

DICTION

Word choice or vocabulary. Diction refers to the class of words that an author chooses as appropriate for a particular poem.





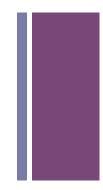
Concrete vs. Abstract:

- concrete = words that refer to what we can immediately perceive with our senses (i.e. plum, cricket, house)
- abstract = words that express ideas or concepts (i.e. love, time, truth)

Ezra Pound's advice to modern poets: "Go in fear of abstractions."

The language of poetry is primarily concrete.





• Literal Meaning: Sometimes the language of a poem references only the concrete reality it describes.

Specimen: "This is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams





Levels of Diction:

- Formal = the heightened, impersonal language of educated persons, usually only written, but possibly spoken on dignified occasions
- General = the ordinary speech of educated native speakers, more studied than colloquial but not pretentious
- Colloquial = the casual or informal but correct language of ordinary native speakers, conversational in tone
- Vulgate = The lowest level of diction, the language of the common people; speech not much affected by schooling



Denotation vs. Connotation:

- Denotation = literal, dictionary meaning of a word
- Connotation = overtones or suggestions of additional meanings that a word may carry beyond its denotative meaning





 Suggestive Meaning: Sometimes the language of a poem implies levels of connotative meaning beyond the literal by evoking allusions, metaphors, or motifs.

Specimen: "London" by William Blake



Checklist: Diction

- As you read, underline words or phrases that appeal to you or seem especially significant
- What is it about each underlined word or phrase that appeals to you?
- How does the word or phrase relate to the other lines? What does it contribute to the poem's effect?
- How does the sound of a word you've chosen add to the poem's tone or mood?
- What would be lost if synonyms were substituted for your favorite words?
- What sort of diction does the poem use? Conversational? Lofty? Monosyllabic? Polysyllabic? Concrete? Abstract?
- □ How does the diction contribute to the poem's flavor and meaning?





Instruction: "Reading Poems Aloud" by Billy Collins

 Additional Specimens: "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by William Butler Yeats & "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden

Tone & Diction: Summary

Listen to "Ask Me" by William Stafford and consider the following:

- Who is speaking in the poem?
- What tone of voice do you hear?
- Which words in particular communicate the tone?
- Consider the suggestive quality evoked in the poem's final line. How do ambiguity and irony serve the poet's purpose in the second stanza?
- How would you describe the poem's theme?