Academic Resources for Language Arts Instruction

1.21 Recognizing Slanted Words

Objectives

Create an awareness of how the slanting of verbs and nouns can be used to depict people favorably or unfavorably.

Practice casting negatively slanted words into favorable terms.

Materials needed

Copies of the handout

Time needed

Ten to twenty minutes

Instructor directions

Ask your students to imagine they are observers preparing to report on a hypothetical political, military, religious, or social activist organization or incident.

Discuss how the reporter's perspective influences how an audience perceives the organization or incident.

Have them cast sentences from positive (approving) and negative (disapproving) points of view. Compare the results and discuss.

Writing for Change

RAISING AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCE, POWER, AND DISCRIMINATION

1.21 Recognizing Slanted Words Handout

Directions

Imagine you are an observer, preparing to write a report describing an incident you witnessed or an organization you saw operating.

Choose two or three of the paired phrases below. Cast two sentences for each pair of phrases, the first from the perspective of someone who disapproves or is not in favor of the activity, the second from the perspective of someone who approves or is in favor of the activity.

cult vs. denomination

demonstrate vs. riot

throwing a tantrum vs. objecting to management's decision

stalked out vs. left abruptly

hysterical vs. adamant

halted vs. paralyzed

preaches vs. advocates

muzzled vs. suppressed

rampaged vs. marched

enthusiast vs. fanatic

assertive vs. abrasive

threaten vs. warn

made a scene vs. stood their ground

zealot vs. patriot

Answer the following questions:

How can verbs, as well as nouns, be used to convey an attitude, bias, or agenda?

How can the use of slanted words influence how a person, organization, or incident is perceived?

1.22 Recognizing Slanted Words II

Objectives

Create an awareness of how the slanting of verbs and nouns can be used to depict people favorably or unfavorably.

Identify instances of slanting in online news media.

Materials needed

Pen and paper or copies of the handout

Internet access

Time needed

Ten to twenty minutes

Instructor directions

Have your students conduct some Internet research before class and bring an article describing a political, military, religious, or social activist organization or incident.

Ask them to be ready to discuss the use of slanting in the article.

1.22 Recognizing Slanted Words II Handout

Directions

Before class, do some Internet research and bring an article describing a political, military, religious, or social activist organization or incident.

Answer the following questions:

What verbs are used to describe the actions of each of the participating groups or parties?

What connotations (implications) do the verbs carry?

What nouns and pronouns are used to describe each of the participating groups or parties?

What connotations do the words carry?

Are each of the participating groups or parties presented with the same level of formality, familiarity, or respect?

How are direct quotes used to present the groups or parties favorably or unfavorably?

What is the proportion of subjective to objective verbs? Nouns?

What is the reporter's or news service's attitude, demeanor, or tone toward each of the parties?

How does this attitude, demeanor, or tone affect readers' perceptions of the events being reported? How does it reflect on the objectivity of the reporter or news service?

We and Thee

Web Exclusive!

Looking at labels and stereotypes and their effects on students. (February 2001)

by Florence Johnson and Sally Redfern

Ninth graders at our high school in northwestern Florida are more than familiar with labels. As "Baby Rams," they are often the target of jokes and taunts from the upperclassmen Rutherford Rams.

Most of them belong -- whether by choice or by "assignment" -- to subgroups that define the world in terms of insiders and outsiders. The "rednecks" are not on friendly terms with the "preps" or "grungies," and the "nerds" keep to themselves. A different kind of barrier often separates our ESL and English-speaking students.

The social stratifications of high school life are often relatively benign, but they can form the basis for more harmful patterns of thinking. Another teacher and I sought to address this issue through a study of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The conflict in this timeless drama hinges on a deep-seated perception of "us and them."

We began the unit by discussing stereotypes. First we talked about the different labels we apply to people based on the way they dress or speak or the crowd they associate with. Then the students wrote down as many labels as they could think of in five minutes.

Next we defined some of the terms the students had jotted down. A "freak" or "weirdo" could be a strange person *or* a person who simply wanted to do his or her own thing. On the other hand, a "poser" or "wannabe" was universally viewed as a superficial person. We also defined "metalheads," "military brats" and "jocks."

We talked frankly about the various labels class members had "earned" and whether they were appropriate or not. One young woman voiced frustration at being considered an "airhead" because she is a cheerleader, even though she is an honor student. A male classmate quickly took offense at being labeled "normal" and assured us that he absolutely did not fit into that category.

This discussion of labeling provided the perfect lead-in to *Romeo and Juliet*. The reason for the "ancient grudge" between the Capulet and Montague families has long been forgotten, but the mutual animosity is obvious in the opening scene.

When servants from the two families get into a brawl, Benvolio -- Romeo's cousin and a Montague -- tries to break up the fight: "I do but keep the peace. Put up thy sword / or manage it to part these men with me."

Tybalt, Juliet's cousin and a Capulet, replies, "What, drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word / As I hate hell, all Montagues and thee."

After many twists and turns, the drama concludes with Romeo and Juliet -- who have fallen in love and married secretly -- and four other people dead. But the bonds of grief finally unite the two families and bring "a glooming peace." Romeo and Juliet "doth with their death bury their parents' strife."

In our follow-up discussion about the destructive power of such unreasonable hatred, many students revealed that they felt pressure from family and peers to avoid associating with people of other races. A nearby military base has brought in people from all over the world, so our young people face their own cultural conflict: "Southern hospitality" vs. a long-standing suspicion of outsiders.

We also discussed the importance of communication in building understanding. If there had not been so much deception among the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, the six deaths could perhaps have been prevented. We brought this into the present by looking at problems that hinder communication among young people -- language, social class, gangs, cliques and the gender gap.

As a final activity, students wrote personal essays about the divisiveness of labels and stereotypes. Many said they had never realized how much they labeled others or how much it hurt people and hindered understanding, and that they were determined to be more tolerant.

Some of the most touching papers were from biracial students. One girl wrote, "I can't do that. Saying I am only white would be denying my father, a wonderful black man whom I love and admire." Another said, "I've always been used to blacks and whites and Hispanics intermingling because of my family and my culture. Here it's so different. Your friends try to make you choose one group."

Through the vehicle of a 400-year-old drama, our students gained new insight into the concept of "us and them." If, through the use of literature, we can help young people to be more tolerant of those who are different, we are giving them much more than language arts skills.

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http://www.tolerance.org/teach/expand/act/activity.jsp?cid=169