

Diction

Consider:

Art is the **antidote** that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another.

— Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson*

Discuss:

1. By using the word *antidote*, what does the author imply about the inability to feel for another?

2. If we changed the word *antidote* to *gift*, what effect would it have on the meaning of the sentence?

Apply:

Brainstorm with the class and develop a list of medical terms; then write a sentence using a medical term to characterize art. Explain to the class the effect this term has on the meaning of the sentence.

Diction

Consider:

As I watched, the sun broke weakly through, brightened the rich red of the fawns, and **kindled** their white spots.

— E. B. White, “Twins,” *Poems and Sketches of E.B. White*

Discuss:

1. What kind of flame does *kindled* imply? How does this verb suit the purpose of the sentence?

2. Would the sentence be strengthened or weakened by changing *the sun broke weakly through* to *the sun burst through*? Explain the effect this change would have on the use of the verb *kindled*.

Apply:

Brainstorm with the class a list of action verbs that demonstrate the effects of sunlight.

Diction

Consider:

An aged man is but a paltry thing
A **tattered** coat upon a stick....

— W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”

Discuss:

1. What picture is created by the use of the word *tattered*?
2. By understanding the connotations of the word *tattered*, what do we understand about the persona’s attitude toward *an aged man*?

Apply:

List three adjectives that can be used to describe a pair of shoes. Each adjective should connote a different feeling about the shoes. Discuss your list with a partner. Share one of the best adjectives with the class.

Diction

Consider:

The man sighed **hugely**.

— E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

Discuss:

1. What does it mean to sigh hugely?
2. How would the meaning of the sentence change if we rewrote it as:

*The man sighed **loudly**.*

Apply:

Fill in the blank below with an adverb:

The man coughed _____.

Your adverb should make the cough express an attitude. For example, the cough could express contempt, desperation, or propriety. Do not state the attitude. Instead, let the adverb imply it. Share your sentence with the class.

Diction

Consider:

A rowan* like a **lipsticked** girl.

*a small deciduous tree native to Europe, having white flower clusters and orange berries.

— Seamus Heaney, “Song,” *Field Work*

Discuss:

1. Other than the color, what comes to mind when you think of a *lipsticked* girl?
2. How would it change the meaning and feeling of the line if, instead of *lipsticked girl*, the author wrote *girl with lipstick on*?

Apply:

Write a simile comparing a tree with a domesticated animal. In your simile, use a word that is normally used as a noun (like *lipstick*) as an adjective (like *lipsticked*). Share your simile with the class.

Diction

Consider:

Abuelito under a **bald** light bulb, under a ceiling **dusty** with flies, puffs his cigar and counts money soft and wrinkled as old Kleenex.

— Sandra Cisneros, “Tepeyac,” *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*

Discuss:

1. How can a ceiling be *dusty* with flies? Are the flies plentiful or sparse? Active or still? Clustered or evenly distributed?

2. What does Cisneros mean by a *bald* light bulb? What does this reveal about Abuelito’s room?

Apply:

Take Cisneros’s phrase, *under a ceiling dusty with flies*, and write a new phrase by substituting the word *dusty* with a different adjective. Explain to a partner the impact of your new adjective on the sentence.

Diction

Consider:

Meanwhile, the United States Army, **thirsting** for revenge, was **prowling** the country north and west of the Black Hills, killing Indians wherever they could be found.

— Dee Brown, *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*

Discuss:

1. What are the connotations of *thirsting*? What feelings are evoked by this diction?
2. What are the connotations of *prowling*? What kind of animals prowl? What attitude toward the U.S. army does this diction convey?

Apply:

Use an eating or drinking verb in a sentence which expresses anger about a parking ticket. Do not use the verb to literally express eating or drinking. Instead, express your anger through the verb. Use Brown's sentence as a model. Share your sentence with a partner.

Diction

Consider:

Most men wear their belts low here, there being so many **outstanding** bellies, some big enough to have names of their own and be formally introduced. Those men don't **suck** them in or hide them in loose shirts; they **let them hang free**, they pat them, they stroke them as they stand around and talk.

— Garrison Keillor, "Home," *Lake Wobegon Days*

Discuss:

1. What is the usual meaning of *outstanding*? What is its meaning here? What does this pun reveal about the attitude of the author toward his subject?

