

Diction

ENGLISH II

What is diction?

- ▶ Basically, it's word choice.
- ▶ It is the foundation of voice.

Why is diction important?

- ▶ Word choice gives **color** and **texture** to the writing.

His head aching, his throat sore, he forgot to light the cigarette.

from Sinclair Lewis, *Cass Timberlane*

- ▶ They give the level of **formality** to the writing...

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

versus

I learned that brave men beat their fears.

Nelson Mandela

Diction uses *big* words

- ▶ To fully understand diction, you often have to *hear* and *feel* the words.
- ▶ Don't skip words you don't know – look them up. The author put them there for a reason.

A coat isn't **torn**; it is **tattered**.

The United States doesn't **want** revenge – the army **thirsts** for revenge.

A door does not **shut**; it **thuds**.

- ▶ Diction brings the reader into the scene, enabling full participation in the writer's world.

Writer's purpose determines diction

- ▶ Informative texts usually use straightforward diction
- ▶ Writing for entertainment will likely use words that are ironic, playful, or used in unexpected ways

Occasion determines diction too

- ▶ Think of diction like clothes...to where would you most likely wear a swimming suit? What about a tuxedo or formal dress?
- ▶ **Formal** diction is used primarily 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 are typically used to create a mood or capture a particular historic or regional dialect.

Connotation versus denotation

- ▶ Understanding both is important with diction.
- ▶ **Denotation** is the dictionary definition of a word.
- ▶ **Connotation** is the meaning *suggested* by the word.

Maturity

Age

Dense

Impenetrable

Thin

Gaunt

Prisoner

Inmate

Diction – Lesson 1

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*

1. Look up and write the definition of *antidote*.
2. By using the word *antidote*, what does the author imply about the inability to feel for another?
3. If we changed the word *antidote* to gift, what effect would it have on the meaning of the sentence?
4. Working with a partner, brainstorm a list of medical terms (at least five); then write a sentence using a medical term to characterize art. Be prepared to explain the term and its meaning within your sentence.

Diction – Lesson 2

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 by E.B. White*

1. Look up and write the definition of *kindled*.
2. What kind of flame does *kindled* imply? How does this verb suit the purpose of the sentence?
3. 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*.
4. Working with a partner, brainstorm a list of action verbs that demonstrate the effects of sunlight (at least five). Be prepared to explain the terms.

Diction – Lesson 3

An aged man is but a paltry thing
A **tattered** coat upon a stick...

-W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

1. Look up and write the definition of *tattered*.
2. What picture is created by the use of the word *tattered*?
3. By understanding the connotations of the word *tattered*, what do we understand about the persona's attitude toward an *aged man*?
4. Working with a partner, list three adjectives that can be used to describe a pair of shoes. Each adjective should connote a different feeling about the shoes. Be prepared to share and explain your list.