Denotation and Connotation

To write good descriptions, you must be able to use words discriminatingly. Good description calls for evocative words that capture feelings about people and things. They should arouse the reader's emotions. One way to do this is to understand the difference between the denotative and connotative meanings of words.



Denotative Meaning:

Dictionary meaning of the word. Example: 1. heart: an organ that circulates blood throughout the body. Here the word "heart" denotes the actual organ, while in another context, the word "heart" may connote feelings of love or heartache.

Connotative Meaning: **What the word suggests.** Take for example the words house/ home. The dictionary says they are, "buildings intended as a dwelling." However, the word "home's" connotation brings up feelings of warmth, love, belonging and happiness. By choosing the word "home" in

your writing, you are helping your readers to make an emotional attachment to your work.

Another example:

Connotations relate not to a word's actual meaning, or denotation, but rather to the **ideas or qualities that are implied** by that word.

A good example is the word "gold." The denotation of gold is a malleable, ductile, yellow element. The connotations, however, are the ideas associated with gold, such as greed, luxury, or avarice.

Think about the following words. What are their denotative and connotative meanings?

pig		
rat		
woman	babe	
saver	cheap	
car	Corvette	
dog	puppy	Pitbull
ocean		
snow		
rose		

Connotations: What do the following connote?

church ocean test rose snow oily mother love honesty youth citizen tide

Notice the gradations of difference between words:

Stout corpulent, fat, obese, plump, chubby, fleshy

Thin, slender, slim, lean, lank, gaunt, emaciated

Dog, mongrel, pup, puppy, mutt, canine, whelp

Old, ancient, stale, obsolete, antique, elderly, senile

Late, tardy, slow, dilatory, belated, overdue.

Word Choices

Experienced writers know that our work needs to be cut, added to, polished, reworked. **Even the slightest change can add depth or give your readers more information**. Supposing you want to get your character, John, up a hill fast - there are many ways to do it.

Version 1: John was running up the hill. (Okay, John is getting to the top of the hill fast where we want him. But is the writing as strong as we want it? It depends on the image we are trying to create in the reader's mind.)

Version 2: John ran up the hill. (Was +verb+ing is weak. Ran without the was and the ing is better.)

Version 3: John catapulted himself up the hill. (It implies John put himself into a machine and somehow launched himself up the hill, however, the force with which he got up the hill is stronger.)

Version 4: John bounded up the hill. (We see John as athletic taking the hill like Superman.)

Version 5: John sprinted up the hill. (Makes the hill seem smaller if he can reach the top with a sprint.)