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Name that Invention: Examining Connotation and Sound

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Name that Invention: Examining Connotation and Sound

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Understanding Poetry
Diction: Product Name Exercise

Name that Invention: Examining Connotation and Sound

Abstract:

This exercise engages students with questions of diction, connotation, and sound patterns. Students discuss the field of product branding, and learn how much certain product names (e.g., Blackberry, Pentium, Swiffer) were considered in light their denotative, connotative, and aural elements. Then, in groups, students devise product names for four imagined products; afterward, as a class they debate the virtues of each name rate and choose a winner for each product. Such close attention to meanings, buried implications, and sound cues encourages students to adopt a very poetic form of word analysis, a skill that transfers nicely to more literary areas.

Common Core Standards:

RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Procedure:

Students should read an account of product branding so that they get a good understanding of the incredible thought and analysis that goes into every product name. A great option here is “Famous Names,” an article by John Colapinto (*New Yorker*, October 3, 2011): this article details the naming history behind many recognizable products (Blackberry phones, Pentium processors, the Swiffer mop, the portable toothbrush Wisp, and the bottled water Dasani) and registers the thorough study that each name undergoes. The article points out that possible product names are considered in terms of their basic meanings, more distant associations, sound qualities, and even their grammatical function. On this last note, for instance, the “swiffer” not only seems great through its comparative adjective aspect – it is “swiffer” than another version – but also because the swiffer, like a carpenter, manager, or other nouns ending in “er,” does the work for you.

Once the students have engaged with these product names and recounted the many ways in which names carry meaning, they are tasked with a challenge of their own. They get into groups (four students per group works well) and ask each group to devise names for four new products:

- a car that runs on compost;
- a cell phone that charges when it moves;
- a straw for hot drinks;
- a robotic microtoothbrush that works while you sleep.

Groups have to consider the meanings (both explicit and implicit) and sound qualities of their names, and be prepared to defend their choices against challenge.

When groups have finished the exercise, it is time for discussion. Take one product at a time so that each group can compare its sound cues and connotations against the work of other groups. Each group should “pitch” their name, saying why they chose it and what they expected the name would say about the product. After each pitch, the class can ask the group questions and make comments. The class should open up quite a bit here, as students in other groups give their accounts of what each name implies to them. Hopefully, students will surprise each other a bit here with their impressions about sounds and implied meanings, and some debate and analysis will grow organically out of the names. After each group gets to present its name and field questions, students can vote on their favorite name: they do not have to vote as a group, and they cannot vote for their own name. The class follows this procedure of pitching, discussing, and voting on names for each product.

Materials:

(none except a good article or chapter on product branding)