2. Read the second sentence again. How would the level of formality change if we changed *suck* to *pull* and *let them hang free* to *accept them*?

Apply:

Write a sentence or two describing an unattractive but beloved relative. In your description, use words that describe the unattractive features honestly yet reveal that you care about this person, that you accept and even admire him/her, complete with defects. Use Keillor's description as a model. Throw in a pun if you can think of one. Share your description with the class.

Diction

Consider:

Doc awakened very slowly and clumsily like a fat man getting out of a swimming pool. His mind **broke the surface** and fell back several times.

— John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*

Discuss:

1. What is the subject of the verb *broke*? What does this tell you about Doc's ability to control his thinking at this point in the story?

2. To what does *surface* refer? Remember that good writers often strive for complexity rather than simplicity.

Apply:

List three active verbs that could be used to complete the sentence below. Act out one of these verbs for the class, demonstrating the verb's connotation.

He _____ into the crowded auditorium.

Diction

Consider:

Pots rattled in the kitchen where Momma was frying corn cakes to go with vegetable soup for supper, and the homey sounds and scents **cushioned** me as I read of Jane Eyre in the **cold** English mansion of a **colder** English gentleman.

— Maya Angelou, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Discuss:

1. By using the word *cushioned*, what does Angelou imply about her life and Jane Eyre's life?
2. What is the difference between the *cold* of the English mansion and the *cold* of the English gentleman? What does Angelou's diction convey about her attitude toward Jane's life?

Apply:

Write a sentence using a strong verb to connect one part of your life with another. For example, you could connect a book you are reading and your mother's dinner preparations, as Maya Angelou does; or you could connect a classroom lecture with sounds outside. Be creative. Use an exact verb (like *cushioned*), one which connotes the attitude you want to convey. Share your sentence with the class.

Diction

Consider:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door **thud** shut.

— Philip Larkin, "Church Going"

Discuss:

1. What feelings are evoked by the word *thud*?

2. How would the meaning change if the speaker let the door *slam* shut?

Apply:

Fill in the following chart. In the first column, record five different verbs which express the closing of a door; in the second column, record the feelings these verbs evoke.

Verbs expressing the closing of a door	Feeling evoked by the verb
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Diction

Consider:

We have been making policy on the basis of myths, the first of them that trade with China will **dulcify** Peking policy. That won't work; there was plenty of trade between North and South when **our** Civil War came on.

— William F. Buckley, Jr., “Like It or Not, Pat Buchanan’s Political Rhetoric Has True Grit”

Discuss:

1. What does *dulcify* mean? What attitude toward his readers does his diction convey?

2. What attitude does Buckley communicate by writing *our* Civil War instead of *the* Civil War?

Apply:

Fill in the following chart, substituting uncommon words for the common, boldface word in the sentence below. Your new words should change the connotative meaning of the sentence. Use your thesaurus to find unusual words. Share your chart with a partner.

She gazed at the **tidy** room.

Synonym for *tidy*

Effect on the meaning of the sentence

Synonym for <i>tidy</i>	Effect on the meaning of the sentence

Diction

Consider:

Wind **rocks** the car.
We sit parked by the river,
silence between our teeth.
Birds scatter across islands
of broken ice . . .

— Adrienne Rich, “Like This Together, for A.H.C.”

Discuss:

1. What are the feelings produced by the word *rocks*? Are the feelings gentle, violent, or both?

2. How would the meaning change if we changed the first line to *Wind **shakes** the car*?

Apply:

List with the class different meanings for the verb *rock*. How many of these meanings would make sense in this poem? Remember that the poet often strives to capture complexity rather than a single view or meaning.

Diction

Consider:

Close by the fire sat an old man whose countenance was **furrowed** with distress.

— James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal*

Discuss:

1. What does the word *furrowed* connote about the man's distress?

2. How would the impact of the sentence be changed if *furrowed* were changed to *lined*?

Apply:

Write a sentence using a verb to describe a facial expression. Imply through your verb choice that the expression is intense. Use Boswell's sentence as a model. Share your sentence with a partner.

Diction

Consider:

Her face was white and sharp and slightly gleaming in the candlelight, like **bone**. No hint of pink. And the hair. So fine, so pale, so much, crimped by its plaiting into springy zigzag tresses, **clouding** neck and shoulders, shining metallic in the candlelight, catching a hint, there it was, of green again, from the reflection of a large glazed cache-pot containing a vigorous sword-leafed fern.

