# **Denotation & Connotation in Type**

## **Semiotics in Graphic Design?**

Have you ever thought about what your written words say? No, we don't mean just the words and their definitions. We mean the way the words' physical appearance influences the message you are trying to convey. There's actually a whole field of study dedicated to asking that question. It's call **semiotics**, and it studies the way symbols, and signs convey meaning, even when we don't know their definition. Yes, this also means these scholars study words in context and how cultural knowledge and experience influences our perception of meaning.

Don't worry, we're not going to go into an advanced semiotics lecture here, but we will use a few of their concepts and explain how they relate to graphic design. Mainly, we'll compare denotation and connotation.

## **Denotation in Type**

Let's start with the easier of the two. **Denotation** refers to the functional aspect of typography. **Typography** is the element of design involving the use of text. The first step is determining what your message will actually say, the definition of the words. Often, this will come from the client, though they will sometimes let you choose the specific words to use.

Next, we deal with the pragmatic aspects of typography, the technical issues. We have to determine what size, spacing, and typeface will be readable to our audience. **Typeface** is the system of style choices that repeat throughout a set of letters, numbers, and symbols in a particular style, what you might think of as a font. You certainly wouldn't use the same size print on a billboard as you would on a magazine cover. They'd never read it. Basically, this step determines the practical issues of using typography in graphic design.

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## ***Denotation might involve deciding whether Old English would be easily read in the context of your design project.***

## **Connotation in Type**

Next, we have **connotation** which deals with the feelings and expressive aspects of your design. When we are talking about the words and the message itself, we think about the cultural context of words and phrases that go beyond their basic vocabulary. A great example would be the word ''trump''. Its definition is ''a playing card that beats another card,'' or ''the act of playing a card that beats another card.'' In the vernacular, it also can mean one-upping someone or outdoing their efforts.

However, with the U.S. president having Trump for his last name, we must carefully consider how we use this term in a design. Some of our audience will have positive associations with the word while others will have negative associations. Using it in the dictionary, or denotative sense is not likely to convey that message alone.

The physical aspects of our typeface will likewise convey meaning that can work with or against our message. This helps us select between two equally functional typefaces or design decisions because we want to choose the one that maximizes the clarity of our message. In many ways, this means we have to know our audience, their cultural association with certain words, images, and styles.

***We can tell by the creative elements in this design that the message is about a specific type of equality.***

## **Example**

Let's take a look at the simple phrase ''Happy Birthday.'' Pretend you are making a birthday card for someone. You want to make a few style choices based on the limitations of the format which is the card itself. You will want to align it and select sizes based on how it fits into the background image.



***Which style of saying HAPPY BIRTHDAY looks most appropriate to you? Which looks the least appropriate?***

Now, we have to concern ourselves with the connotation conveyed by our selections. Here, we have four different examples. At the top, we have Times New Roman, a very formal typeface. Set in a basic black, the message looks stuffy and too formal for a birthday card.

The second choice uses the energetic lines of Freestyle Script set in green. This looks more appropriate for a birthday card.

The third uses Cooper Black, a thick typeface with rounded edges. This too conveys a fun birthday message. Selecting blue, however, might not work if the recipient is a woman or girl.

Finally, we have the last option, a Chiller typeface in a dark red. What kind of birthday greeting does this make you think about? Is this on a card from a friend or a card containing a chilling death threat from a stalker?

In all these examples, we have the same denotative meaning, a common phrase wishing someone a nice day on the anniversary of their birth. However, each one of these feels very different. It's like changing the tone of your voice when you say something.