

## Determining Word Meanings: Figurative, Connotative & Technical

**CCSS**

RI.6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

Theme: *The Power of Music*

Think about the lyrics to your favorite song. What pictures or images do they bring to mind? How do the words make you feel?

Writers use words in different ways, depending on their purpose. They might use words with a **figurative meaning** that is different from their literal, or usual, meaning. They might use words with a **technical meaning** when writing about a specific subject area, like music. Sometimes writers choose words with a positive or negative **connotative meaning** to show how they feel about the topic. You can figure out an author's intended meaning by thinking about the word's **context**, or the text that comes before and after it.

**Look at the picture below and read how the boy and girl describe the music. Circle words and clues in the picture that tell you how each person feels about the music.**



The words *intense* and *earsplitting* are both ways of saying that something is loud. But *intense* suggests positive feelings, while *earsplitting* suggests negative ones. Although they have similar meanings, the words have different connotations.

**Look again at how the girl describes the music. Are her ears literally splitting?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What does she really mean?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why do you think she uses that word?** \_\_\_\_\_

The word *earsplitting* is a figurative expression. It is an exaggeration used to describe something unpleasantly loud.

Knowing the literal meaning of a word or phrase is not always enough. It's also a good idea to pay attention to the context in which that word or phrase appears. Context will help you figure out if the author is using a word for its technical, connotative, or figurative meaning.



Read the first two paragraphs of an account about the famous musician Chuck Berry.

Genre: Historical Account

## The Father of Rock and Roll *by LaTisha Hammond*

Rock musicians can trace their roots back to one individual: Chuck Berry. He rose to stardom in the 1950s with music featuring driving beats and catchy guitar riffs—short series of notes that repeat throughout a song. Berry’s groundbreaking sound combined rhythm and blues with country music. As a guitarist, he was known for his phrasing. Aerosmith guitarist Joe Perry describes the way Berry grouped notes into quick bursts as “that double-note stop, where you get the two notes bending against each other and they make that rock & roll sound.”

Berry’s clever lyrics about high school and dancing also won over teenage audiences. The words to his songs told the stories of their generation. “Everything I wrote about wasn’t about me, but about the people listening,” said Berry.

*(continued)*

**Explore how to answer this question:** “What does the author mean when she says that Chuck Berry ‘was known for his phrasing’?”

The sentence says that, as a guitarist, Berry was known for his phrasing. The usual meaning of *phrasing* is “putting a group of words together.” What does this term mean in music?

**The author is using a word’s technical meaning here. In order to understand that meaning, look for clues in the sentences that come before and after it. Fill in the context chart.**

Example	Context Clues
“As a guitarist, he was known for his phrasing.”	

**On the lines below, state the technical meaning of the word *phrasing*. Then explain how the context helped you figure it out.**

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Continue reading about Chuck Berry. Use the Close Reading and the Hint to help you answer the question.

### Close Reading

The author says Berry “shined a light on many rock stars’ paths.” How can the context help you understand this figurative expression?

*(continued from page 96)*

Berry also revolutionized guitar showmanship with his signature “duck walk.” It involved playing guitar while squatting and moving forward. One leg would swing back and forth in the air while he hopped on the other.

Chuck Berry has shined a light on many rock stars’ paths. Even the Beatles’ John Lennon credited Berry’s sound and style. He said, “If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it ‘Chuck Berry.’”

### Hint

Substitute each choice for the phrase in the text to see which meaning makes sense.

**Circle the correct answer.**

Based on the text, which of the following is closest to the figurative meaning of the phrase “shined a light on many rock stars’ paths”?

- A** made it possible for musicians to play rock and roll for a living
- B** drew attention to the talents of other rock musicians, making them famous
- C** helped musicians learn their craft by studying his songwriting and performing
- D** exposed the secrets of rock musicians and the music business



### Show Your Thinking

Look at the answer that you chose above. Explain how the context in the paragraph helped you understand the meaning of “shined a light on many rock stars’ paths.”

