

TUTORIAL

Quick reminder! Denotation is the dictionary definition of a word (what the word literally means).

Most teachers will provide a list of vocabulary words to go along with a book or assigned reading, and then ask that students take the time to look up the definitions for each word on the list. Most words have multiple denotations (meanings or uses), so instead of jotting down the first meaning that appears for each term, take some time to determine which meaning (or denotation) is the right one.

To determine the denotation of a vocabulary word, you'll first need to look it up in the dictionary and read the whole definition, which includes reading the different or alternative meanings. In order to decide which of those possible meanings (or denotations) best matches the meaning implied by the author, you'll want to compare those meanings with the way the author uses that word. The best way to do that is by reading sentences containing that vocabulary word in the book or assigned reading.

Let's look at this plan in action!

Here are two vocabulary words pulled from the short story "Wakefield" by Nathaniel Hawthorne: **Bosom** and **Meager**. Let's first look at the denotations listed within each term's definition, and then compare them to the way the author uses the terms in the sentences provided.

BOSOM

Bosom denotes the following meanings when used as a **NOUN**: the human chest; a woman's breasts; where emotions and affection are located; the part of an article of clothing that covers the chest.

Bosom denotes the following meanings when used as a **VERB**: embrace; to carry in one's heart (figuratively).

Bosom denotes the following meaning when used as an **ADJECTIVE**: intimate.

Let's look at how the author used it in a sentence:

- Only the wife of his **bosom** might have hesitated.
- Furthermore, he is rendered obstinate by a sulkiness occasionally incident to his temper, and brought on at present by the inadequate sensation which he conceives to have been produced in the **bosom** of Mrs. Wakefield.

It seems that the author used the word **bosom** to denote where emotions and affections are located. Notice that **bosom** is used as a noun, and not a verb or an adjective, which helps narrow down the denotations.

MEAGER

Meager denotes the following meanings when used as an **ADJECTIVE**: having little flesh; thin; lacking desirable qualities.

Let's look at how the author used it in a sentence:

He is meager; his low and narrow forehead is deeply wrinkled; his eyes, small and lusterless, sometimes wander apprehensively about him, but oftener seem to look inward.

This term is a good example of how an author might use a single term to imply several meanings at the same time. It is easy to imagine that Wakefield is a man frail with age (and is therefore thin); but judging from his actions, he also seems to lack desirable qualities, such as loyalty, selflessness, or consideration.