

# DICTION

Word choice, or **DICTION**, is typically the first powerful element of style for students to understand due to its simplicity. If directions in a writing prompt do not provide special terms/techniques/elements for students to analyze, diction is always a safe choice--though rather rudimentary. As many words in our language have strong **connotations**, authors undoubtedly use them with the *intention* of shaping meaning and *eliciting* particular responses from readers.

These two terms refer to the two levels of word meanings:

The word **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 words, making them synonyms.*

The word **CONNOTATION** refers to the implied or suggested meaning attached to a word, or the emotional "charge" it carries along with its denotative meaning.

*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 layer of associated meaning that enhances what it conveys and indicates how we typically use the term. Meanwhile, the word "obese" has a more clinical connotation. It carries a more objective, scientific association or charge. It is in the connotations of these synonyms where we can discern distinctions between them.*

**CONNOTATION** is important because it shows differences between synonyms and suggests specific ways in which we use a word. You must understand connotations of the words that you read and write in order to analyze style well.

Here is an example of a sentence with strong connotative DICTION:

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

Two words are important in the example above: "surveyed," and "snatching." They carry the strongest connotations.

The first step of analyzing diction is recognizing interesting word choices. ***Annotation supports this recognition!*** Once you identify interesting diction, you must analyze it. This means that you write interpretive or explanatory comments about the word or phrase and how it affects and reveals meaning in the work.

After you find interesting DICTION examples, you must discuss the connotation of the word or phrase to successfully analyze DICTION. You should comment on the reaction the word choice elicits in a reader, and how the particular word choice indicates the mood or attitude (TONE) of the author, or even how the particular word choice indicates meaning or a point (THEME) the author seems to be making. Below is an example of DICTION analysis and commentary on the word “surveyed” as used in the example sentence ***The boy surveyed the class, congratulating himself for snatching the highest grade on the test.***

Commentary note #1--conveys the idea of someone looking around as if he were a king, looking at lowly, common subjects.

Commentary note #2--the boy sees himself as an Olympian god, gazing down at lesser mortals.

Now it is ***your turn*** to try your hand at composing commentary, this time for the other strong, connotative word in the example sentence: “snatching.” Remember to start by writing phrases of commentary, not full sentences. At this point, you are gathering evidence to consider using.

Commentary note #1 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Commentary note #2 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

One additional thought: analyzing DICTION can include a consideration of the type of words chosen for a poem or passage, or a single stanza or section of writing. Don’t forget to consider word choices as a group in addition to individual word choices when analyzing.

So far, you have covered the general idea behind DICTION analysis. The next step is to practice spotting DICTION samples in an actual passage, and forming comments about them.

*FYI--we will be using the same passage as we start practicing how to analyze many of the “Big Five” items. If you choose to annotate on “The Rattler,” please do so neatly so that you can read it through several rounds of studying it.*

Sample prompt: Read the following passage carefully. Then, in a well-developed essay, discuss the effect the passage has on the reader by analyzing the techniques used by the writer to achieve that effect. In your essay you might consider such aspects of writing as organization, point of view, language, and selection of detail.

## THE RATTLER

After sunset...I walked out into the desert...Light was thinning; the scrub's dry, savory odors were sweet on the cooler air. In this, the first pleasant moment for a walk after long, blazing hours, I thought I was the only thing abroad. Abruptly, I stopped short.

The other lay rigid, as suddenly arrested, his body undulant; the head was not drawn back to strike, but was merely turned a little to watch what I would do. It was a rattlesnake—and knew it. I mean that where a six-foot black snake as thick as my wrist, armed with powerful fangs and capable of long-range attack will flee at the sight of a man, the rattler felt no necessity of getting out of anybody's path. He held his ground in calm watchfulness; he was not even rattling yet, much less was he coiled; he was waiting for me to show my intentions.

My first instinct was to let him go his way and I would go mine, and with this he would have been well content. I have never killed an animal I was not obliged to kill; the sport in taking life is a satisfaction I can't feel. But I reflected that there were children, dogs, horses at the ranch, as well as men and women lightly shod; my duty, plainly, was to kill the snake. I went back to the ranch house, got a hoe, and returned.

The rattler had not moved; he lay there like a live wire. But he saw the hoe. Now indeed his tail twitched, the little tocsin sounded; he drew back his head and I raised my weapon. Quicker than I could strike he shot into a dense bush and set up his rattling. He shook and shook his fair but furious signal, quite sportingly warning me that I had made an unprovoked attack, attempted to take his life, and that if I persisted he would have no choice to but take mine if he could. I listened for a minute to this little song of death. It was not ugly, though it was ominous. It said that life was dear, and would be dearly sold. And I reached into the paper-bag bush with my hoe and, hacking about, soon dragged him out of it with his back broken.

He struck passionately once more at the hoe; but a moment later his neck was broken, and he was soon dead. Technically, that is; he was still twitching, and when I picked him up by the tail, some consequent jar, some mechanical reflex, made his jaws gape and snap once more—proving that a dead snake may still bite. There was blood in his mouth and poison dripping from his fangs; it was all a nasty sight, pitiful now that it was done.

I did not cut the rattles off for a trophy; I let him drop into the close green guardianship of the paper-bag bush. Then, for a moment, I could see him as I might have let him go, sinuous and self-respecting in departure over the twilit sands.

