

RHETORICAL DEVICES

Diction
Imagery
Details = TONE
Language
Syntax

DICTION

Diction is the author's word choice, and includes **connotation** (the suggested meaning of a word) and **denotation** (the literal meaning of the word). Diction guides the meaning an author wants the reader to take away from the text. When interpreting diction, some questions you should ask yourself are: Why did the author choose that word over that word? How does the author's word choice affect my understanding? What was the author's motive in choosing this specific word or phrase?

- Describe diction (choice of words) by considering the following:
 - Words can be *monosyllabic* (one syllable in length) or *polysyllabic* (more than one syllable in length). The higher the ratio of polysyllabic words, the more difficult the content.
 - Words can be mainly *colloquial* (slang), *informal* (conversational), *formal* (literary) or *old-fashioned*.
 - Words can be mainly *denotative* (containing an exact meaning, e.g., dress) or *connotative* (containing suggested meaning, e.g., gown)
 - Words can be *concrete* (specific) or *abstract* (general or conceptual).
 - Words can be *euphonious* (pleasant sounding, e.g., languid, murmur) or *cacophonous* (harsh sound, e.g., raucous, croak).

Example: "The spider herself is of uncertain lineage..." (Dillard).

Instead of saying the spider has no specific species, Annie Dillard uses the word "lineage". How does her use of this word change your idea of this spider? How does Dillard want the reader to feel about this spider?

IMAGERY

Imagery appeals to your five senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch). Images help convey the author's attitude and tone. Some questions to ask yourself when interpreting imagery are: Why did the author choose this particular image? How does this image affect this piece of literature?

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| Alliteration | repetition of consonant sounds at the start of a word | The giggling girl gave gum. |
| Assonance | repetition of vowel sounds in the middle of a word | Moths cough and drop wings |
| Consonance | repetition of consonant sounds in the middle of a word | The man has kin in Spain |
| Onomatopoeia | writing sounds as words | The clock went tick tock |
| Simile | a direct comparison of unlike things using like or as | Her hair is like a rat's nest |
| Metaphor | a direct comparison of unlike things | The man's suit is a rainbow |
| Hyperbole | a deliberate exaggeration for effect | I'd die for a piece of candy |

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|------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Understatement | represents something as less than it is | A million dollars is okay |
| Personification | attributing human qualities to inhuman objects | The teapot cried for water |
| Metonymy | word exchanged for another closely associated with it | Uncle Sam wants you! |
| Pun | play on words – Uses words with multiple meanings | Shoes menders mend soles. |
| Symbol | something that represents/stands for something else | the American Flag |
| Analogy | comparing two things that have at least one thing in common | A similar thing happened... |
| Oxymoron | Use of words seemingly in contradiction to each other | bittersweet chocolate |

DETAILS

Details are facts that help color an otherwise drab “picture” for the reader.

Details give life to characters, settings, and situations. It is through details that the reader is able to form precise mental images.

Example: “When called upon, I delivered an effortless list of things that I detest: blood sausage, intestinal pates, braid pudding...I then declared my love for IBM typewriters, the French word for *bruise*, and my electric floor waxer” (Sedaris).

Think about what choices Sedaris makes and what these choices say about him. What if he just said I listed several items I detest and three I love? How would that change the essay?

LANGUAGE

Language is the entire body of words in a piece of text. This is not the same as *diction*, which involves merely isolated examples of words. The language used in a text helps shape its tone. For example, a wedding invitation might use formal language, an e-mail to a friend will use informal language, and a text message might use a series of symbols and abbreviations that form an altogether different kind of language.

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|--------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Artificial | false | Literal | apparent, word for word |
| Bombastic | pompous, ostentatious | Moralistic | puritanical, righteous |
| Colloquial | vernacular | Obscure | unclear |
| Concrete | actual, specific, particular | Obtuse | dull-witted, undiscerning |
| Connotative | alludes to; suggestive | Ordinary | everyday, common |
| Cultured | cultivated, refined, finished | Pedantic | didactic, scholastic, bookish |
| Detached | cut-off, removed, separated | Plain | clear, obvious |
| Emotional | expressive of emotions | Poetic | lyric, melodious, romantic |
| Esoteric | understood by a chosen few | Precise | exact, accurate, decisive |
| Euphemistic | insincere, affected | Pretentious | pompous, gaudy, inflated |
| Exact | verbatim, precise | Provincial | rural, rustic, unpolished |
| Figurative | erving as illustration | Scholarly | intellectual, academic |
| Formal | academic, conventional | Sensuous | passionate, luscious |
| Grotesque | hideous, deformed | Simple | clear, intelligible |
| Homespun | folksy, homey, native, rustic | Slang | lingo, colloquialism |
| Idiomatic | Peculiar, vernacular | Symbolic | representative, metaphorical |
| Insipid | uninteresting, tame, dull | Trite | common, banal, stereotyped |
| Jargon | vocabulary for a profession | Informal | casual, relaxed, unofficial |
| Learned | educated, experienced | Vulgar | coarse, indecent, tasteless |

Example: “That night when the katydids and tree frogs and every other musical creature were wound up and going strong, I walked around the honey house, feeling like I had spring fever” (Kidd 284).

The language used in this passage is conversational and almost colloquial. By using words like “katydids” and phrases like “wound up,” Kidd creates a comfortable, rural atmosphere. The words in this passage are not formal or highfalutin; rather, they are informal and commonplace.

