The Best Word for the Job
Foundation Lesson

About this Lesson
“Best Word for the Job” is a lesson designed to teach the importance of diction. Understanding an author’s word choice and being aware that writers deliberately select words to affect the reader is the first step toward literary/rhetorical analysis. While the lesson asks students to classify words as having positive, negative, or neutral connotations, it is important for teachers and students to realize that this is just a way to introduce the concept of diction. As students become more skilled in discussing diction, they should be challenged to come up with more sophisticated words to describe an author’s diction or the overall tone that the connotative words create.

This lesson is included in Module 1: Introduction to Laying the Foundation.

Definitions and Examples
**Diction** refers to the writer’s word choice. Students should be taught early to use the term “diction” correctly.

- **Students should write:** In “The Open Boat,” Stephen Crane uses positive diction to create a feeling of hopefulness that the crew will be rescued.
- **Students should not write:** Stephen Crane uses diction words to show that the crew might be rescued.

Analyzing diction is one of the first steps in determining the overall tone of a literary text.

The **denotative** meaning of a word is the dictionary definition. Many words have more than one denotative meaning. In order to understand what a writer means, the reader must often know multiple definitions of a word.

**Example:** He is a hard teacher.

“Hard” can be defined as: not easily penetrated; firm or definite; severe or unfeeling; strenuous or difficult; having mineral salts that interfere with lathering

The best definition for the word “hard” in this sentence is “strenuous or difficult.”

The **connotative** meaning of a word refers to the feelings and associations created by the word. Words can have positive, negative, or neutral connotations.

**Example:**
Positive: slender
Neutral: thin
Negative: scrawny

Objectives
Students will
- demonstrate an understanding of diction, connotation, and denotation.
- select words based on denotative and connotative meanings and apply them in various writing activities.

Level
Grades Six through Eight
**Connection to Common Core Standards for English Language Arts**

LTF® Foundation Lessons are designed to be used across grade levels and therefore are aligned to the CCSS Anchor Standards. Teachers should consult their own grade-level-specific Standards. The activities in this lesson allow teachers to address the following Common Core Standards:

Explicitly addressed in this lesson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Level of Thinking</th>
<th>Depth of Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R.1</td>
<td>Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it. Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.4</td>
<td>Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</td>
<td>Analyze</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.10</td>
<td>Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.3</td>
<td>Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.5</td>
<td>Demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.3</td>
<td>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.</td>
<td>Create</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
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<th>Code</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SL.1</td>
<td>Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL.4</td>
<td>Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</td>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL.5</td>
<td>Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.</td>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>III</td>
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</table>
LTF Skill Focus
The foundation for LTF English lessons is the Skill Progression Chart that identifies key skills for each domain, beginning with grade six and adding more complex skills at each subsequent grade level while reinforcing skills introduced at previous grade levels. The Skill Focus for each individual lesson identifies the skills actually addressed in that lesson.

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<th>Remember</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Apply</th>
<th>Analyze</th>
<th>Evaluate</th>
<th>Create</th>
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<tr>
<td>Close Reading</td>
<td>written, spoken, and visual texts</td>
<td>Purposeful use of language for effect</td>
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<td>Literary Elements</td>
<td>Diction</td>
<td>Parts of Speech</td>
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<td>connotation</td>
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<td>denotation</td>
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<td>vocabulary</td>
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<td>Style</td>
<td>tone determined through diction</td>
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<td>Tone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Multiple Mode</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>Personal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Process of Composition</td>
<td>Prewriting</td>
<td>consideration of audience</td>
<td>determination of purpose</td>
<td>generation of ideas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Revisiion of Multiple Drafts</td>
<td>precise diction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>mechanics</td>
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<td>sentence structure</td>
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<td>Style/Voice</td>
<td>choosing vivid verbs</td>
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<td>Use of Technology</td>
<td>Imitation of Stylistic Models</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Selection of Vocabulary</td>
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Connections to AP*
Analysis of diction is a skill that recurs in both the free response and multiple choice sections of AP English Literature and AP English Language exams.

