

Informational Vocabulary: Content Words

- RI.4.4** Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text relevant to a grade 4 topic or subject area. **(See grade 4 Language standards 4-6 for additional expectations.) CA**
- SL.4.4** Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.
- W.4.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
  - d.** Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.



**Understand the Standards**



Word choice counts! The English language is full of clever sayings and subtle meanings. Sometimes the word you choose has a **connotative meaning**, an unspoken meaning, emotion, or association. The connotative meaning goes well beyond its dictionary definition, or **literal meaning**.

**Words to Know**  
 connotative meaning  
 literal meaning  
 figurative meaning  
 technical meaning

Is it better to be *slim* or *skinny*? Would you rather be described as *stubborn* or *persistent*? Fill in the chart with a word or words that have a similar literal meaning to each word shown but a positive (or negative) connotative meaning.

| Positive Connotation | Negative Connotation |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| thrifty, frugal      |                      |
|                      | stench, stink        |
| stare                |                      |
|                      | outdated, obsolete   |
| fatigued, tired      |                      |

Connotative meanings don't have to be positive or negative. For example, we have many words that mean roughly the same thing as *vacation*. Each has its own set of associated feelings. How many of these "vacation words" can you name?

Figurative language uses exaggerations or comparisons to get across the meaning in a way that is different from the literal interpretation. Think about the literal meaning of these examples as you explain the **figurative meaning**. In poetry and descriptive nonfiction writing, figurative language helps paint a picture of a place or event. It makes descriptions more interesting and vivid.

Examples:

- Keep your eye on the ball.
- I felt like I could run forever.
- Mom said my eyes were bigger than my stomach.
- He ached for summer vacation to start.

The **technical meaning** of a word refers to a special meaning for the word or phrase in an area such as mathematics, science, or education that may be different from its everyday use. For example, the word *bug* means “error” in the world of computers, “illness” in the medical field, and a type of insect if you’re speaking to a biologist.



## Guided Instruction

Here is some technical writing on space. Which words or phrases have specific technical meanings in this field? Do any of them have other meanings in regular usage?



### The Vocabulary of Space

Our fascination with space started thousands of years ago. Ancient people looked up into the sky and made up stories about the dazzling lights they saw there. They observed the tails of comets and shooting stars that seemed to fall from the sky. During the Renaissance, people began to calculate the orbit of planets around the sun. The invention of the telescope enabled scientists to see into the sky.



Between 1959 and 1971, we traveled outside the bounds of Earth’s gravity. Manned spacecraft were sent to explore the moon, and spacecraft have since landed on Venus, Mercury, and Mars. Scientists have observed planets, comets, and asteroids. Special missions and instruments have successfully collected data and samples for further study.

The search goes on. In August 2011, the *Juno* spacecraft lifted off on its way to Jupiter. The spacecraft will arrive in July 2016. During that year it will orbit the planet 32 times. The data collected will answer questions about how Jupiter formed, how much water is in its atmosphere, and how Jupiter’s magnetic field affects its atmosphere.

### Guided Questions

What is the general topic of this passage? How does knowing the topic help you decide which meanings of words to use?

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Does the writer use words with strong figurative and connotative meanings or words with more literal meanings? Why?

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Answer and discuss these questions about the passage.

1. How does what you already know about a tail enable you to visualize the tail of a comet?

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2. What is the general meaning of the word *atmosphere*? How is the technical meaning of the word different?

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3. What technical vocabulary is used in various sports? List some words that have special technical meanings and the sport that's associated with each word.

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## On Your Own

Whether you are writing or speaking, the words you use count. You probably know from experience that you can hurt someone's feelings by accident, just by the wrong choice of words. In writing you often want to get across a specific idea or impression. The passage below describes a hike in the desert. As you read, think about how the author's words help communicate the feeling and experience of this landscape.



### A Hike in the Mojave Desert

My lips, eyes, and ears were painted with gritty sand, making me a crusty, cracked, and aged shadow of my former self. My skin felt like it had metamorphosed into that of the desert horned lizard that curiously poked his head out of his burrow to observe me.

Everything moves in slow motion in the Mojave Desert. Maybe it's because of the searing heat that smacks you into submission, imprinting tiny dots on every inch of your skin with a sizzling sound. Or maybe it's because your brain slows to a snail's pace in such a mesmerizing, brown landscape. There is no canopy, no place to rest or to escape the sun's rays that burn holes through your clothing. Even with a hat on, the water my dad poured over my parched scalp felt like a trickle when I wanted a downpour.

Nothing smart stands out (or up) here. Plants hug the ground for dear life. Trees are small and thick as if to brace themselves. Most animals are nocturnal. They spend their days waiting for the cool of the evening to venture out. A few raptors made lazy circles above us. Did I, Marcus, look like prey? I hoped not, but still, I began to walk a little faster toward our campground.



Complete the following activities.

- 1 What does the author compare his skin to in this passage, and how does it help get across the author's message?

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- 2 How do you think that you, as a writer, could begin to write in a descriptive way like this about nature?

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- 3 The writing in this passage is effective because it uses a lot of

- A technical terms.
- B figurative language.
- C literal words.
- D background knowledge.

- 4 The words *burrow* and *canopy* are

- A idioms.
- B technical words.
- C synonyms.
- D figurative words.



- 5 Rewrite the first paragraph of “A Hike in the Mojave Desert” using only literal language, and then discuss with your partner why it is more or less effective than the original.

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- 6 What form of descriptive writing is used in tall tales such as “Paul Bunyan,” and why do you think it’s used so much?

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**Elevate**

- 7 With a partner, discuss your favorite environments or places in nature. Choose one and write a paragraph describing it. Underline any technical words you include and highlight the descriptive language used to help convey the feeling of the place. When you both finish, read your paragraph aloud to your partner. Speak clearly and at an appropriate pace. Then discuss which descriptive parts you liked best in each other’s writing and why. Take turns helping each other think of places where more descriptive language might be added. Then rewrite your paragraphs to include the new descriptions.