Rhetorical Devices -- The use of language that creates a literary effect – enhance and support

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| Rhetorical Question | food for thought; create satire/sarcasm; pose dilemma |
| Euphemism | substituting a milder or less offensive sounding word(s) |
| Aphorism | universal commends, sayings, proverbs – convey major point |
| Repetition | also called refrain; repeated word, sentence or phrase |
| Restatement | main point said in another way |
| Irony | Either verbal or situational – good for revealing attitude |
| Allusion | refers to something universally known |
| Paradox | a statement that can be true and false at the same time |

SYNTAX

Syntax focuses on the way sentences are structured, the way they are crafted. When analyzing syntax, look for varied uses of punctuation, paragraph divisions, sentence length, and sharp contrasts in diction. How does the sentence structure affect the reader? How does it affect the text? Why are some sentences long? Why are others short? What purpose does the structure of various sentences serve?

Consider the following patterns and structures:

- Does the sentence length fit the subject matter?
- Why is the sentence length effective?
- What variety of sentence lengths are present?
- Sentence beginnings – Variety or Pattern?
- Arrangement of ideas in sentences
- Arrangement of ideas in paragraph – Pattern?

Construction of sentences to convey attitude

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|----------------------------|---|
| Declarative | assertive – A statement |
| Imperative | authoritative - Command |
| Interrogative | asks a question |
| Simple Sentence | one subject and one verb |
| Loose Sentence | details after the subject and verb – happening now |
| Periodic Sentence | details before the subject and verb – reflection on a past event |
| Juxtaposition | normally unassociated ideas, words or phrases placed ext together |
| Parallelism | show equal ideas; for emphasis; for rhythm |
| Repetition | words, sounds, and ideas used more than once – rhythm/emphasis |
| Rhetorical Question | a question that expects no answer |

Punctuation is included in syntax

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|--------------------------|--|
| Ellipses | a trailing off; equally etc.; going off into a dreamlike state |
| Dash | interruption of a thought; an interjection of a thought into another |
| Semicolon | parallel ideas; equal ideas; a piling up of detail |
| Colon | a list; a definition or explanation; a result |
| Italics | for emphasis |
| Capitalization | for emphasis |
| Exclamation Point | for emphasis; for emotion |

Sentence Structure

Describe the sentence structure by considering the following:

1. Examine the sentence length. Are the sentences *telegraphic* (shorter than 5 words in length), *short* (approximately 5 words in length), *medium* (approximately 18 words in length), or *long and involved* (30 or more words in length)? Does the sentence length fit the subject matter? What variety of lengths is present? Why is the sentence length effective?
2. Examine sentence beginnings. Is there a good variety or does a patterning emerge?
3. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a sentence. Are they set out in a special way for a purpose?
4. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a paragraph. Is there evidence of any pattern or structure?
5. Examine the sentence patterns. Some elements to consider are listed below:

- a. A *declarative (assertive) sentence* makes a statement: e.g., The king is sick.
- b. An *imperative sentence* gives a command: e.g., Stand up.
- c. An *interrogative sentence* asks a question: e.g., Is the king sick?
- d. An *exclamatory sentence* makes an exclamation: e.g., The king is dead!
- e. A *simple sentence* contains one subject and one verb: e.g., The singer bowed to her adoring audience.
- f. A *compound sentence* contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinate conjunction (and, but, or) or by a semicolon: e.g., The singer bowed to the audience, but she sang no encores.
- g. A *complex sentence* contains an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses: e.g., You said that you would tell the truth.
- h. A *compound-complex sentence* contains two or more principal clauses and one or more subordinate clauses: e.g., The singer bowed while the audience applauded, but she sang no encores.
- i. A *loose sentence* makes complete sense if brought to a close before the actual ending: e.g., We reached Edmonton/that morning/after a turbulent flight/and some exciting experiences.
- j. A *periodic sentence* makes sense only when the end of the sentence is reached: e.g., That morning, after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences, we reached Edmonton.
- k. In a *balanced sentence*, the phrases or clauses balance each other by virtue of their likeness of structure, meaning, or length: e.g., He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- l. *Natural order of a sentence* involves constructing a sentence so the subject comes before the predicate: e.g., Oranges grow in California.
- m. *Inverted order of a sentence (sentence inversion)* involves constructing a sentence so that the predicate comes before the subject: e.g., In California grow oranges. This is a device in which normal sentence patterns are reverse to create an emphatic or rhythmic effect.
- n. *Split order of a sentence* divides the predicate into two parts with the subject coming in the middle: e.g., In California oranges grow.
- o. *Juxtaposition* is a poetic and rhetorical device in which normally unassociated ideas, words, or phrases are placed next to one another creating an effect of surprise and wit: e.g., “The apparition of these faces in the crowd:/ Petals on a wet, black bough” (“In a Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound)
- p. *Parallel structure (parallelism)* refers to a grammatical or structural similarity between sentences or parts of a sentence. It involves an arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased: e.g., He was walking, running, and jumping for joy.
- q. *Repetition* is a device in which words, sounds, and ideas are used more than once to enhance rhythm and create emphasis: e.g., “...government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (“Address at Gettysburg” by Abraham Lincoln)
- r. A *rhetorical question* is a question that expects no answer. It is used to draw attention to a point that is generally stronger than a direct statement: e.g., If Mr. Ferchoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin’s arguments?

Example: “Outside I heard the wind high in the trees, a singsong voice that carried me back to long-ago times when I would wake in the night to the same sound and, muddled with sleep and wanting, would imagine it was my mother out there among the trees, singing her bottomless love” (Kidd 258).

Because the sentence is lengthy, it connotes that long stretch of time that memory can create, and memory is exactly where Lily is at this point. The length of the sentence also helps convey the dreamlike quality of her memory of “muddled” sleep. Also, Lily is remembering her mother’s “bottomless love,” which also connects to the seemingly “bottomless” sentence.

Adapted from AP Language & Composition Course Handouts