



When you critique an oral or media presentation, two of the most important things to evaluate are its **diction** and **syntax**. Those words are sometimes used interchangeably, but they actually mean different things:

**Diction** means a speaker or writer's **choice of words**, while

**Syntax** means **how those words are put together**.

In English, there are many different ways to say the same thing. So diction and syntax become the **hallmarks of** a writer or speaker's **style**.

## Diction (Choice of Words)

As we said, in English there is usually more than one right way to say something. **One uses different words or phrases depending on the situation.** Professor David Megginson of the University of Ottawa gives this example of four different ways to describe the same event. You could call it:

a screw-up  
a mistake  
an accident, or  
an oversight

When would you be most likely to use which description? It depends on whom you're talking to.

If you were speaking to a friend, you might say "screw-up."

If you were correcting a child, you'd probably say "mistake."

If you were making a police report, you'd describe "an accident."

And if you were explaining yourself to your boss, you might downplay what happened by calling it "an oversight."

So whenever you evaluate a speech or presentation, ask yourself if the writer or speaker chose the best possible word for the situation.



## Grammar & Missing Words

Many mistakes in diction are really mistakes in **grammar**. For example, you can speak of "the enormity of a crime" or "the enormity of the violence" but not "the enormity of his generosity." That's because the word *enormity* can only be used to describe something negative. Here's how the dictionary defines *enormity*:

The quality of passing all moral bounds;  
excessive wickedness or outrageousness

Everything you've learned about **grammar**, **word roots**, **affixes** and **etymology** (the history of words) comes into play when you are evaluating diction. These subjects are covered at length in a number of eTAP Lessons, especially English/Language Arts Lesson 1 for Grades 9 through 12.

Now would be a good time to review that Lesson.

You'll learn all sorts of interesting things -- like where the word *twiddle* comes from. *Twiddle* means, "to do little or nothing -- to be idle." Many etymologists think that *twiddle* is a combination of the words *twist* (to twist one's thumbs -- an idle way to pass time) and *fiddle* (meaning, "to idly play around with").

Another thing look for is **missing words** -- writers and speakers sometimes leave words out of sentences. For example, if you say, "the reason he is late is because he had a flat tire," that's incorrect diction -- the **person** didn't have a flat tire, **his car or bicycle** did. The sentence should be, "the reason he is late is because **his car** had a flat tire."

## Word Meanings

Something else that happens is that the meaning of a word can change -- like *bad* coming to mean *good*. When something cataclysmic happens -- like the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon -- words can take on new or different meanings overnight. For an interesting exploration of post-9/11 diction and syntax, click <http://www.yourdictionary.com/library/changed.htm>

When critiquing diction, also check to see if the speaker falls back on catch phrases or clichés instead of using fresh, original language.

## Catch Phrases and Cliches

A trite over-used phrase is called a *catch phrase*. It shows that the writer or speaker is too lazy to come up with a new way to say something. A particularly stale or worn-out catch phrase is called a *cliché*.

Here are some examples:

at the end of the day  
when all is said and done  
the key to the future  
enough to worry about  
putting the cart before the horse  
the bitter end  
eat your heart out  
quick as a wink  
a rolling stone  
the best-laid plans  
love never fails

Obviously, if you are quoting someone who uses one of these phrases, you must reproduce it. And there are times where pre-existing writing formulas should be observed, such as in technical reports or accounting audits.

But otherwise catch phrases should be avoided *at all costs*. (Did you find the catch phrase in that sentence?)

Another aspect of diction is how a word **sounds**. This is particularly important in an oral presentation. For example, If harsh-sounding words are used in a gentle description of nature, the speaker hasn't given his or her diction enough thought.

## Syntax (How Words are Put Together)

As we said, **syntax** means **how words are put together** to form sentences. As with diction, many choices are possible. The choices a speaker or writer makes are what determine his or her **style**.

When evaluating style, ask yourself these questions.



Did the speaker use short, simple sentences or long, complex ones? Or maybe a combination of the two? A combination can be interesting -- provided the words all "hang together" properly.

Did the ideas and language engage your interest or put you to sleep?

Did the speaker use unusual sentence construction and sentence patterns?

What kind of rhetorical devices did he or she use? (For a review of rhetorical devices, refer to eTAP Language Arts Instruction 2-3 for Grades 9-12.)

As we said when we talked about diction, **things can be said in a number of different ways**. Consider these two newspaper headlines:

Iraq forces suspension of surveillance flights.  
*The New York Times*, 3/11/2003

U.N. withdraws U-2 planes.  
*USA Today*, 3/11/2000

Both headlines refer to the same event -- the ending of surveillance flights in Iraqi air space. But the diction and syntax make them sound like two separate incidents.

Or take these sports headlines. Both describe the same hockey game between the Denver Avalanche and the Detroit Red Wings -- a game that the Red Wings won 5 to 3.

Injury begins Avs' tumble  
*The Denver Post*

Wings too much for Avalanche  
*The Detroit News*

It's not hard to figure out which team is from which city, is it?

It used to be thought that all media sources were impartial. But that's changed. As 24-hour news proliferates, the Internet expands, and cable and satellite bring us hundreds of channels, many media outlets don't make any secret of their point of view.



For example, some observers believe that radio talk shows mostly have a conservative slant, while the broadcast networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) are more liberal.

And of course media from different countries report on events from different perspectives. While covering the U.S.-Iraq conflict in 2003, newspapers in the U.S. and Britain referred to "**coalition** forces" and "the War **in** Iraq," while much of the Arab media reported on "the War **on** Iraq" and "**invasion** forces."

And there are even regional differences within the U.S. In the North, the Civil War is called just that, while southerners refer to it as The War Between the States or The War of Northern Incursion.

So how can you tell who's telling the truth? It's difficult.

The best thing to do is to read and watch as many media sources as you can and try to figure out where each is coming from.

Then decide who's right and wrong for yourself.