

Basic Elements of Style – Diction, Syntax, Point of View, Tone, Theme

Diction = word choice – A study of diction is the analysis of how a writer uses language for a distinct purpose and effect, including word choice and figures of speech.

“The difference between the right word and almost the right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” (Mark Twain)

Examine the following when considering word choice:

Informal Diction (personal writing) e.g. bug, folks, job, kid, boss, get across

Formal Diction (academic or literary writing) e.g. germ, relatives, position, child, superior, communicate

Types of Diction

Colloquial words – conversational language – Is there dialect?

Slang – highly informal

Jargon – the special language of a profession or group (lawyer talk, technical talk)

Ways to Characterize Diction

General – look, walk, sit, cry, throw, dog, boy

Specific – gaze, stride, slump, weep, hurl, black Labrador retrieve, tall boy

Monosyllabic words – single syllable words

Polysyllabic words – more than one syllable in the words

The greater the number of polysyllabic words, the more complex the passage.

Denotative words – dictionary meaning (wedding dress, law officer, public servant)

Connotative words – emotional meaning (wedding gown, cop, bureaucrat)

Cacophonous words – harsh sounding words (maggot)

Euphonious words – pleasant sounding words (butterfly)

Abstract words – not material; representing a thought (pleasant tasting)

Concrete words – real or actual; specific, not general (sour tasting)

Diction Review

- Are the words monosyllabic or polysyllabic?
- Is the diction formal or informal? Colloquial? Slangy? Filled with jargon?
- Is the language concrete or abstract?
- Is there a change in the level of diction in the passage?

Figures of Speech

- Does the passage use unusual images or patterns of imagery?

- Does the author create analogies, like similes or metaphors?
- Does the author use personification?
- Is there deliberate hyperbole or understatement in the passage?
- Does the author employ paradox or oxymoron to add complexity?
- What part do rhythm and sound devices such as alliteration or onomatopoeia play in the passage?
- What purpose do the figures of speech serve, and what effect do they have on the passage?

Literary Devices

| | | |
|-----------------|------------|----------------|
| Alliteration | Pun | Hyperbole |
| Assonance | Apostrophe | Understatement |
| Consonance | Paradox | Onomatopoeia |
| Metaphor | Antithesis | Oxymoron |
| Simile | Synecdoche | Allusion |
| Personification | Metonymy | Irony |

Syntax = sentence structure – Syntax controls verbal pacing and focus.
Examine sentence patterns and variety for their effects.

Sentence length

- Telegraphic – < five words long
- Short - ~ five words long
- Medium - ~ eighteen words long
- Long - > 30 words long

Sentence patterns – What is the function of the sentence?

- Declarative sentence – Tom ate the rat.
- Interrogative sentence – Did Tom eat the rat?
- Exclamatory sentence – Tom ate the rat!
- Imperative sentence – Eat the rat. (Subject of the sentence is understood to be “you.”)

Simple sentence – A sentence that has only one subject and one verb, e.g. Tom ate the rat.

Complex sentence – A sentence made up of one independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses, e.g. Because Tom ate the rat, he died.

Compound sentence – A sentence made up of two or more independent clauses. The clauses are joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or) or by a semi-colon, e.g. Tom ate the rat, and he died.

Compound-complex sentence – A sentence that contains two or more main clauses and one or more subordinate clauses, e.g. Tom ate the rat when he was hungry, and he died.

Periodic sentence – A sentence in which the main thought is not complete until the end, e.g. After a lengthy flight and many stops, we reached Edmonton.

Loose sentence – A sentence in which the essential meaning is complete before the end, e.g. We reached Edmonton, after a lengthy flight and many stops.

Balanced/Parallel sentence – The phrases or clauses balance each other in likeness or structure, meaning, and/or length.
e.g. He was walking, running, and jumping. To err is human, to forgive divine.

Natural order – The subject comes before the predicate, e.g. Saskatoons grow in Saskatchewan.

Inverted order – The predicate comes before the subject, e.g. In Saskatchewan grow saskatoons.

Split order – The predicate is divided into two parts with the subject coming in the middle, e.g. In Saskatchewan saskatoons grow.

Repetition – words sounds or ideas are used more than once to enhance rhythm and create emphasis

Juxtaposition – normally unassociated ideas, words or phrases are placed next to one another creating an effect of surprise and wit, e.g. “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough” (“In a Station of the Metro” Ezra Pound)

Rhetorical question – A question that expects no answer, e.g. If Mr. Ferchoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin’s arguments?

Imagery – a verbal representation of a sensory experience brings the immediacy of sensory experience to writing and gives voice a distinctive quality.

Detail – (facts, observation, and incidents) may be used to develop a topic, shaping and seasoning voice.

Syntax Review

- Are the sentences simple and direct or complex and convoluted?
- Are the sentences loose/cumulative or periodic?
- Are there rhetorical questions in the passage?
- Is there variety in the sentence patterns?
- Does the author use repetition?
- Does the author use parallel structure?
- Does the author use antithesis?
- Does the author use juxtaposition?

Point of View – how the author tells his story

First person – narrator as a major character; narrator as a minor character – the narrator may be naïve or insane – the narrator uses first person pronouns (I, my, mine, we, our, etc.)

Second person – narrator involves the reader through the use of second person pronouns (you, yourself, yours, etc.)

Third person – omniscient, selective omniscient, objective – third person pronouns are used (he, she, him, her, they, them, etc.)

Stream of consciousness – first, second, or third person; narrator records in detail what passes through a person’s mind.

Tone – The manner of expression showing the author’s attitude toward characters, events, or situations. Tone is reflected in the author’s “voice.”

Tone Review

- What seems to be the speaker’s attitude in the passage?
- Is more than one attitude or point of view expressed?
- Does the passage have a noticeable emotional mood or atmosphere?
- What effect does tone have on the reader?

Determining Theme

In identifying the theme, it is necessary to recognize the human experience, motivation, or condition suggested by the literature.

1. List the subjects of the piece – use words or phrases but not sentences – there are many subjects in a literary work
2. Write a sentence in which you describe what the author is saying about a subject.

Style Analysis – Putting it All Together

After annotating a text through an examination of the diction, syntax, point of view, and tone, ask---What is the effect of these devices? How do the devices contribute to the theme?