Words at Work

How figurative language shapes a public debate

L.9-10.5.a "Interpret figures of speech in context, including but not limited to euphemism and oxymoron, and analyze their rhetorical function in the text."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Circle two euphemisms, underline two oxymorons, and box the metaphor to track how each phrase shapes the debate.

The Maple Street Meeting

1 On Tuesday evening, the city council met to discuss the Maple Street Library. Its roof leaked, and the heating system had failed twice that winter. At the microphone, a council member described a plan to "retire the branch" in June. He said the city could redirect its repair budget to a larger library across town. But the bus to the larger library ran only once an hour, and several people in the room glanced at the posted schedule on their phones. Beside the microphone, a cardboard box held surveys from residents who used the branch after school or on their way home from work.

2 When the council member finished, a deafening silence filled the room. No one clapped or called out. Then Ms. Alvarez, a volunteer, described the library's Saturday mornings as "organized chaos": toddlers wandered between chairs while tutors guided teenagers through job applications. Behind her, another volunteer held a sign-up sheet for tutors, with every shift covered through spring. Ms. Alvarez held up a worn library card and said the building was a lifeboat for neighbors without reliable internet. Across the aisle, a student lowered his phone, where the next bus arrival glowed on the screen.

3 The council member thanked Ms. Alvarez and called the proposal "a service adjustment." A parent in the back asked whether children would still have a place to study while waiting for the bus. The council member answered that the city had not decided what would happen to the building. Before the vote, the student from across the aisle spoke up: "You can adjust a schedule. You cannot adjust away the walk home from school." The council postponed its decision for two weeks and asked staff to report how many residents could reach the larger library without a car.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What does “retire the branch” mean in the council member’s plan, and why might he choose that phrase?

2. What does Ms. Alvarez mean by “organized chaos”? How does that phrase support her view of the library?

3. Why does Ms. Alvarez call the library a “lifeboat” for some neighbors instead of simply calling it a building?

4. What makes the silence “deafening” after the council member speaks, and what does that description suggest about the room’s reaction?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence scene about a school changing a rule. Include a euphemism in someone’s speech and an oxymoron in your narration, then use the last two sentences to explain what each phrase means and how it affects the reader.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Circle two euphemisms, underline two oxymorons, and box the metaphor to track how each phrase shapes the debate. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What does "retire the branch" mean in the council member's plan, and why might he choose that phrase?	**It means closing the Maple Street Library. "Retire" makes the closure sound gentle and deserved rather than harmful to residents.**
2	What does Ms. Alvarez mean by "organized chaos"? How does that phrase support her view of the library?	**The library is busy and noisy, but volunteers plan and guide useful activities. The contrast helps her present that activity as valuable rather than disorderly.**
3	Why does Ms. Alvarez call the library a "lifeboat" for some neighbors instead of simply calling it a building?	**A lifeboat suggests essential help. The metaphor stresses how much neighbors without reliable internet depend on the library.**
4	What makes the silence "deafening" after the council member speaks, and what does that description suggest about the room's reaction?	**Silence cannot literally be loud. The oxymoron makes the lack of applause or response feel striking and suggests that the room is stunned or troubled.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The principal announced, "We are streamlining lunch options," as the cafeteria removed its hot meal choice. An uneasy calm settled over the line as students stared at the empty serving station. "Streamlining lunch options" softens the loss of a meal choice, making the change sound efficient instead of disappointing. "Uneasy calm" shows that students stay quiet but feel upset, building tension around what they might say next.

Accept interpretations grounded in the surrounding details. For Part 3, check that both figures of speech fit the scene and that the last two sentences explain their meanings and effects.