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Materials and Resources
- access to dictionaries or online dictionaries
- copies of Student Activity

Assessments
The following kinds of formative assessments are embedded in this lesson:
- guided questions
- graphic organizers
- brief writing assignments
- fill-in-the-blank templates
Teaching Suggestions

**Activity One** introduces the skill of close reading for denotative and connotative meaning. The excerpt from *The Giver* by Lois Lowry is used to illustrate the importance of diction because the character Jonas is reflecting on his own word choice to describe his feelings.

**Activity Two** continues the idea of connotation/denotation by distinguishing between the degrees of meaning in three similar words: embarrassed, self-conscious, and humiliated.

**Activity Three** introduces the use of precise diction. A PowerPoint® created by the teacher or the students should be used in this part of the lesson to show the various types of hats. Students should be encouraged to write a paragraph creating a character who wears a specific hat they have researched. A good extension of this lesson for students learning English as a second language might be to create PowerPoint presentations of other precise words for common nouns in the English language.

**Activity Four** is not intended to be a fill-in-the-blank activity with one correct answer. This activity is designed to stimulate class discussion and illustrate how deliberate word choice affects the meaning of a sentence.

**Activity Five** is designed to help students avoid the vague, overused word *good*. Students are asked to use words with more precise meanings than *good*. Most language arts teachers have a list of words that students should avoid in their writing. This activity can serve as a model for activities using additional words from such a list.

**Answers**

Activity One

Question 6: “Apprehensive” is the word used in this particular sentence from *The Giver*.

Activity Two

*Answers will vary*

Activity Three

Student answers may vary; however, the original sentences from the novels use the following words: turban, yarmulkes, bonnet, babushka, cap, and beret.

Activity Four

Either word can be correct, so students should discuss how the selection of each word changes the meaning of the sentence.

Activity Five

*Answers will vary*. Students should be encouraged to work in pairs and consult a dictionary or thesaurus.
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Often when an artist paints, he or she will use a palette—a thin, oblong wooden board with a small hole for the thumb, to mix the primary and secondary colors of paint into a variety of shades and hues in order to create a precise color or realistic portrayal for the audience. Writers use words in much the same way. The more words a writer has on his palette, the more meaning he or she will be able to convey to the reader.

Diction is word choice intended to convey a certain effect. When selecting the best word for the job, the writer must consider both the denotative and connotative meaning of the word. The denotation of a word refers to the dictionary meaning of the word. The connotation of the word refers to the feelings and attitudes associated with the word. Words can have positive, negative, or neutral connotations.

Activity One
Denotation
1. Many words have more than one denotative meaning. Give two denotative meanings for the word “sharp” and use each in a sentence.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. One denotation for house is “a place for human beings to live.” In the space below, list as many words as you can that have the same denotation as house.

______________________________________________________________________________
Connotation

Look again at the words you listed in #2 above. Decide whether each word with the same denotative meaning has a positive, negative or neutral connotative meaning and fill in the chart below. Be prepared to defend your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The following sentence is from *The Giver* by Lois Lowry.

Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above.

3. Explain the significance of Lowry’s choice of the word “home.” What feelings do we associate with this word?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Read the excerpt that follows from *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. In this passage, Jonas is awaiting the Ceremony of Twelve at which he will be given his Assignment in the community. He considers the importance of selecting the word with both the appropriate denotation and connotation to convey his meaning.

Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above. It was not what he was feeling now with December approaching. He searched for the right word to describe his own feeling.

Jonas was careful with words about language. Not like his friend, Asher, who talked too fast and mixed things up, scrambling words and phrases until they were barely recognizable and often very funny.

He realized that frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings, now that December was almost here. It was too strong an adjective.
He had waited a long time for this special December. Now that it was almost upon him, he wasn’t frightened, but he was eager, he decided. He was eager for it to come. And he was excited certainly. But there was a little shudder of nervousness when he thought about it, about what might happen.

4. Identify the words in the passage that Jonas has used to express his feelings concerning the upcoming Ceremony of Twelve.