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With a partner, discuss other words from both parts of the account that have figurative, technical, or connotative meanings.



Read the text. Use the Study Buddy and the Close Reading to guide your reading.



*Authors use words with connotative meaning to show how they feel about a topic. As I read, I'll look for words that suggest the author's feelings about guitars.*

Genre: Historical Account

## The Evolution of the Guitar *by Pat Frisell*

- 1 Guitars are dynamic, evolving instruments. Today, guitars are flat-bodied wonders with fretted necks and six strings. Frets are metal pieces cut into the neck at specific intervals. By pressing a string down onto a fret, guitarists change the string's length. This changes its tone when it vibrates.
- 2 The guitar has a rich history that dates back to ancient times, but the first instruments that modern audiences would recognize as guitars developed in the 15th century. They arrived in Spain from Northern Africa. Initially, some had only four strings and were much smaller than guitars today. Guitars were all acoustic—that is, their melodic sound was made from string vibrations in their hollow bodies. People used them to accompany songs and poetry.
- 3 Acoustic guitars delight the ears but are not very loud. By the 20th century, they were often drowned out by trumpets, pianos, and even singers. Few could actually hear them.
- 4 This changed in the 1920s when Lloyd Loar designed the first magnetic pickup, which could capture the acoustic guitar's string vibrations and amplify them electronically through speakers. A guitar could now hold its own with louder instruments. This was the birth of the electric guitar.
- 5 Now, guitarists can either amplify their acoustic hollow-body guitars with pickups or play solid-body electric guitars. The ways guitars sound, and even how they are built, continue to develop in fascinating ways.

### Close Reading

What does the context suggest about the meaning of the phrase "drowned out" as it is used in paragraph 3?

What does a magnetic pickup do to the sound of a guitar? **Circle** sentences that explain this technical term.





### Hints

Which choice contains words that show the author's personal feelings about guitars?

Look for clues before and after this phrase in the text that help you understand its figurative meaning.

*Amplify* is used twice by the author. Find both instances and think about their context.

Use the Hints on this page to help you answer the questions.

- 1 Which words from the account have positive connotations?
  - A *fretted, acoustic, vibrations, amplify*
  - B *evolving, specific, modern, solid*
  - C *wonders, rich, delight, fascinating*
  - D *ancient, smaller, hollow, louder*
  
- 2 What does the author mean when he writes that guitars were often “drowned out” by singers and other instruments?
  - A There was a chance that guitars would be replaced by other instruments.
  - B The moisture in a hollow-body guitar kept it from being loud enough.
  - C It was difficult to hear acoustic guitars over other instruments and voices.
  - D Other instruments were becoming more popular than the acoustic guitar.
  
- 3 Describe the technical meaning of the word *amplify*. Include two context clues from the account that help you provide its definition.

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Read this excerpt from a book. Then answer the questions that follow.

## from *The Power of Music*

by *Elena Mannes*

1 Many musicians have an instinctive understanding of how musical sound interacts with our bodies. They know—they feel—that sound impacts our bodies in a way no other art does. Opera singer Irene Gubrud says, “As a very young child, I experienced who I was through sound. I felt whole.”

2 Daniel Bernard Roumain, a young cross-genre violinist who is known as DBR, thinks one reason music is so powerful is that sound actually penetrates our bodies: “You know when someone says that a piece of music ‘touched me’ or ‘moved me,’ it’s very literal. The sound of my voice enters your ear canal and it’s moving your eardrum. That’s a very intimate act. I am very literally touching you, and when you speak to me, you are literally touching me. And then we extend that principle to the sound of a violin.”

3 The conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim believes that our early connection to sound is another reason for its power—one that in today’s world we sometimes forget. He thinks that because we live in a very visual society we’re more aware of what we see than what we hear. But he reminds us that the latest scientific evidence reveals that the ear, which we now know is active even in the womb, has an advantage over the eye. He also says: “The ear has a head start over the eye, which doesn’t see anything until it comes out. The eye is also something that one can control more fully. If you don’t like the way I look, and you don’t want to see me, you close your eyes and I disappear. But if you don’t like my voice and you’re in the same room, then you cannot shut your ears in a natural way. Sound literally penetrates the human body.”

