# CHOOSING THE BEST WORDS: DENOTATIONS AND CONNOTATIONS

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Careful writers choose words both for what they mean (that is, their dictionary meanings, or denotations) and for what they suggest (their connotations, or emotional associations). For instance, "slim," "scrawny," and "svelte" all have related denotative meanings (thin, let's say) but different connotative meanings. And if we're trying to pay someone a compliment, we better get the connotation right.

Here's another example. The following words and phrases all refer to "a young person," but their connotations may be quite different depending, in part, on the context in which they appear: *youngster, child, kid, little one, small fry, brat, urchin, juvenile, minor*. Some of these words tend to carry favorable connotations (*little one*), others unfavorable (*brat*), and still others fairly neutral connotations (*child*). But referring to an adult as a *child* can be insulting, while calling a young person a *brat* lets our readers know at once how we feel about the rotten kid.

Working with the three passages below will help make you more aware of the importance of choosing words carefully for what they imply or suggest as well as for what they mean according to the dictionary.

**Instructions:**
Each of the short passages below (in italics) is fairly objective and colorless, using words with neutral connotations. Your job is to write *two* new versions of each passage: first, using words with positive connotations to show the subject in an attractive light; second, using words with negative connotations to describe the same subject in a less favorable way. The guidelines following each passage should help you focus your revisions.

**A.** *Gus cooked dinner for Merdine. He prepared some meat and vegetables and a special dessert.*
(1) Describe the meal that Gus prepared, making it sound appetizing by using words with favorable connotations.
(2) Describe the meal again, this time using words with negative connotations to make it sound quite unappealing.

**B.** *The person did not weigh very much. The person had brown hair and a small nose. The person wore informal clothing.*
(1) Identify and describe this particularly *attractive* person.
(2) Identify and describe this particularly *unattractive* person.

**C.** *Douglas was careful with his money. He kept his money in a safe place. He bought only the necessities of life. He never borrowed or lent money.*
(1) Choose words that show how impressed you are by Douglas's sense of thrift.
(2) Choose words that make fun of Douglas or pass scorn on him for being such a tightwad.