Before you tackle writing about any literary device/element/technique, you need to write an INTRODUCTION for your essay FIRST.

You should have already studied tone and attitude, and we will study TONE analysis with much greater depth after we have worked through more of the “Big Five” lists. The important thing to remember about style analysis is that a strong major thesis paragraph must include two different but complementary tones or attitudes.

To practice, look over “The Rattler.” Do a two-to-three minute free-write on this question: What feelings did the author have about the man’s killing the snake? (There is no one right answer--to start, consider how you actually felt, and if you think the author wanted that to be your reaction).

[illegible]

As an initial reaction to the story, students will often say they were sorry the snake had to be killed. They understand that the man did not **want** to kill it—he simply knew it was necessary. Sometimes students will say the snake seemed human, full of power and dignity. They get a feeling of compassion from the man and a feeling of calm waiting from the snake. You may have written something like this in the free-write you just did.

The next step is to take your description of these feelings or attitudes and put them into your major thesis paragraph—also known as an introduction. Remember to give a clear focus for your essay in the first sentences so your reader will know where your essay is taking them.

Here is a sample major thesis paragraph (introduction) for “The Rattler”:

The author’s techniques used in “The Rattler” convey not only a feeling of sadness and remorse but also a sense of the man’s acceptance of the snake’s impending death. A human being has confronted nature, and in order for him to survive the snake must be killed. The reader feels sympathy for the man’s plight and a reluctant agreement with him for his decision.

That major thesis paragraph may seem strange if you have written essays with a funnel style of introduction, making a general statement and narrowing down to your thesis. This introduction begins with the thesis and further explains it in the sentences that follow. This allows the writing to be interpretive in nature **from the very start**, as you will be directly responding to the prompt from the beginning. It is more of an unfolding than a funnel. And stylistically, it sounds much more sophisticated and thoughtful rather than canned and formulaic.

Now it’s time to turn to paragraph #2 (a body paragraph). This will analyze only the **DICTION** in “The Rattler.” Other elements—detail, point of view, organization—will be in separate paragraphs. Your conclusion will follow those paragraphs.

Before you start the diction paragraph, you need a new topic sentence for it. This is also known as the **BODY PARAGRAPH THESIS**. Here is a sample for a paragraph analyzing diction in “The Rattler”:

The author’s diction heightens the power and force behind the snake as it acts throughout the passage.

This topic sentence/body paragraph thesis must do two things: it should state the element being analyzed **and** give a focus for the paragraph.

In a DICTION paragraph, after you have written the topic sentence that tells what the DICTION “does,” you will write **one** integrated quotation example sentence with DICTION samples you have noted in the passage, followed by **two** sentences of commentary. The commentary must echo the idea in the topic sentence. This unit of writing—one integrated quotation sentence with two or more commentary sentences—is called a “block.” You need **at least two blocks** in each body paragraph of a literary analysis essay.

Remember that in writing example sentences for DICTION, you must include **at least three** different, short quotations from several parts of the passage as you write your sentence.

Here is an example:

Like a soldier, the snake lay “arrested,” waiting for the “unprovoked attack” after shaking his “little tocsin” at the man.

This quotation sentence integrates **three** separate DICTION examples taken from different parts of the passage. This demonstrates that you understood the entire piece and can choose quotations thoughtfully.

Now look over the words or phrases you have marked on your own copy of “The Rattler” and write a quotation sentence of your own. Remember to use three different, short quotes.

Write your sentence here: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The next step is to write analysis or interpretation through commentary for the three quotes you included in your example sentence. These thoughts should echo the tones mentioned in the introduction. To create commentary, you must first jot down some ideas for the 3 quotes you have included in your example sentence.

Here is an example, based on the previous sample sentence for “The Rattler.”

*Commentary note #1--feeling of adversary versus adversary*

*Commentary note #2--snake is powerful, dangerous; won't attack without provocation; military feeling in being armed*

Commentary formation does not mean paraphrasing the quotes from the example sentence. It means thinking about the feeling behind the quoted words and the reader's responses to these words and phrases. Within the two points, the commentary must discuss all three quoted words/phrases. The process is to think about the **connotations** of the quotes in the text and write down how you feel when you read them, and what ideas come to mind when you think about the words.

Now look at your quotation sentence that you wrote. Think of two points of commentary for your choices and write them below.

Commentary Sentence #1:

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Commentary Sentence #2:

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What you have just done (the example sentence + two commentary sentences) is create the first block of a paragraph that analyzes DICTION in "The Rattler." Each body paragraph must have at least TWO blocks to be fully developed; it may have three blocks if you have the time and more to say. Only one block feels skimpy and under-developed, and fails to demonstrate that you are fully competent in discussing a particular literary technique/element/device. Offer a sense of closure to the paragraph with a final opinion--offering an overall comment on the use of DICTION, based on all your examples and commentary from all blocks. Here is an example of a final opinion statement for a DICTION analysis paragraph for "The Rattler":

The author's specific word choices function to successfully characterize the man as humane yet responsible, and the snake as dignified yet dangerous.

You won't be writing your own version of a DICTION analysis paragraph based upon "The Rattler." You will have another literary sample to read and write a DICTION analysis paragraph about, using the same formula (topic sentence + 2 blocks + final opinion statement).