

Literal, Nonliteral, and Multiple Meanings

When should you stop taking the words literally?

5 days · 5 books · 145 min full · 72 min short · Grade 3 · Language in context

Every day of this unit uses a lesson that already exists. Days 1 and 2 use accessible Grade 2 lessons as entry points into the Grade 3 language work that follows. The unit supplies the teaching order, the progression, and the cross-book synthesis. It does not replace or alter the underlying book lesson, student product, or materials.

The idea

Words do not always stop at their first meaning. A familiar saying can mean something no literal reading will explain; a sentence can be figurative in ordinary speech while also being literally true of an art supply; and two ordinary words can become ambiguous when they are joined together. This unit teaches students to notice that shift and then prove which meaning the context supports.

The sequence matters. Two accessible Grade 2 entry lessons establish the meaning move before the unit steps into Grade 3 work. It begins with a familiar idiom whose nonliteral meaning is clear from context, then asks students to interpret sayings used as questions, then to hold two meanings at once. Boy Soup makes the problem harder because neither reading is nonsense: the reader must explain how the words can be grouped two ways. The final Grade 3 lesson transfers the distinction to a fresh set of literal and nonliteral expressions.

Essential question

When do the words mean exactly what they say, and when does the context make them mean something else?

The arc

Day 1 · When Pigs Fly — Use When Pigs Fly. An idiom has a conventional meaning, but Ralph deliberately treats it as a literal condition.

Day 2 · Song of Middle C — Use What Her Big Brother Asks. Sayings such as “take the heat” and “cool as a cucumber” must be translated into the actual questions being asked.

Day 3 · Art’s Supplies — Use Two Meanings at Once. The same sentence can work figuratively in everyday speech and literally for the object named.

Day 4 · Boy Soup — Use Two Ways to Read Boy Soup. Two ordinary words can support two different relationships; the phrase itself does not settle which reading is intended.

Day 5 · Pizza Counting — Use The Cat, the Whale, and the Apple Pie. Transfer: distinguish literal and nonliteral meanings in new phrases, then state a rule for deciding which reading the context supports.

Day 1 · When Pigs Fly

If Dad means “never,” why does Ralph hear a promise?

Use When Pigs Fly. 30 min full / 15 min short

Teaching sequence

1. Write “when pigs fly” before reading the key exchange. Ask first for the literal picture the words create, then for what Dad intends after repeatedly refusing the bicycle.
2. Put the two readings side by side: Dad’s conventional meaning (“never”) and Ralph’s condition (“if pigs fly, I get the bike”).
3. Use Ralph’s later explanation of the helicopter plan to prove that his literal reading drives the plot.
4. Finish by naming the clue that lets a reader reject the literal meaning in ordinary conversation: the phrase is being used as a saying after repeated refusals.

Student product

Boxes for what Dad means and what Ralph decides the words mean, with the sentence copied between them.

Look for

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States that Dad uses the phrase to mean never.

States that Ralph treats it as a condition he can satisfy.

Uses the repeated refusals and Ralph’s own plan as evidence.

Distinguishes the words themselves from the meaning supplied by the situation.

Why this day belongs

This is the cleanest entry point because one reading is the familiar nonliteral meaning and the other is a deliberately literal reading. Students can see immediately that understanding a phrase requires more than decoding each word.

Day 2 · Song of Middle C

What question is he really asking when he never asks it plainly?

Use What Her Big Brother Asks. 30 min full / 15 min short

Teaching sequence

1. Read the brother’s sayings one at a time and require a plain-language translation before discussing the sister’s reply.

2. For “take the heat,” separate the literal words from the contextual meaning: can she cope when the recital becomes difficult?
3. For “cool as a cucumber,” identify the intended meaning as calm rather than cold.
4. Compare each translated question with her very short answer, then use the recital to decide whether she actually answered the concern.

Student product

Rows for each question the brother asks, with a box for what it means and a box for her answer.

Look for

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Explains at least one saying in ordinary language.

Does not define the phrase by repeating its words.

Uses what happens at the recital to test the brother’s concern.

Recognizes that a reader sometimes has to translate figurative language before evaluating a character’s response.

Why this day belongs

Day 1 gave students one established idiom. Day 2 asks them to perform the interpretive move repeatedly and then use the translated meaning to understand a conversation and later event.

Day 3 · Art’s Supplies

Can a sentence be figurative and literal at the same time?

