal and figurative meanings of words and understand word derivations.



BEHIND THE SCENES BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Objective

Students will distinguish between literal and figurative language.

Vocabulary Terms

Figurative language: Language that uses words beyond their basic meaning

Idiom: An expression with a meaning that is different from the meaning of its individual words

Literal language: The common dictionary usage of a word

Metaphor: A phrase that compares two things without using the words *like* or *as*

Simile: A phrase that compares two things using the words *like* or *as*

Materials

- student books, pages 67–73



SETTING THE STAGE OPENING ACTIVITY

approximately 5 minutes

Activate students' background knowledge about figurative language.

- Have students open their books to page 67 (T127), read the passage, and underline any unfamiliar phrases.
- Have students share their responses. Focus the discussion on which specific phrases are unfamiliar.
- Explain that many of the phrases which students identified as unfamiliar are meant to create an image or a general idea in the mind of the reader. Emphasize that these phrases are not meant to be taken literally—i.e., word for word.
- Tell students that distinguishing between literal and figurative language ensures they understand the meaning of a passage.

Opening Activity Sample Answers

Arnold's mother yelled out the window that it was time for Arnold to come home for dinner. Arnold had been chewing the fat with Lewis about his mother's disaster. Arnold's mother had been down in the dumps lately. She had been burning the midnight oil to finish the book she was writing, when her computer crashed. The whole thing was erased! Now his Mom was back to square one, and it was no bed of roses at home. Arnold started running at the drop of a hat. He looked down the street to make sure that the coast was clear. Arnold hightailed it around the corner and ran up the steps, just in time for the dinner bell.



DRESS REHEARSAL INSTRUCTION & GUIDED PRACTICE

approximately 20 minutes

Introduce literal and figurative language.

- Have students turn to page 68 (T128).
- Read the introduction and emphasize that figurative language appeals to the imagination because the writer uses unusual comparisons to make a description of something clearer or more interesting to the reader.
- Have students respond to the prompt.

Instruction Sample Answers

chewing the fat: *Arnold had been having a long friendly conversation with Lewis.*

down in the dumps: *Arnold's mother had been unhappy lately.*

burning the midnight oil: *She had been staying up late to finish the book she was writing.*

back to square one: *Mom had to rewrite the document from the beginning.*

it was no bed of roses: *It was a very difficult and unpleasant situation at home.*

running at the drop of a hat: *Arnold started running suddenly without notice.*

Have students distinguish between literal and figurative language in "A Dark World Indeed."

- Have students turn to page 69 (T129).
- Point out the graphic organizer on page 70 (T130) and explain that students will use the table to identify the meaning of literal and figurative language in the poem.
- Together as a class, read "A Dark World Indeed."
- Pause after reading the second line and have students explain the meaning of the first example from the table.



You may want to model ways to respond to difficult vocabulary as you read. For example, you might pause after encountering the word "dreary" in the first stanza and explain that the poet's description of the dark world indicates that the word "dreary" has a negative meaning.

- Complete the graphic organizer as a class.
- To help students focus on identifying the meaning of literal and figurative language, you may want to ask the following questions:
 - Does this line or phrase create an image in your mind? Describe the image.*
 - How do the other words in the poem help you identify the meaning of this line or phrase?*
 - How can you reword this language to identify what it means?*

Guided Practice Sample Answers

Line/Phrase	Literal or Figurative	Meaning
"And by that I mean simply a world that used only plain old words."	literal	<i>I mean a world that uses only plain and boring words to describe people or feelings.</i>
"She has eyes as blue as the sea"	figurative	<i>Her eyes are the same color blue as the sea.</i>
"Today I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders"	figurative	<i>Today I feel worried and stressed.</i>
"No way of describing to your friends / Exactly what the moonlight looked like late last night."	literal	<i>The moonlight looks like plain moonlight because there are no words to describe it.</i>
"How could you describe a rainy Sunday afternoon / Without using sheets and buckets to describe your gloom?"	figurative	<i>A rainy Sunday afternoon would be hard to describe as gloomy without exciting language.</i>
"It would be a dark world indeed if we didn't have words / That made the tip of your tongue twist and bend / Like a rattlesnake coiled onto the tip of a pen"	figurative	<i>Figurative language is exciting and powerful.</i>



SHOW TIME INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

approximately 20 minutes

Have students apply their analytical skills on their own.

- Have students turn to page 71 (T131).
- Read the directions aloud and be sure that students understand the activity.

Give students approximately 15 minutes to complete the activity.

- As students work, circulate and ask them to explain their thinking. Redirect students as needed by asking them questions about their work. Effective questions might include the following:
Does this sentence or phrase create an image in your mind? Describe the image.
How do the other words in the passage help you identify the meaning of this sentence or phrase?
How can you reword this language to identify what it means?



Encourage struggling students to visualize the sentence or phrase before identifying the meaning. For example, have students create a mental image of the phrase “Bessie Coleman ran up against a brick wall.” Then have students reexamine the entire phrase in context.

Independent Practice Sample Answers

Sentence/Phrase	Literal or Figurative	Meaning
“Bessie Coleman went against all odds to reach her goals.”	figurative	<i>Bessie Coleman faced every obstacle that stood in the way of her goals.</i>
“Coleman wanted to make a name for herself, so she decided to pursue her dream and become a pilot.”	literal	<i>She decided to follow her dream and become a pilot.</i>
“Coleman ran up against a brick wall, though, when she applied to flight school.”	figurative	<i>She was challenged when she applied to flight school.</i>
“Letting nothing get in the way of her dream, Coleman returned to France and trained for two more months.”	literal	<i>She would not allow anything to get in the way of her dream.</i>
“Coleman’s fame proved to be a stepping stone in her desire to make a difference in the lives of young African-American people.”	figurative	<i>Her fame as a pilot was a step in her realization that she wanted to make a difference.</i>
“Bessie Coleman certainly earned her star.”	figurative	<i>Bessie Coleman became famous for her determination. She earned the right to be recognized and respected as a star pilot.</i>

- Bring the class together and have students share their responses.



RAVE REVIEWS

REFLECTION & ASSESSMENT

Formal Assessment

- Review students' work from the Show Time section of the lesson.

Informal Assessment

- As students engage in classroom discussion, note how adeptly they distinguish between literal and figurative language.



ENCORE! ENCORE!

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Writing Extension

- Have students analyze their own writing to distinguish between literal and figurative language. Instruct students to make revisions where appropriate. You may wish to have students work with an existing piece of writing or have them draft an essay describing what Bessie Coleman might have said as she toured the country encouraging young people to become pilots.

Group Project

- Challenge groups to write an original poem. Students should elaborate on a topic from "A Dark World Indeed" by using figurative language (e.g., "what the moonlight looked like last night" or "describe a rainy Sunday afternoon"). Students should present their poems to the class.