_____________________________________________________________________________________

5. Using a thesaurus or online dictionary, complete the chart with words having the same or similar denotative meanings as the words below. Think of specific situations that might cause someone to feel each of these emotions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frightened</th>
<th>eager</th>
<th>nervous</th>
<th>excited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. Reread the excerpt from *The Giver*. Complete the following sentence with the best word to convey to the reader the way Jonas is feeling. Keep in mind he feels a combination of the four emotions.

“______________________________, Jonas decided. That’s what I am.”
Activity Two

Consider the words “embarrassed,” “self-conscious,” and “humiliated.” After reading the denotations and connotations below, provide an example of a situation that illustrates the use of each word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Denotation</th>
<th>Connotation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>embarrassed</td>
<td>to feel self-consciousness or confusion</td>
<td>People can be embarrassed for many reasons, but often it implies a person has done something silly or out of the ordinary in front of others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-conscious</td>
<td>aware of oneself</td>
<td>A person might feel self-conscious when entering a room full of strangers, especially if someone is staring.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humiliated</td>
<td>a painful loss of self-respect</td>
<td>When people are humiliated, they feel a deep sense of shame. We think people who humiliate others are mean. We usually feel sorry for someone who is humiliated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. How are the three words related? 

2. Would you rather be embarrassed, self-conscious or humiliated? 
   Explain your answer.

3. Write a paragraph describing a situation in which a real or imaginary person is embarrassed, self-conscious, or humiliated. Deliberately use diction, details, and imagery that will convey the intended emotion to the reader.
Activity Three
Precise Language
Since many words have the same denotative meaning, writers use very precise language to create an image for the reader. The following words all have the same denotation: a covering for the head. However, each word represents a very precise type of head covering. Using the Internet, look up each hat, and identify the type of occasion for which it might be worn.

- helmet
- turban
- Stetson
- bonnet
- babushka
- doo-rag
- fedora
- yarmulke
- ushanka
- toboggan
- beret
- burqa
- top hat
- tiara
- cap

Using context clues from the sentence, fill in the blanks below by using the word for a specific head covering. Compare your answers to the author’s original sentence.

“He was a bushy headed Indian with a red ____________ wrapped around his head.”
—“Homesick” by Jean Fritz

“The religious school was still in session, and there were kids everywhere. The preteen girls loped with awkward self-awareness and the boys ran the halls and grabbed their heads to keep their ______________ from falling off.”—Have a Little Faith by Mitch Albom

“Still my family dressed me as a young woman, ______________ covering my beautiful hair, full skirts, high button shoes, and you may be sure, white gloves.”—True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle by Avi

“Ruthie, tall and skinny, with red lipstick and blue ___________, one blue sock and one green because she forgot, is the only grown-up we know who likes to play.”—House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

“Perhaps even a knit woolen ____ with a ball on top or a woman’s yellow _______. I have witnessed all these wonders and more.”—The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver
Activity Four
Select the word with the best connotative meaning for each sentence below. If you feel both words are appropriate, explain the different meaning created by using each word.

The teacher displayed a/an __________________ of a map for the class during the outline or silhouette?
geography lesson.

The saleswoman gave the customer a __________________ look as she entered condescending or welcoming?
the designer jewelry store.

The speaker __________________ the audience to remain seated. pointed at or gestured for?

The basketball player was __________________ when the referee called a foul. indignant or indifferent or irate?

Activity Five
Many teachers have a list of vague, ambiguous words that are off limits for students to use in writing assignments. Look at the following paragraph and replace the word “good” each time it is used.

Farmer Maloney was an old man who had lived a good life. At eighty years old, he was still in good health and exhibited good judgment. Young men and women from good families frequently came to him for good advice about farming. Almost all of them had been good boys and girls growing up, so he wanted to help them. He told them that seeds planted in good soil would produce vegetables that were good for them to eat.

Farmer Maloney was an old man who had lived a __________________ life. At eighty years old, he was still in _____________ health and exhibited _______________ judgment. Young men and women from ______________ families frequently came to him for _______________ advice about farming. Almost all of them had been ______________ boys and girls growing up, so he wanted to help them. He told them that seeds planted in _____________ soil would produce vegetables that were __________________________ for them to eat.