

Analyzing DICTION

Diction is simply the **words** the writer chooses to convey a particular meaning.

When analyzing diction, look for **specific words** or short phrases that seem stronger than the others

(ex. Bragg's use of *slingshot* instead of *travel*). Diction is NEVER the entire sentence!

Also, look for a **pattern** (or similarity) in the words the writer chooses (ex. Do the words imply sadness, happiness, etc?). This pattern helps to create a particular kind of diction.

This pattern can also include **repetition** of the same words or phrases. Repeating the same word or phrase helps the reader emphasize a point, feeling, etc.

Effective diction is shaped by words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Good writers avoid words like *pretty*, *nice*, and *bad* because they are not specific enough. Instead, they rely on words that invoke a specific effect in order to bring the reader into the event being described.

Examples:

A coat isn't *torn*; it is *tattered*.

The US Army does not *want* revenge; it is *thirsting* for revenge. A door does not *shut*; it *thuds*.

Diction depends on **subject**, **purpose**, **occasion**, and **audience**.

The **subject** often determines how specific or sophisticated the diction needs to be. For example, articles on computers are filled with a specialized language: e-mail, e-shopping, web, interface. Many topics generated special vocabularies to convey meaning.

The writer's **purpose** – whether to persuade, entertain, inform – partly determines diction. Words chosen to impart a particular effect on the reader reflect the writer's purpose. For example, if an author's purpose is to inform, the reader should expect straightforward diction. On the other hand, if the author's purpose is to entertain, the readers will likely encounter words used in ironic, playful, or unexpected ways.

Diction also depends on **occasion**. Formal diction is reserved for scholarly writing and serious texts. Informal diction is often used in narrative essays and newspaper editorials. Colloquial diction and slang are typically used to capture the language of a particular time frame or culture.

Finally, the type of diction a writer uses depends on the **audience** (readers, listeners). An author who uses sophisticated diction knows he is writing for an intelligent audience. An author who uses more informal diction knows he is writing for an audience of varied intelligence.

When you are **writing an essay** in which you are analyzing the diction of the writer:

Avoid saying: "The writer used diction..." – since this is obvious (diction IS the words on the page; without them, the page would be blank ☺).

Instead, say: "The writer creates a _____ diction through the use of..." OR
"The language of the text is _____."

Below are just a few words that you may use to **describe the type of diction** used by the writer.
You may want to add words to this list or circle the ones you use frequently.

abstract	academic	curt	inflammatory	passionate	subdued
ambiguous		denotative	inflated	patriotic	symbolic
biting		detached	informal	pedantic	tame
bombastic		divisive	insincere	picturesque	technical
brusque		emotional	jargon	plain	trite
cacophonous		esoteric	learned	poetic	unifying
casual		euphemistic	literal	political	uppity
caustic		euphonious	loaded	polysyllabic	vague
colloquial		everyday	lyrical	precise	vulgar
colorful		exact	melodious	pretentious	
common		fanciful	monosyllabic	provincial	OTHERS:
concrete		figurative	nostalgic	romantic	abstract diction
connotative		flowery	obscene	scholarly	concrete diction
conversational		folksy	obscure	sentimental	elevated/formal
crisp		formal	offensive	shocking	low/informal
cultured		grandiose	ordinary	sincere	
		idiomatic	ornate	slang	