

Examining Language in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In a society where literacy is forbidden her, Offred frequently contemplates words and their meanings. Instead of illicit sex, the commander engages her in illicit games of Scrabble.

This activity will ask you and your group to examine three categories of language in the book:

Neologisms—words that are invented or given new meaning in Gilead

Biblical Language—phrases that sound Biblical, are said to be from the Bible, or are lifted from the Bible and have become part of every day interaction (pay particular attention to what Aunt Lydia says)

Language Musings—words that Offred contemplates the meaning of (italicized in the text)

In your small group, decide who will be the **note taker**, the **summarizer** and the **presenter** (you can divide the job of presenting between two people). Reread the chapter your group is assigned and use the sticky notes to mark NL for neologisms, BL for Biblical language, and LM for Offred's language musings.

The **note taker** should take notes during your conversation about the significance of these passages and any observations you have about meaning and significance as you look at them.

The **summarizer** will write up a summary of your discussion for the presenter to use when you address the class tomorrow.

The **presenter(s)** will share your findings and how they have led you to an overarching understanding of how language is used in the book.

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After you have reread the chapter and marked language examples, answer these questions.

What purpose do neologisms serve in Gilead? What is their significance? How do you figure out what they mean?

How is Biblical language used in Gilead?

What is the significance and purpose of Offred's musings about language? How do they affect the story, the reader, and Offred? What might be a larger, symbolic, significance to Offred thinking about language?

What general observations about the use of language in this book can you make based on looking closely at language use in your chapter?

Why does Offred spend so much time thinking about language?

Why are the women in Gilead forbidden to read (down to the signs on the stores being replaced with images)? Why is literacy a threat to Gilead?

What was your reaction when you read that the Commander wanted to play Scrabble with Offred? Why is playing Scrabble such an illicit activity?