

ANALYZING DICTION AND WRITING COMMENTARY

The words **diction**, **language**, and **figurative language** are terms that you will use interchangeably when you analyze an author's style. These words all refer to the concept of an author's **WORD CHOICE**.

1. WORD CHOICE:

➤ Word choice is probably the most powerful element of style for you to understand. If the directions in the prompt do not give you any specific terms to start your analysis, always begin with diction—you won't be wrong. Many words in our language have strong connotations, and authors learn to use them on purpose to elicit certain responses from the reader.

2. DENOTATION means the literal, dictionary definition of a word.

➤ Example: The words "plump" and "obese" both literally describe a person who is overweight. This is the dictionary definition of both words. It is the shared meaning of these 2 synonyms.

3. CONNOTATION means the implied or suggested meaning attached to a word, or the emotional "tag" that goes along with a word.

➤ Example: The word "plump" has the connotation of being pleasantly fat, almost cutely overweight. Its connotation describes women more often than men. It is this extra "emotional" feeling that shows how we use the word. The word "obese," often used by medical personnel, has a more technical connotation. It carries a less emotional, more scientific emotional tag. Both "plump" and "obese" have the same literal definition, but the connotations are different.

Writing Commentary on Diction

Steps to take for commentary on diction:

1. You must discuss the connotation of the word or phrase to do a good job of diction analysis.
2. Comment on the emotional response. What is the tone? Mood?
3. Comment on the purpose of the type of diction an author uses. What is the significance? What does it show us about characters? What does it show about the author? What does it show about the setting.

Integrating Quotations

When you analyze style, you will often quote from the passage to support the points you make. The best way to include quotations is by integrating them smoothly into your own sentences. This is also called embedding quotations or incorporating quotations.

➤ Here is an example of a poorly integrated Quotation:

The phrase, "The gloom hovering over them," shows the ominous feeling of the scene.

➤ This is better:

The scene with "the gloom hovering over them" was an eerie and dismal picture.

➤ If you change the form of a word when you quote, you must enclose that word in brackets to show your reader what you did. Here is an example of brackets:

As the "gloom [hovered] over them," the reader felt a sense of ominous unrest.

PRACTICE: Diction analysis and commentary

The boy **surveyed** the class, congratulating himself for **snatching** the highest grade on the test.

Two words are important here: surveyed and snatching. They are the words with the strongest connotations.

Commentary #1: When the “boy surveyed the class, congratulating himself” a reader forms the idea that the boy is acting as if he were a king looking at lowly subject. The purpose for this word choice seems to be that it creates an emotional distance or liking between the reader and the character, which is often the feeling created with the antagonist in the story. Thus, this word choice leads a reader to feel almost distant from the boy.

Commentary #2: In this excerpt, the author describes the boy “[surveying] the class.” When one “surveys” something, one is usually placed above that which is being surveyed, causing them to look down. Therefore, it is as if the boy sees himself on a kind of Mt. Olympus, placed above his classmates, sitting with other gods and looking down on lesser mortals surveying their reactions. This emotional response seems to purposefully pit the protagonist against the reader.. Thus, the diction causes the reader not to like this character and speculate on the integrity of this character.

This last point of commentary is especially good because the writer made an allusion to another bit of information— a reference to mythology. It expanded the ideas of “surveying” and “snatching,” and it described the purpose for this diction.

Now it is your turn to try some commentary for the other strong connotative word in the example--**snatching**. (Remember to write phrases of commentary, not full sentences.)

Commentary #1: