DICTION: Word Choice

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

Ways to characterize diction:

- **Monosyllabic (Anglo-Saxon)**  
  One syllable

- **Polysyllabic (Latinate)**  
  Many syllables

Note: The higher the ration of polysyllabic words, the more difficult the content.

**EXAMPLES:**

The respite from study was devoted to a sojourn at the ancestral mansion.  
I spent my vacation at the house of my grandparents.

The visitor proved a harbinger of glad things.  
The visitor brought good news.

I endeavored to peruse the volume.  
I tried to read the book.

Fire (A-S), conflagration (Latin), holocaust (Greek)

- **Formal**  
  germ  
  relatives  
  position  
  child  
  superior  
  communicate

- **Informal**  
  bug  
  folks  
  job  
  kid  
  boss  
  get across

**EXAMPLES:**

He’s nuts (slang).  
He’s insane (informal).  
He’s schizophrenic (formal).

- **Denotative (Referential)**  
  Connotative
public servant
financier
law officer
legislative consultant
investigator
soldier of fortune

bureaucrat
speculator
cop
lobbyist
spy
hired killed

• General
look
walk
sit
cry
throw

• Specific
gaze, stare, peer, squint, ogle
stride, slink, trot, shuffle, drag
slump, squat, lounge, hunch
weep, sob, sigh, bawl, blubber
hurl, pitch, toss, dump, flip

• Abstract
Concrete

EXAMPLES:
The dishes fell to the floor with a loud noise (crashed or clattered).

He walked along slowly (ambled, sauntered).

He looked at her in an angry way (glowered, glared).

He sat in the chair looking idle and lazy (lolled).

• Jargon

EXAMPLE:
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 the behalf of the Senator from Utah to the perfecting amendment in the first degree proposed by the Senator from Tennessee on behalf of the Senator from Utah to the language proposed to be stricken by the amendment in the first degree in the nature of a “strike and insert” by the Senator from West Virginia, as proposed to be amended by an amendment the nature of a substitute in the second degree by the Senator from West Virginia and the perfecting amendment in the second degree proposed by the Senator from Tennessee on behalf of the Senator from Utah proposing to amend the language in the amendment in the first degree by the Senator from West Virginia proposed to be stricken by the amendment in the second degree in the form of a substitute by the Senator from West Virginia and by the first committee amendment to the Continuing Resolution (Horse Joint Resolution 648), was non-germane to the first committee amendment in the first degree by the Senator from West Virginia proposing a “strike and insert” in the language proposed to be stricken by the first committee amendment to the Continuing Resolution and is therefore out of order under Rule XXII because cloture has been invoked on the amendment in the first degree by the Senator
from West Virginia proposing a “strike and insert” in the language proposed to be
stricken by the first committee amendment to the Continuing resolution, was tabled.

• **Euphonious (Pleasant sounds)**

• **Cacophonous (Harsh sounds)**

**EXAMPLES:**

…through the drizzling rain  …their lean and flashy songs
On the bald street breaks the blank Grate on their scrannel pipes of
day. wretched straw.

butterfly  plus

**Additional words that describe diction:**

| pedantic | poetic | vulgar |
| pretentious | moralistic | scholarly |
| sensuous | idiomatic | insipid |
| exact | esoteric | learned |
| cultured | symbolic | picturesque |
| plain | simple | homespun |
| literal | figurative | provincial |
| colloquial | bombastic | trite |
| artificial | abstruse | obscure |
| detached | grotesque | precise |

Note: Depending on the selection, diction may be characterized as the language of law,
medicine, or science.

• **Figurative Language**

Often prose passages use highly figurative language. For a list of common terms
students need to know, consult the list in the “Poetry” handout.

| imagery | simile | metaphor |
| allusion | personification | oxymoron |
| paradox |  |  |
DICTION: Word Choice Controls Tone
WORDS HAVE NEGATIVE, POSITIVE, OR NUETRAL EFFECTS

DISLIKE:
resent, lament, hate, scorn, disapprove, deplore, decry, oppose, regret

ODD:
bizarre, singular, outlandish, curious, unusual, extraordinary, remarkable, noteworthy, out of the way, strange

THRIFTY:
saving, tight, miserly, frugal, economical, careful, budget-minded, prudent, penny-pinching, mean, penurious

CONFESS:
admit, acknowledge, concede, give in, grant, come clean, own up, allow

AMATEUR:
buff, enthusiast, nut, fan, hobbyist, connoisseur

FUNNY:
hilarious facetious, joking, comic, ribald, farcical, silly, slapstick, humorous

SAD:
morose, depressed, melancholy, blue, somber, down, glum, sullen, withdrawn, reticent, silent, taciturn

HAPPY:
joyous, delirious, ecstatic, high, euphoric, delighted, glad

UPSET:
annoyed, vexed, worried, cross, indignant, uneasy

LAUGH:
guffaw, chuckle, titter, giggle, cackle, snicker, snigger, roar

SELF CONFIDENT:
proud, conceited, egotistical, stuck up, haughty, smug, over-bearing, complacent, arrogant, condescending, snooty, cocky, vain, supercilious

HOUSE:
home, hut, shack, mansion, cabin, chalet, abode, dwelling, shanty, domicile, residence

KING:
ruler, leader, tyrant, dictator, autocrat, rex

OLD:
mature, experienced, antique, relic, ancient, elderly, senior

FAT:
obese, plump, corpulent, portly, roly-poly, stout, rotund, burly, full-figured, heavy set, fleshy, paunchy, over-weight, bulky, pudgy, weighty

UNMARRIED WOMAN:
spinster, old maid, bachelor girl, maiden lady, career woman

SHORT:
laconic, terse, economical, concise, pointed, pithy, compressed, brief, boiled down

STEAL:
purloin, embezzle, filch, pilfer, burglarize, rob, hold up, snatch, grab, help oneself to, appropriate

SMART:
shrewd, calculating, clever, sly, adroit, knowing, astute, cunning, skillful, smooth
A study of diction is the analysis of how a writer uses language for a distinct purpose and effect, including **WORD CHOICE AND FIGURES OF SPEECH**.

