Diction: Word Choice
How a writer uses language for distinct purposes and effects

“The Difference between the right word and almost the right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” -- Mark Twain

Adapted from AP Language & Composition course handouts

Ways to characterize diction:

- **Monosyllabic (Anglo-Saxon) vs. Polysyllabic (Latin Origin)**
  - Formal vs. Informal
    - germ vs. bug
    - relatives vs. folks
    - position vs. job
    - child vs. kid
    - superior vs. boss
    - communicate vs. get across
    - He's schizophrenic. vs. He's nuts!

- **Denotative (Referential/Literal) vs. Connotative (Inferential/Interpretive)**
  - General vs. Specific
    - look vs. gaze, ogle, squint
    - walk vs. stride, saunter, shuffle
    - sit vs. slump, squat, hunch
    - cry vs. weep, bawl, blubber
    - throw vs. hurl, flip, pitch

- **Jargon (technical or specialized language)**
  “Motion to reconsider the vote by which the appeal to the ruling of the Chair that the amendment in the second degree proposed by the Senator from Tennessee on behalf of the Senator from Utah to the perfecting amendment in the first degree proposed by the Senator from Tennessee…”

- **Euphonious (Pleasant sounds) vs. Cacophonous (Harsh sounds)**

- **Additional words that describe diction:** (You need to know these words.)
  - pedantic vs. poetic
  - euphemistic vs. moralistic
  - pretentious vs. slang
  - sensuous vs. idiomatic
  - exact vs. esoteric
  - cultured vs. symbolic
  - plain vs. simple
  - literal vs. figurative
  - colloquial vs. bombastic
  - artificial vs. abstruse
  - detached vs. grotesque
  - vulgar vs. scholarly
  - insipid vs. precise
  - learned vs. picturesque
  - homespun vs. provincial
  - trite vs. obscure
Figurative Language

- Does the passage use unusual imagery?
- Does the author create analogies using *similes* (comparison using like or as) or *metaphors* (comparison of two unlike things)?
- Does the author use *personification* (applying human characteristics to inanimate objects or animals)?
- Is there deliberate *hyperbole* (extreme exaggeration) or *understatement* (writer says less than actually intended)?
- Does the author employ *paradox* (a seemingly contradictory statement) or *oxymoron* (an image of contradictory term/EX: bittersweet) to add complexity?
- What part do rhythm and sound devices such as *alliteration* (repetition of the initial consonant) or *onomatopoeia* (words that sound like the sound they represent) play in the passage?
- What purpose do the figures of speech serve, and what effect do they have on the passage?

How diction controls tone: Words have negative, positive, or neutral effects.

- **Dislike:** resent, lament, scorn, disapprove, deplore, decry
- **Odd:** bizarre, outlandish, curious, extraordinary, noteworthy
- **Thrifty:** tight, miserly, frugal, economical, prudent, penny-pinching
- **Confess:** acknowledge, concede, grant, allow
- **Amateur:** buff, enthusiast, nut, fan connoisseur
- **Funny:** hilarious, facetious, silly, comic, humorous
- **Sad:** morose, melancholy, blue, somber, glum, taciturn
- **Happy:** joyous, delirious, ecstatic, euphoric, delighted
- **Upset:** annoyed, vexed, cross, indignant
- **Laugh:** guffaw, chuckle, titter, giggle, cackle, snicker
- **Self-confident:** conceited, egotistical, smug, proud, supercilious, vain
- **House:** home, hut, shack, abode, dwelling, domicile, residence
- **Old:** mature, experienced, antique, relic, ancient
- **Fat:** obese, plump, corpulent, portly, heavy set, paunchy, burly
- **Short:** laconic, terse, concise, pithy, compressed, boiled down, brief
- **Smart:** shrewd, calculating, clever, adroit, astute, skillful

Remember that diction and syntax count!

- Spotted in a toilet of a London office:
  TOILET OUT OF ORDER. PLEASE USE FLOOR BELOW.
- In a Laundromat:
  AUTOMATIC WASHING MACHINES: PLEASE REMOVE ALL YOUR CLOTHES WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT.
- In an office:
  WOULD THE PERSON WHO TOOK THE STEP LADDER YESTERDAY PLEASE BRING IT BACK OR FURTHER STEPS WILL BE TAKEN.
- Outside a secondhand shop:
  WE EXCHANGE ANYTHING - BICYCLES, WASHING MACHINES, ETC. WHY NOT BRING YOUR WIFE ALONG AND GET A WONDERFUL BARGAIN?
- Seen during a conference:
  FOR ANYONE WHO HAS CHILDREN AND DOESN'T KNOW IT, THERE IS A DAY CARE ON THE FIRST FLOOR.
- On a repair shop door:
  WE CAN REPAIR ANYTHING. (PLEASE KNOCK HARD ON THE DOOR - THE BELL DOESN'T WORK.)