

ANALYSIS OF AUDIENCE AND LEVELS OF DICTION

The following information should be used as a guide in analyzing the different *levels of diction* a writer may use in order for a student to determine the *nature* and possible education level (i.e., reading comprehension ability) of the *targeted or intended audience* in the various readings assigned, as well as for help in writing essays in college.

Writers will sometimes use a *single, consistent level of diction*, such as a strictly moderate level when attempting to reach an audience with possibly varied educational levels, such as readers of a daily newspaper or mass-circulation magazine. Writers will occasionally *vary the level up or down* from this moderate level, using a high-moderate or low-moderate or even slang term for the precision of its meaning or perhaps an intended impact on the audience. A writer's *isolated* use of higher-level diction can usually be perceived by audiences with lower education levels due to the context in which the diction is used.

The *totality of the diction* used in an essay must be considered in order to accurately assess an audience and its education level. Diction level can't simply be viewed in a single paragraph or two unless the diction is highly consistent. Some types of diction, such as jargon, slang, or foreign languages, may only be used in isolated portions of an essay for particular communication purposes. In addition, a writer's *point of view* — a *rhetorical position in the overall communication attempt* (primarily a reference to personal pronoun usage) — is also an indicator of a targeted audience and its educational level as well as its expectations of a piece of writing.

- **Formal** — This term is used by some teachers of composition to refer to writing *style*, a combination of a writer's diction, sentence construction and variety, as well as tone. Formal-style communication is usually encountered in speeches or writing for ceremonial purposes, such as in a president's inaugural address.

Examples: cull; ingenuous; insuperable

- **High Moderate** – A distinction used by some when the definition for ‘Formal’ as used above is applied. These are words which are less frequently used or encountered in daily speech and writing, but which may be used due to their precision of meaning. If there is a consistent presence of this level in an essay, its usage is indicative of an audience with substantial college education, likely a 4-year degree.

Examples: select; objective; view

- **Moderate** – Words commonly used and encountered in daily speech and writing. Its presence in an essay is indicative of an audience with at least a middle-school education (approximately 8th to 9th grade).

Examples: choose; mission; observe

- **Informal/Low Moderate** – More basic or simplistic language than moderate; its use by a professional writer is indicative of an audience expectation of a very informal or conversational level of communication. It’s best avoided in college writing.

Examples: pick; goal; watch

- **Colloquialisms** – Shortened forms of commonly used words (such as *TV* for television, *phone* for telephone, *cell* for cellular telephone, etc.). It is also identified with the use of contracted forms of words (such as *can’t* for *cannot*, *don’t* for *do not*, etc). These colloquialisms are generally acceptable in writing situations that are not specified as ‘formal’ in nature. Colloquialisms also include idiomatic expressions such as ‘*keep an eye on*’ for ‘observe’ or ‘watch.’

- **Regionalisms** – Words or expressions associated with particular regions of the United States.

Examples: ‘you guys’ or ‘y’all’ for ‘you’ or ‘you all’; ‘over yonder’ for ‘over there’; or more colorful expressions such as ‘as the crow flies’ or ‘spittin’ distance’)

- **Slang**— Words used in speech but usually inappropriate for college writing, other than in reproducing speech for dialog. A professional writer's use of slang would therefore be considered a deliberate attempt to influence the audience in some way in a particular writing situation.

Examples: These words change so frequently in speech among certain groups that a term used to mean one thing today may not mean that at all in the near future; thus, identifying individual words is somewhat pointless, and at times, agreement on the meaning of the term is equally impossible, even among members of the group using the terms.

- **Non-standard**— Words which are not part of proper written English grammar. If used in speech or writing, they signify to the literate audience a person who lacks education. Thus, they would only be used in writing in order to reproduce the speech patterns of that type of person for purposes of dialog.

Examples: ain't, nohow, nowheres, hisself, theirselves

- **Jargon/Technical Language**— Words which are commonly understood by a particular audience with *specialized knowledge or education*. Jargon could include terms used in *medical, legal, computer, and automotive* fields, as well as many others.

Examples: coronary thrombosis (medical); writ (legal); motherboard (computer); venturi (automotive); rhetorical modes (composition)

- **Foreign Languages**— Any language other than English which a writer uses would require special knowledge or education on the part of the audience in order to be read and appreciated. While some non-English words may become fairly widely known (particularly in the area of food), usage of less-well-known words would signify a *highly specialized audience* with knowledge of that language expected.

Examples: carpe diem, a priori (Latin); dias, semanas (Spanish); coterie, outré (French)

FORMAL/HIGH MODERATE	MODERATE	INFORMAL/LOW MODERATE
Cull	Select/Choose	Pick
Ingest	Consume	Eat
Ingenuous	Candid	Open
Clandestine	Hidden	Secret
Vain	Conceited	Proud
Interrogate	Question	Ask
Impart/Communicate	Inform/Relate	Tell
Resuscitate	Revive	Bring back to life
Interject	Insert	Put in
Irate	Angry	Mad
Corpulent	Plump	Fat
Flee	Retreat/Depart	Leave
Insuperable	Insurmountable	Unable to be overcome
Penultimate	Next to last	
Limn	Portray (as in words)	Describe
Salient	Conspicuous	Noticeable
Satiate	Satisfy	Fill
Enmity	Animosity	Hatred/Dislike
Disperse	Distribute	Spread

Meld	Merge/Blend	Mix
Meretricious	Pretentious/Gaudy	Flashy
Conflate	Fuse/Combine	Bring together
Fathom	Probe/Comprehend	Understand
Germane	Relevant	Fitting
Belie	Contradict	Prove wrong
Bellicose	Belligerent	Angry
Perspicacity	Keeness	Sharpness
Perdition	Damnation	Loss
Prevaricate/Equivocate	Mislead	Lie
Truculent/Vitriolic	Savage	Mean
Asperity	Rigor	Roughness
Vaunt	Boast	Brag
Assay	Attempt	Try

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