**WORD CHOICE:**

- Is the language general or specific? Concrete or abstract?
- Are the words monosyllabic or polysyllabic?
- Do the words have interesting connotations?
- Is the diction slang or jargon?
- Do any words seem especially euphonious or cacophonous?
- Does the passage use dialect? If so, what kind?
- Does the level of diction change in the passage use? Are they active or passive? Present, past, or future tense?
- What can the reader infer about the speaker’s attitude from the word choice?

**FIGURES OF SPEECH:**

- Does the passage use unusual images or patterns of imagery?
- Does the author create analogies, like similes or metaphors?
- Does the author use personification or apostrophe?
- Is there deliberate hyperbole or understatement in the passage?
- Does the author employ paradox or oxymoron to add complexity?
- What part do rhythm and sound devices, such as alliteration or onomatopoeia, play in the passage?
- What purpose do the figures of speech serve, and what effect do they have on the passage?

**REMEMBER:** No element should be considered in isolation: The importance of any element is how it works with other to convey the writer’s purpose. **NEVER** substitute terminology for analysis: **ALWAYS** connect the term directly (with an example) to the effect it creates in the passage.
DICTION STUDY: THE RATTLER

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: Read the following passage carefully. In a well-developed essay, discuss the effect the passage has on the reader by analyzing the techniques used by the writer to achieve that effect. You should consider such elements as diction, syntax, point of view, and organization.

After sunset...I walked out into the desert...Light was thinning; the scrub's day savory odors were sweet on the cooler air. In this, the first pleasant moment for a walk after long blazing hours, I thought I was the only thing abroad. Abruptly, I stopped short.

The other lay rigid, as suddenly arrested, his body undulant; the head was not drawn back to strike, but was merely turned a little to watch what I would do. It was a rattlesnake—and I knew it. I mean that where a six-foot blacksnake thick as my wrist, capable of long-range attack and armed with powerful fangs, will flee at sight of man, the rattler felt no necessity of getting out of anybody's path. He held his ground in calm watchfulness; he was not even rattling yet, much less was he coiled; he was waiting for me to show my intentions.

My first instinct was to let him go his way and I would go mine, and with this he would have been well content. I have never killed an animal I was not obliged to kill; the sport in taking life is a satisfaction I can't feel. But I reflected that there were children, dogs, horses at the ranch, as well as men and women lightly shod; my duty, plainly, was to kill the snake. I went back to ranch house, got a hoe, and returned.

The rattler has not moved; he lay there like a live wire. But he saw the how. Now indeed his tail twitched, the tocsin sounded; he drew back his head and I raised my weapon. Quicker than I could strike, he shot into a dense bush and set up his rattling. He shook and shook his fair but furious signal, quite sportingly warning me that I had made an unprovoked attack, attempted to take his life, and that if I persisted he would have no choice but to take mine if he could. I listened for a minute to this little song of death. It was not ugly, though it was ominous. It said that life was dear, and would be dearly sold. And I reached into the paper-bag bush with my hoe and, hacking about, soon dragged him out of it with his back broken.

He struck passionately once more at the hoe; but a moment later his neck was broken, and he was soon dead. Technically, that is; he was still twitching, and when I picked him up by the tail, some consequent jar, and some mechanical reflex made his jaws gape and snap once more—proving that a dead snake may still bite. There was blood in his mouth and poison dripping from his fangs; it was all a nasty sight, pitiful now that it was done.

I did not cut off the rattles for a trophy; I let him drop into the close green guardianship of the paper-bag bush. Then for a moment I could see him as I might have let him go, sinuous and self-respecting in departure over the twilit sands.
A sample response on diction might be set up this way:

The author's techniques used in “The Rattler” convey not only a feeling of sadness and remorse but also a sense of the man’s acceptance of the snake’s impending death. A human being has confronted nature, and in order for him to survive, the snake must be killed. The diction and figures of speech, especially the images, similes, and metaphors, create sympathy in the reader for the man’s plight and a reluctant, sad agreement with him for his decision.

The author's diction, largely concrete and informal in order to convey the confrontation, heightens the power and force behind the snake as it responds to the man. “Arrested” at first, the snake becomes a “live wire” as he shakes his “little tocsin” at the man. Unmoving at first, the snake plays a waiting fame as adversary meets adversary across an imaginary line drawn in the desert sand. Then a feeling of electricity jolts the reader, heart beating faster from the noise of the warning that, like battle stations abroad a ship, calls all to readiness. Yet it must lose; despite its attempts to hide in the “paper-bag bush,” the snake knows its life has been “dearly sold,” but it remains a “sinuous and self-respecting” in the man’s mind. The hiding place is an illusion, and a costly one. The reader admires the valiant behavior of the snake’s last moments and the dignity which the man offers. All involved recognize the strength of both the man and the almost-human snake, but know that responsibility and duty to others make the killing necessary.

The figures of speech…