

6.2 Antonymy

key words: antonyms, formal/informal language, dictionaries, meaning

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2g Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed to check and correct spellings. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4d Use glossaries or beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/4/d>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.5c Distinguish shades of meaning among related words that describe states of mind or degrees of certainty (e.g., *knew, believed, suspected, heard, wondered*).
<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3c Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion).
<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/3/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5c Demonstrate understanding of words by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) and to words with similar but not identical meanings (synonyms).
<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.5c Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homographs) to better understand each of the words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/5/c>

We all know what opposites are: *big-little, happy-sad, beginning-end*. But there are some interesting different kinds of relationships among pairs of opposites. All languages share these same kinds of meaning relationships.

Some antonyms are **gradable**; that is, the opposites are two ends on a scale and there can be various gradations of each term. *Big* and *little* are like this, so something can be *very big, biggest, littler*, and so on. Compare that to antonyms that are **complementary** antonyms. These are not gradable – you are either *dead* or *alive*, but you can't be *deader than someone* or *very alive*.

In informal speech, we do sometimes use degree words like *very* or *so* even with complementary antonyms: *She is very pregnant. Your homework is very complete. That raccoon is completely dead*. What is conveyed by the degree words in these examples, which serve to express degree on adjectives that are supposedly not able to express degree? Can they express degree? Why? In what contexts?

Various parts of speech can have antonyms. For the following pairs, label the part of speech and the type of antonym (gradable or complementary).

smart/dumb

dead/alive

often/rarely

before/after
fat/thin
permit/prohibit
day/night
precede/follow
up/down
send/receive
tall/short
beginning/end
rich/poor