



Ambiguity: Lesson Plan

Topic	
<p>An expression is ambiguous if the proper way to interpret it is unclear, making it able to be understood in at least two different ways. In this lesson, we cover three types of ambiguity. An expression may have ambiguous vocabulary if words in the sentence can mean different things, giving the expression different means. It may have ambiguous word order if the words in the expression are arranged in a way that makes the exact meaning unclear. And, finally, it may have an ambiguous description if the description does not provide enough information to make clear what a relevant term or phrase means in that context.</p>	
Possible subjects/classes	Time needed
English, History, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology	30-45 minutes
Video link:	
https://academy4sc.org/topic/ambiguity-thats-not-what-i-meant/	
Objective: <i>What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?</i>	
<p>Students will be able to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain and identify the three types of ambiguity. • Articulate how to avoid ambiguity and the importance of doing so. • Reflect on instances of ambiguity in their own speech and decide how to correct them. 	
Key Concepts & Vocabulary	
Clarity	
Materials Needed	
Worksheet	
Before you watch	



Ask students to think of something that happened in their life recently. It can be exciting or something ordinary that they do every day. Then ask them to write a headline as if they had to write a news article about the event. But here's the catch: the headline has to be ambiguous. Then they must share their headline with the person next to them who has to guess what the headline is about.

While you watch

1. Define ambiguity.
2. What are some ambiguous words mentioned that can take on different meanings in different sentences?

After you watch/discussion questions

1. Why is it important to avoid ambiguity when you're trying to get your point across?
2. What are some circumstances in which you'd want to use ambiguity? Defend your answer.
3. How can you avoid making ambiguous statements?

Activity Ideas

- Write out an excerpt from a favorite book, poem, or song (4 to 8 sentences or lines long). Then briefly explain what the writer wants the audience to take away from that excerpt. Keeping in mind the goal of the text or lyrics, carefully go through each sentence/line and decide whether it clearly conveys that point. Circle ambiguous words or descriptions and write in more precise substitutes. Underline ambiguously arranged sentences and rewrite them so that they only produce one, clear meaning. After correcting for ambiguity, pick one significant correction and explain what other meaning the sentence/line could have taken on had you not revised it, and describe how this other meaning would have affected the meaning of the excerpt overall.
- Complete the activity about Aristotle's use of the word "healthy" on the corresponding Worksheet.

Sources/places to learn more

1. David Marsh and Amelia Hodsdon, *Guardian Style* (Guardian Books, 2010). James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley, and Michael B. Smith, *Semantics: A Coursebook*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2007).



2. Sanford Schane, "Ambiguity and Misunderstanding in the Law," in *Thomas Jefferson Law Review* 26, no. 1 (2002). Link:
<http://idiom.ucsd.edu/~schane/law/ambiguity.pdf>
3. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New Directions, 1947).