— A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*

Discuss:

1. When the author describes a face “like *bone*,” what feelings are suggested?
2. How can hair be “*clouding* neck and shoulders”? What picture does this word create for the reader?

Apply:

Substitute another noun for *bone* in sentence one. Your substitution should change the meaning and feeling of the sentence. Share your sentence with the class and explain how your noun changes the sentence’s connotation and impact.

Diction

Consider:

“Ahhh,” the crowd went, “Ahhh,” as at the most beautiful of fireworks, for the sky was alive now, one instant a **pond** and at the next a **womb** of new turns: “Ahhh,” went the crowd, “Ahhh!”

— Norman Mailer, “Of a Fire on the Moon”

Discuss:

1. This quote is from a description of the Apollo-Saturn launching. The Saturn was a huge rocket that launched the Apollo space capsule, a three-man ship headed for the moon. Why is the sky described as a *pond* then a *womb*? Contrast the two words. What happens that changes the sky from a *pond* to a *womb*?
2. What does Mailer’s use of the word *womb* tell the reader about his attitude toward the launch?

Apply:

Think of a concert you have attended. Write one sentence which expresses a transformation of the concert stage. Using Mailer’s description as a model, call the stage first a _____ then a _____. Do not explain the transformation or your attitude toward it. Instead, let your diction alone communicate both the transformation and your attitude. Share your sentence with a partner.

Diction

Consider:

. . . then Satan first knew pain,
And writh'd him to and fro convolv'd; so sore
The **grinding** sword with **discontinuous** wound
Passed through him.

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book VI, lines 327-330

Discuss:

1. By using the word *grinding*, what does Milton imply about the pain inflicted by the sword?

2. What does *discontinuous* mean? How does the use of *discontinuous* reinforce the idea of a *grinding* sword?

Apply:

Pantomime for the class the motion of a *grinding* sword, a *slashing* sword, and a *piercing* sword. Discuss the context in which a writer might use the three different kinds of swords.

Diction

Consider:

Newts are the most common of salamanders. Their skin is a **lighted** green, like water in a sunlit pond, and rows of very bright red dots line their backs. They have gills as larvae; as they grow they turn a luminescent red, lose their gills, and walk out of the water to spend a few years padding around in damp places on the forest floor. Their feet look like **fingered baby hands**, and they walk in the same leg patterns as all four-footed creatures — dogs, mules, and, for that matter, lesser pandas.

— Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Discuss:

1. What is the difference between a *lighted* green and a *light* green? Which one do you think creates a more vivid picture?

2. What is the effect of saying *fingered baby hands* instead of simply *baby hands*?

Apply:

Compare the neck of each of the animals below to something familiar. Use Dillard's comparison (*Their feet look like fingered baby hands*) as a model.

The elephant's neck looks like _____

The gazelle's neck looks like _____

The flamingo's neck looks like _____

Share one of your comparisons with the class and explain the attitude it conveys about the animal.

Diction

Consider:

This is earthquake
Weather!
Honor and Hunger
Walk **lean**
Together.

— Langston Hughes, “Today”

Discuss:

1. What does *lean* mean in this context?
2. Is *lean* a verb, an adjective, or both? How does this uncertainty and complexity contribute to the impact of the lines?

Apply:

With a partner, read the poem aloud several times, changing the meaning of *lean* with your voice. Discuss how you controlled your voice to make the changes.

Diction

Consider:

Twenty **bodies** were thrown out of our wagon. Then the train resumed its journey, leaving behind it a few hundred naked **dead**, deprived of burial, in the deep snow of a field in Poland.

— Elie Wiesel, *Night*

Discuss:

1. This scene describes the transporting of Jews from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, both concentration camps in World War II. In this selection, Wiesel never refers to the men who die on the journey as men. Instead, he refers to them as *bodies* or simply *dead*. How does his diction shape the reader's understanding of the horror?

2. How would the meaning change if we substituted *dead people* for *bodies*?

Apply:

Change the italicized word below to a word that disassociates the reader from the true action of the sentence.

Fifteen chickens were *slaughtered* for the feast.

Share your new sentence with the class and explain its effect.