

**Diction** refers to the author's choice of words. Words are the writer's basic tools: they create the color and texture of the written work; they both reflect and determine the level of formality; they shape the reader's perceptions. When studying serious literature, students should rarely skip words they do not know. That is tantamount to wearing earplugs to a symphony. To understand voice, students must both "hear" the words and "feel" their effects. Diction reflects the writer's vision and steers the reader's thought.

Effective voice is shaped by words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Good writers eschew words like *pretty*, *nice*, and *bad*. Instead they employ words that invoke a specific effect. A coat isn't *torn*; it is *tattered*. The United States Army does not *want* revenge; it is *thirsting* for revenge. A door does not *shut*; it *thuds*. Specific diction brings the reader into the scene, enabling full participation in the writer's world.

Diction depends on topic, purpose, and occasion. The topic often determines the specificity and sophistication of diction. For example, articles on computers are filled with specialized language: *e-mail*, *e-shopping*, *web*, *interface*. Many topics generate special vocabularies as a nexus to meaning.

The writer's purpose – whether to convince, entertain, amuse, inform, or plead – partly determines diction. Words chosen to impart a particular effect on the reader reflect and sustain 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 reader will likely encounter words used in ironic, playful, or unexpected ways.

Diction also depends on the occasion. As with clothes, level of formality influences appropriate choices. Formal diction is largely reserved for scholarly writing and serious prose or poetry. Informal diction is the norm in expository essays, newspaper editorials, and works of fiction. Colloquial diction and slang borrow from informal speech and are typically used to create a mood or capture a particular historic or regional dialect. Appropriateness of diction is determined by the norms of society.

When studying diction, students must understand both connotation (the meaning suggested by a word) and denotation (literal meaning). When a writer calls a character *slender*, the word evokes a different feeling from calling the character *gaunt*. A word's power to produce a strong reaction in the reader lies mainly in its connotative meaning.

Finally, diction can impart freshness and originality to writing. Words used in surprising or unusual ways make us rethink what is known and re-examine meaning. Good writers often opt for complexity rather than simplicity, for multiple meanings rather than precision. Thus diction, the foundation of voice, shapes a reader's thinking while guiding reader insight into the author's idiosyncratic expression of thought: the writer's voice.

FORBIDDEN  
WORDS →

good  
nice  
pretty  
beautiful  
fine  
bad  
thing  
really  
very  
terrible  
wonderful  
'ot

# Diction ①

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_  
WEEK: \_\_\_\_ : PERIOD: # \_\_\_\_

## Consider:

Art is the **antidote** that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another.

— Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson*

## Discuss:

1. By using the word *antidote*, what does the author imply about the inability to feel for another?
2. If we changed the word *antidote* to *gift*, what effect would it have on the meaning of the sentence?

## Apply:

3. Brainstorm with the class and develop a list of medical terms; then write a sentence using a medical term to characterize art. Explain to the class the effect this term has on the meaning of the sentence.

## Diction ②

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_  
WEEK: \_\_\_\_ : PERIOD: # \_\_\_\_

### Consider:

As I watched, the sun broke weakly through, brightened the rich red of the fawns, and **kindled** their white spots.

— E. B. White, "Twins," *Poems and Sketches of E.B. White*

### Discuss:

1. What kind of flame does *kindled* imply? How does this verb suit the purpose of the sentence?
2. Would the sentence be strengthened or weakened by changing *the sun broke weakly through* to *the sun burst through*? Explain the effect this change would have on the use of the verb *kindled*.

### Apply:

3. Brainstorm with the class a list of action verbs that demonstrate the effects of sunlight.