Use Two Meanings at Once. 30 min full / 15 min short

Teaching sequence

1. Model one line by giving the everyday meaning first, then the literal action of the art supply named.
2. Use examples such as “outside the box” and “blend in.” Require both meanings in separate columns.
3. Move to a page containing more than one double meaning and ask students to identify which supply makes each joke work.
4. Test transfer by swapping the object: ask whether the sentence still works if a different supply says it, and explain why or why not.

Student product

Rows for each sentence with a box for each of its two meanings.

Look for

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Gives both meanings rather than choosing only one.

Connects the literal meaning to what the supply actually does.

Explains the everyday meaning without relying on the picture alone.

Uses exact wording as evidence for why both readings are available.

Why this day belongs

This is the hinge of the unit. Earlier lessons ask students to replace a literal reading with a contextual one. Here both meanings remain active at once. That makes multiple meaning a feature of the author's craft rather than merely a vocabulary problem.

Day 4 • Boy Soup

How can the same two words make two different things?

Use Two Ways to Read Boy Soup. 35 min full / 18 min short

Teaching sequence

1. Write "boy soup" by itself before showing the relevant pages. Collect possible readings without deciding which one is right.
2. Set out the two relationships explicitly: soup made out of boys / soup made by boys.
3. Ask what the two words themselves establish and what the reader has to supply about the relationship between them.
4. Use the prescription and Kate's interpretation to show how choosing one reading rather than the other changes the plot.

Student product

Boxes for each meaning of the phrase, with a box underneath for who believes which.

Look for

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States both legitimate readings.

Explains that neither individual word changes meaning; the relationship between them does.

Connects Kate's reading to what she does next.

Does not treat one reading as grammatically impossible simply because the story prefers the other.

Why this day belongs

This raises the difficulty. The ambiguity no longer comes from an idiom or a figurative saying. Both readings are literal possibilities, and the reader must reason about how two words have been combined.

Day 5 · Pizza Counting

What tells you whether a phrase is literal or nonliteral?

Use The Cat, the Whale, and the Apple Pie. 20 min full / 9 min short

Teaching sequence

1. Teach the existing lesson exactly as written: begin with the cat expression and separate the literal picture from the intended meaning.
2. Use the author-provided definition to show how a reader can use an explicit clue to recover a nonliteral meaning.
3. Move to “a whale of an appetite” and “as American as apple pie.” Students state each expression’s literal picture and intended meaning, then identify the clue, comparison, or supplied background knowledge that supports it.
4. Complete the existing three-row chart and evidence explanation. After the lesson is finished, return orally to examples from earlier days and ask what the class now notices about how readers decide what words mean.

Student product

The existing three-row literal / intended meaning chart and one evidence-based explanation.

Look for

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Explains the intended meaning of at least two expressions accurately.

Distinguishes the literal words from the intended meaning.

Uses an explicit definition, sentence clue, comparison, or supplied background knowledge as evidence.

Can connect this final lesson orally to at least one earlier example without changing the lesson’s student product.

Why this day belongs

The final day returns to the core Grade 3 move in a clean, independent form: distinguish literal words from intended meaning and explain what evidence supports the interpretation. The cross-book decision rule belongs in the unit close, not in a replacement worksheet.

Unit close

The decision rule

Do not ask only “What do these words mean?” Ask “What can these words mean here?”

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Test the literal reading first.

Check whether the situation makes that reading sensible.

Look for a familiar saying, a second meaning, or another way the words can be joined.

Use the surrounding text to decide which meaning is intended - or whether the author wants both meanings at once.

Culminating response

Choose three expressions from three different books in the unit. For each one: (1) state the literal reading, (2) state the contextual or alternate reading, and (3) explain what evidence tells you which meaning the reader should use. At least one example must be a case where both meanings remain active at once.

Assessment

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Distinguishes literal wording from intended or alternate meaning.

Uses context as evidence rather than simply labeling a phrase “an idiom.” Can hold two meanings at once when the text supports both.

Explains ambiguity in Boy Soup as a relationship between words, not a change in the words themselves.

Applies a general decision rule to a new phrase.

Short version

Teach Days 1, 3, 4 and 5. When Pigs Fly establishes literal versus intended meaning; Art’s Supplies introduces simultaneous double meaning; Boy Soup introduces structural ambiguity; Pizza Counting supplies independent Grade 3 transfer. Add Song of Middle C when you want more practice translating sayings before the two harder multiple-meaning days.

Teacher note

This is a language-in-context unit, not an idiom memorization unit. Do not turn the lessons into lists of expressions and definitions. The recurring work is to test a possible reading against the actual sentence, scene, and consequence in the book.