Two Audiences: Word choice in “A Cry from an Indian Wife”

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 2. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

“A Cry from an Indian Wife” speaks to a Cree warrior in 1885, but it was performed for, and published to, the settlers he was riding against. Every word has two audiences. Johnson chooses words that the husband would hear one way and a Toronto audience another, and that double hearing is where the poem's argument lives.

What students do: Students learn how Johnson performed the poem for Toronto audiences in 1892, read it as a speech with two audiences, audit the connotations of key words, trace how the speaker's turns build an argument, and write an analytical paragraph about word choice.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C2.3	identify a variety of elements of style in texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, in relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, and explain, with increasing insight, how they help communicate meaning or reflect a world view and enhance the effectiveness of the text
C1.6	analyse texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, in terms of the information, themes, ideas, and issues they explore in relation to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, explaining with increasing insight how various aspects of the texts contribute to the presentation or development of these elements
C3.3	use a variety of strategies, with increasing regularity, to explore and expand vocabulary, focusing on words and phrases that have particular significance for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and evaluating the precision with which these words are used in the texts they are reading

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning to analyse how word choice creates meaning for different audiences. • We are learning to explain how a poem's structure develops its ideas.	• I can explain the poem's two audiences. • I can analyse the connotations of key words. • I can explain how the turns build an argument. • I can write an analytical paragraph about diction.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Two Audiences deck.

© 2026 K9solutions

- **Handouts:** Two Audiences (page 1), Word-Choice Audit (page 2).
- **Reader:** “A Cry from an Indian Wife.”

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Overheard speech.	Discuss.	
8–20	**Read**	Aloud; context.	Listen.	
20–40	**Two audiences**	Line by line.	Analyse.	Both readings explained.
40–60	**Word-choice audit**	Connotation.	Audit.	Precise vocabulary.
60–75	**Paragraph**	Model and write.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Six words pre-selected for the audit, with dictionary definitions.
- **ELL:** Connotation scale (positive to negative) with examples.
- **Challenge:** Compare the 1885 newspaper image of the North-West with the poem's.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Word-Choice Audit and paragraph	Elements of style (C2.3), development of ideas (C1.6) and vocabulary (C3.3)

Two audiences: key points

- **Audience 1:** The husband: urged to fight, then held back, then sent.
- **Audience 2:** Settler listeners in Toronto and readers of the collections, who are asked to see the war from the other side.
- **Diction:** “stripling pack,” “young and beautiful and good”: generous to the soldiers, which earns trust before the claim.
- **Turns:** “Yet stay” twice; each turn adds a new argument: empathy, then rights, then shared grief.
- **Imagine:** Lines 24–27 ask settlers to picture a nation “from far away” taking their land.
- **Ending:** “By right, by birth” is a legal claim; “Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so” leaves the audience to judge.

Teacher notes

- Before reading, name the content (boarding and residential schools, separation from family, loss) and remind students they may step out, pass, or talk privately. This course discusses colonization,

© 2026 K9solutions

residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.

- Johnson's public career began in January 1892 at an evening of Canadian literature organized by the Young Men's Liberal Club in Toronto, where her recitation of “A Cry from an Indian Wife” made her name (Dictionary of Canadian Biography; CWRC). The poem was written in 1885 and collected in The White Wampum (1895) and Flint and Feather (1912).
- Context for 1885: the North-West Resistance, when Métis and some Cree and other First Nations people resisted the Canadian government over land, treaty promises and starvation. Keep the history brief; the focus is how words work for two audiences.
- Historical texts use the words of their time, including terms now considered offensive (for example, “Red-skin,” “savage,” “squaw,” “half-breed,” “Eskimo”). We quote accurately when analysing, explain why these terms are harmful, and use today's terms (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, or the specific Nation) in our own words. Readers may say “[skip]” instead of reading a slur aloud.
- Johnson, Zitkála-Šá and Eastman are historical writers (they died in 1913, 1938 and 1939). We read them as historical context: Indigenous writers who answered settler audiences a century ago. The course's contemporary voices are First Nations, Métis and Inuit creators chosen by the teacher.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 3, The Ballad Turned.

© 2026 K9solutions