

Diction



DICTION

Diction is a fancy way of saying “word choice.”

Why Diction Matters

Writers carefully consider which words to use to best accomplish their rhetorical goals.

Consider the evolution of the following sentence:

- The stone looked like it could roll down the hill.
- The rock was about to crash down the mountain.
- The boulder was destined to come crashing down the cliff.

Denotation and Connotation

Every word has two kinds of meaning:

- *Denotation* is the dictionary definition of a word.
- *Connotation* is the feeling a word conveys.

Consider these two versions of another sentence:

- **Angry** students **protest** dress code policies.
- **Outraged** students **riot against** dress code policies.

HOW WRITERS MANIPULATE DICTION

Qualifying Language

Authors can manipulate the degree of doubt or certainty of something by using qualifying words.

- The following words indicate a lack of certainty:
 - could, may, might, perhaps, hope, sometimes
- Using more absolute language indicates more certainty:
 - first, only, never, always, must
- An author can also indicate criticism by using words like the following:
 - predictable, dubious, fantastical, unexceptional

What other examples of words that convey an author’s attitude can you think of?

Imagery

Imagery means using language to represent ideas and objects in a way that appeals to the reader’s physical senses. The kind of imagery an author uses is another example of how an author can manipulate diction.

Here are some words used to describe Rome in a passage from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon:

- swelled, ripened, decay

The words describe the decline and fall of the Roman Empire in a way that makes it sound like an overripe fruit. What if those words were changed to less image-laden ones?

- grew, matured, decline

These words would give a less nuanced, less dramatic description.

NOTES

The sentence starts out without a lot of excitement, but it gets progressively more dramatic with each version. Each sentence conveys more or less the same idea, but each one fulfills a different rhetorical purpose.

The difference between these two sentences is caused largely by the connotations of the bolded words: “angry” and “outraged” have the same denotation: they both mean something like “mad.” But “angry” students sound like they could be calmed down, while “outraged” students must have their concerns addressed. What about “protest” versus “riot”? Do they have the same denotation? What about their connotations?

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DICTION

In the free-response section of the test, it isn’t enough to just bring diction up; you have to be specific about it.

First, give a description of the *type* of language the author uses—is it objective? Subjective? Literal? Abstract?

Then be sure to explain *why* an author has used particular words and *how* those words helped achieve a specific purpose.

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