

## Literal and Nonliteral Language

### Key Terms

- **literal language:** words and phrases that reflect the dictionary definitions of words and mean exactly what they say
- **nonliteral language:** words and phrases that mean one thing but are used for effect to describe something else (i.e., idioms)
- **context clues:** words and phrases that help you figure out the meaning of unknown language

### Instruction

When you look up a word in the dictionary, you will find its literal meaning. **Literal language** is language that means exactly what it says. It uses words by their dictionary definitions. “I am going to the store” is literal language.

The opposite of literal language is **nonliteral language**. These are words and phrases that do not mean exactly what they say. You probably hear these words and phrases all the time. For example, say you are really angry at your friend. He might tell you to “chill.” The dictionary meaning of *chill* is “to become cold.” Your friend is not telling you to put yourself into your freezer. He is telling you to relax. He is using *chill* as nonliteral language.

People use nonliteral words and phrases for many reasons. Nonliteral words and phrases help express feelings. They help show how one thing is like another. They also help create images in a reader’s mind. They can make a text more fun to read.

This table shows some nonliteral phrases and the literal meaning of each. Think about how the phrases have the same meaning but use different language.



Nonliteral Language	Literal Language
hit the hay	go to sleep
having butterflies in the stomach	feeling nervous
shake a leg	leave very fast
sell like hotcakes	sell quickly
rain cats and dogs	rain very hard
spill the beans	tell a secret

### Using Context Clues to Understand Nonliteral Language

Sometimes you might not know what a nonliteral word or phrase means. As a reader, you can find **context clues** in the sentence to help you. Look for other important words and phrases in the sentence. They can help you understand the meaning of the unknown word or phrase.

Read the two sentences below.

Sentence 1: The used car didn't start, so Mom returned that lemon.

Sentence 2: Mom squeezed the juice of the lemon into her water.

Which sentence uses the word *lemon* literally, and which uses it nonliterally? Look for context clues in the sentence. Then, apply your own knowledge of words and phrases. This will help you figure out the meaning of *lemon* in each sentence.

	Sentence 1: "lemon"	Sentence 2: "lemon"
<b>Context Clues</b>	The car didn't start.	Mom squeezed juice.
<b>Your Knowledge</b>	Things that don't start are bad.	Lemon juice comes from an actual fruit.
<b>What Does the Word Mean?</b>	A lemon is something that is bad and doesn't work.	A lemon is a fruit that can be squeezed into liquid.
<b>Literal or Nonliteral?</b>	Nonliteral	Literal



The dictionary meaning of *lemon* is “a type of fruit,” so Sentence 2 is literal. However, you might not know that a car that won’t start is often called a “lemon.” Instead, you can use context clues to understand the nonliteral language. Sentence 1 uses a nonliteral meaning of *lemon*.

Nonliteral language can be very powerful. Think about the image and taste in your mouth when you hear the word *lemon*. The fruit is very sour. It doesn’t taste very good on its own. A “lemon” is an entertaining way to describe a machine that doesn’t work well.

### Activity #1

Read the poem. Then answer the questions.

#### “The Rainbow” by Christina Rossetti

Boats sail on the rivers,  
And ships sail on the seas;  
But clouds that sail across the sky  
Are prettier than these.

There are bridges on the rivers,           5  
As pretty as you please;  
But the bow that bridges heaven,  
And overtops the trees,  
And builds a road from earth to sky,  
Is prettier far than these.           10

1. What is the meaning of the word *sail* in lines 1–2? Is it literal or nonliteral language? How do you know?

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2. What is the meaning of the word *sail* in line 3? Is it literal or nonliteral language? How do you know?

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**Activity #2**

Write a paragraph in which you use at least two examples of nonliteral language. Underline the nonliteral words and phrases.

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