Words in the Dark

Trace how word choices shape meaning and tone in a short story.

9-10.RC.12 "Analyze the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in works of literature, including figurative, connotative, and denotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Circle both uses of "current," underline two other words or phrases that shape the mood, and put a star beside one figurative phrase. Use your marks to track how the scene changes.

The Message Board

1 By the time Mara reached the river station, the storm had knocked out every streetlamp. The footbridge was closed, and water dragged branches past its concrete piers. Inside, her grandfather had spread damp notices across the counter. He ran the station's message board for neighbors stranded on either bank. "No current," he said, tapping the dead outlet where the printer usually sat. Mara looked through the window at the river's fierce current. The printer could not produce a single notice, but the river had no trouble delivering its own: a broken chair, a bicycle tire, a blue glove.

2 Grandfather handed her a marker and the last sheet of dry cardboard. "Write what matters," he said. Mara wrote BRIDGE CLOSED in block letters. Beneath it, she added the names of two neighbors who had offered spare rooms. She wanted to write SAFE, but the word felt too clean for a night that smelled of mud and wet wires. Outside, a gust slapped the sign against the glass. Grandfather held it steady while Mara taped the corners. From the dark sidewalk, a woman stopped to read, then pointed her flashlight toward a family coming up the hill.

3 More people gathered, carrying news instead of phones raised for a signal. A teenager reported that the clinic was open; a bus driver knew which road remained clear. Mara filled the cardboard until the letters crowded its edges. Grandfather called it a small light, though the only bulbs in the station stayed dark. When the woman with the flashlight left, she promised to tell the next block what the sign said. Mara watched her beam disappear around the corner. The river still rushed past the piers, but the station no longer felt stranded on its bank.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What does “current” mean in each use in the first paragraph? How does the contrast sharpen the station's problem?

2. Why does SAFE feel “too clean” to Mara? Explain what that phrase suggests about the tone of the scene.

3. What does the verb “slapped” suggest about the gust? How would the tone change if the author wrote “moved” instead?

4. What does Grandfather mean by “a small light”? Use a detail from the last paragraph to explain how this phrase changes the tone.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a three-sentence scene set somewhere other than a river station. Use one word in two different senses and one figurative phrase, then write two sentences explaining the two senses and how the figurative phrase shapes the tone.

ANSWER KEY

Words in the Dark

HIGH SCHOOL · 9-10.RC.12

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Circle both uses of "current," underline two other words or phrases that shape the mood, and put a star beside one figurative phrase. Use your marks to track how the scene changes. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What does "current" mean in each use in the first paragraph? How does the contrast sharpen the station's problem?	**At the outlet, "current" means flowing electricity; in the river, it means flowing water. The station lacks the power to print notices while the dangerous river keeps moving.**
2	Why does SAFE feel "too clean" to Mara? Explain what that phrase suggests about the tone of the scene.	**SAFE would suggest that no one faces danger, but the mud, wet wires, and closed bridge make that claim uncertain. "Too clean" gives the scene an uneasy, realistic tone.**
3	What does the verb "slapped" suggest about the gust? How would the tone change if the author wrote "moved" instead?	**"Slapped" makes the gust seem sudden and forceful, adding tension. "Moved" would sound calmer and less threatening.**
4	What does Grandfather mean by "a small light"? Use a detail from the last paragraph to explain how this phrase changes the tone.	**He means the message board offers guidance and hope, not actual light. The woman promises to share its news, shifting the tone from isolation toward connection.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At the bakery, the power failed just as I set the dough on the counter. Dad said we could still rise to the occasion, and I watched the bread rise slowly by the window. The oven stood cold, a sleeping giant beside our floury hands. In the second sentence, "rise" means meeting a challenge and the dough swelling as it ferments. Calling the oven a sleeping giant makes the setback feel large but not permanent.

For the marking job, accept any two mood-shaping choices and any defensible figurative phrase, such as "a small light" or "the station no longer felt stranded." For Your Turn, check that the response has three scene sentences and two explanation sentences, with two distinct senses of one word and a supported tone analysis.