Words Shape Land

Trace how related terms guide a public debate.

12.L.V.3.b "Analyze relationships between words to determine connotative and denotative meanings for words and/or phrases across a variety of contexts. (I)"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Circle every use of "vacant," "commons," "reclaim," "cleanup," "clearing," "wild," and "unmanaged," and write +, −, or 0 above each to show the association created by its context. Draw lines connecting "vacant" with "commons," "cleanup" with "clearing," and "wild" with "unmanaged," then use nearby words as evidence.

Naming the Rail Yard

1. At a public meeting, residents discussed a proposal to turn a former rail yard into a public wetland. The planning document described the fenced property as "vacant," noting that no trains had used its tracks for decades. A neighborhood gardener objected that the word ignored the foxes, grasses, and informal walking paths already there. She called the area "the commons," even though the city, not the public, legally owned it. Both phrases referred to the same parcel, but each invited listeners to picture a different relationship between people and the land.

2. The proposal promised to "reclaim" the corridor by removing contaminated soil and opening a trail. The rail company had abandoned the tracks decades earlier, but the gardener reminded the meeting that neighbors had long used the paths. A construction manager preferred "cleanup" for the soil work, while several residents said "clearing" when they worried about bulldozers removing shrubs. Both groups expected trucks to take material away. Still, cleanup appeared beside references to safer soil and a reopened trail. Clearing appeared beside shrubs, bulldozers, and the residents' fear that the project would erase a habitat.

3. Later, a council member praised a design that would keep part of the site "wild" and place benches near the trail. An opposing speaker called that same plan "unmanaged," arguing that tall plants could hide litter and reduce sightlines. The council member pointed to nesting birds and plants that grow without regular mowing. The opposing speaker pointed to a broken fence and an overflowing trash bin near the old tracks. Neither speaker disputed that the vegetation would receive limited maintenance. Their disagreement rested on the picture each word created: a living habitat for one speaker, and a neglected public space for the other.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do “vacant” and “commons” differ in denotative focus and connotative effect when they describe the rail yard?

2. Beyond restoring damaged land to use, what does “reclaim” suggest about the corridor’s past? Use one detail from paragraph 2.

3. Compare the connotations of “cleanup” and “clearing.” Which context clues make one sound restorative and the other potentially harmful?

4. Both “wild” and “unmanaged” refer to vegetation receiving limited maintenance. How does each word support a different position on the plan?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write exactly two sentences about the same proposed change to a public place. In the first sentence, use one term for the change, and in the second, use a closely related term with a different connotation; make clear what both terms literally describe.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 12 · 12.L.V.3.b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Circle every use of "vacant," "commons," "reclaim," "cleanup," "clearing," "wild," and "unmanaged," and write +, −, or 0 above each to show the association created by its context. Draw lines connecting "vacant" with "commons," "cleanup" with "clearing," and "wild" with "unmanaged," then use nearby words as evidence. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do "vacant" and "commons" differ in denotative focus and connotative effect when they describe the rail yard?	**"Vacant" focuses on the lack of train use and suggests emptiness or little value. "Commons" presents the area as a shared resource and suggests public belonging, although the city legally owns it.**
2	Beyond restoring damaged land to use, what does "reclaim" suggest about the corridor's past? Use one detail from paragraph 2.	**It suggests recovering something that was lost or once belonged to someone. The reminder that neighbors had long used the paths raises the question of whose claim to the corridor matters.**
3	Compare the connotations of "cleanup" and "clearing." Which context clues make one sound restorative and the other potentially harmful?	**"Cleanup" sounds restorative because it appears with safer soil and a reopened trail. "Clearing" can sound harmful because it appears with bulldozers, shrubs, and fear of erasing habitat.**
4	Both "wild" and "unmanaged" refer to vegetation receiving limited maintenance. How does each word support a different position on the plan?	**"Wild" supports the plan by suggesting a natural habitat with nesting birds. "Unmanaged" opposes the plan by suggesting neglect, litter, hidden areas, and poor oversight.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Supporters call the new street design a "greenway" because it replaces parking spaces with trees, bike lanes, and paths. Critics call the same change a "road diet," a term that still means reducing vehicle lanes but suggests loss and restriction.

Accept defensible analyses that distinguish literal reference from the positive, negative, or neutral associations created by nearby context. For Part 3, accept any accurate pair of related terms if the response has exactly two sentences and clearly explains the shared denotation and contrasting connotations.