4 This human relationship to sound starts early. The fetus begins to develop an auditory system between seventeen and nineteen weeks. Already we are in a world of sound, of breath and heartbeat, of rhythm and vibration. But how do we know what the fetus actually hears? Until recently, there were different theories. Some doctors thought that the fetus could hear only some frequencies, probably high ones. It certainly wasn’t known whether we could hear and respond to music before birth until the groundbreaking research of Sheila Woodward, a South African, who wanted to know more about musical sound in the womb. She was a young scientist in the early 1990s—and pregnant; she wondered what music her own child was being exposed to before birth. In her studies at the University of Capetown, she worked with the Institute for Maritime Technology to adapt an underwater microphone so it could be placed in the uterus. . . .

5 As we listen to the recordings that Woodward conducted with several mothers in early stages of labor, we first hear the rhythmic sound of blood coursing through the uterine artery. Says Woodward, “Nature allows us to evolve with rhythm all around us.” And her recordings reveal that a landscape of musical sound does indeed surround the fetus. Along with the natural womb sounds, we can hear the strains of a Bach Brandenburg Concerto being played, or the melody of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” as Woodward sings in a normal tone of voice. The recordings show that the very high frequencies, like the sharp attack of an instrument, are attenuated and sound a bit muffled. The overall effect is like listening to music underwater. But when listening to the human voice, one can still detect whether it’s a woman or a man. And the tonal quality of the voice comes through.



6 Just because the sound of music exists in the womb doesn't necessarily mean that the fetus hears it. Yet, the "startle response" of the fetus was measured as well, and Woodward's team found that when music was played, the fetal heart rate became slightly elevated. Woodward says it was clear that the fetus reacted, as if to say, "Something's happened and now there's music!" Other studies show that even if only the mother hears music—if she has headphones on, and it is music that she finds soothing—the baby's heart rate lowers while the mother is listening. If the mother finds a certain piece of music stressful, the baby's heart rate goes up. So the fetus is echoing the mother's response to the quality of the music.

7 Woodward is convinced that we begin learning about music even before birth. She points out that even when music that can penetrate the womb is absent, the fetus is surrounded by those natural rhythms of the body—heartbeat and pulse and breath.

Answer the questions. Mark your answers to questions 1–4 on the Answer Form to the right.

**Answer Form**

1 (A) (B) (C) (D)

2 (A) (B) (C) (D)

3 (A) (B) (C) (D)

4 (A) (B) (C) (D)

**Number  
Correct**

/ 4

1

In paragraph 1, when opera singer Irene Gubrud says "I felt whole," what does she mean?

- A She always knew she would grow up to sing opera.
- B She realized that nothing was missing from her life.
- C She understood that sound affected her body.
- D She believed that opera was the best type of music.

2

Read this sentence from paragraph 5.

The overall effect is like listening to music underwater.

What does this sentence tell the reader about how the music sounded?

- A The music sounded like waves.
- B The music sounded loud and thunderous.
- C The music sounded muted and distant.
- D The music sounded mysterious.



3

Which sentence from the book excerpt shows the author's positive feeling about music?

- A "They know—they feel—that sound impacts our bodies in a way no other art does."
- B "He thinks that because we live in a very visual society we're more aware of what we see than what we hear."
- C "This human relationship to sound starts early."
- D "Woodward is convinced that we begin learning about music even before birth."

4

Which phrase from the book excerpt **best** helps a reader understand the meaning of the term "startle response"?

- A "the fetal heart rate became slightly elevated"
- B "the baby's heart rate lowers while the mother is listening"
- C "the mother finds a certain piece of music stressful"
- D "the fetus is echoing the mother's response"

5

The author uses the phrase "tonal quality" in paragraph 5. Review the context surrounding the phrase. Then explain the meaning of this technical term in your own words.

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 **Self Check** *Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 93.*