Diction

DEFINITION

What is diction? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Diction is a writer's unique style of expression, especially his or her choice and arrangement of words. A writer's vocabulary, use of language to produce a specific tone or atmosphere, and ability to communicate clearly with the reader are all essential parts of diction. If a writer favors specific words or phrases and uses them throughout his or her work, those are also considered to be part of the writer's general diction, though a writer might also modify his or her diction to achieve certain effects, such as to create characters of different types and backgrounds.

Some additional key details about diction:

- Published or not, every writer—including yourself—has his or her own particular diction.
- Aristotle was the first writer in the Western tradition to discuss diction. He did so in his book, *Poetics.*
- Over time the term "diction" has also come to refer to pronunciation*:* the manner of enunciating words and sounds. *This* guide focuses on the literary definition of diction*,* which has more to do with word choice.

How to Pronounce Diction

Here's how to pronounce diction: **dik**-shun

A Closer Look at Diction

Diction can seem like a very broad term that includes all of a writer's style, but it's possible to break down the concept by looking at some specific examples. The poem "Shakespeare," by the 18th century English poet Matthew Arnold, is a particular good case study for investigating and understanding the key elements of diction. In this poem, Arnold pays tribute to Shakespeare by consciously adopting Shakespeare's diction in three specific ways: **word choice**, **register**, and **tone**. First read the poem below (paying attention to Arnold's choice and arrangement of words) and then continue on for an explanation of each aspect of Arnold's diction.

> Others abide our question. Thou art free.
> We ask and ask—Thou smilest and art still,
> Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest hill,
> Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,
>
> Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,
> Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling-place,
> Spares but the cloudy border of his base
> To the foil'd searching of mortality;
>
> And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
> Self-school'd, self-scann'd, self-honour'd, self-secure,
> Didst tread on earth unguess'd at.—Better so!
>
> All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
> All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
> Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.

Word Choice

The first thing to notice is that Arnold mimics Shakespeare's distinctive word choice—most notably, he uses the formal "thou" (as in "thou art" and "thou didst"), which was no longer in common use when Arnold was writing. He also describes Shakespeare's brilliance in the lofty terms typical of Shakespeare's own writing—for example, he writes that the playwright was such a transcendent visionary that he dwelt in the "heaven of heavens" and knew the "stars and sunbeams." Arnold makes another move typical of Shakespeare when he spells "foiled" as "foil'd" and "unguessed" as "unguess'd." The insertion of the apostrophe to shorten both words is called elision*,* and it's something that Shakespeare did frequently, particularly in order to maintain a consistent number of syllables in each line of verse.

Arnold, here, is carefully modeling his word choice after Shakespeare's to create a particular effect. In other words, by choosing and arranging his words in a particular way Arnold can make his poem seems to belong to a different era and take on the lush style of Shakespeare's prose.

Register

Another aspect of diction that Arnold borrows from Shakespeare is his register*,* which means level of speech. Register refers to whether a piece of writing is formal or informal, or whether the writer is using "high," "neutral," or "low" diction. For example, if writing a cover letter for a job, you would likely use high diction: "Thank you for your consideration. It would be a privilege to contribute to the betterment of this institution." Neutral diction would sound like, "Thank you for your time. I'll look forward to hearing from you." Low diction would be, "Thanks man. Talk to you soon."

While today's readers generally think of Shakespearean register as high diction because of his elegant, archaic vocabulary and syntax, Shakespeare actually employed a whole range of different registers in each of his plays, which he varied as the plot and mood developed. In other words, Shakespeare's writing mimicked all different types of speech in order to convey the linguistic conventions of the broad cross-sections of society that existed during his time.

Arnold's imitation of Shakespeare's register, then, is complicated—to Arnold's 18th century readers, most or all of Shakespeare's writing

would have seemed simply to be high diction, and thus Arnold's imitation would have come across, too, as high diction. This choice makes sense in the context that Arnold had a conservative view of the poetic tradition: he believed that poets of his day could only achieve greatness by referring back to the classics, such as Shakespeare and Homer. However, if Arnold had different ideas about poetry, he might have chosen to imitate Shakespeare's use of register by mixing the high and low diction of his own time, just as Shakespeare had done two centuries before. Were this the case, Arnold could have juxtaposed archaic, Shakespearean language with the profane, idiomatic, or ungrammatical language commonly in use in 18th century England. This would have preserved the sense of shifting registers that Shakespeare's writing gave in its own time, though using contemporary language might have made it less clear to 18th century readers that Arnold was imitating the Bard.

Tone

The tone or atmosphere of a piece of writing is also considered to be part of diction. It's important to note that tone is significantly affected by word choice and diction, so it's not always easy to tell the different elements of diction apart. However, it's crucial, when analyzing diction, to look closely at how a writer develops the tone of a book, play, or poem by making very small changes in their word choice or level of speech. The tone of Arnold's "Shakespeare" can be described as:

- **Reverential/admiring.** Arnold's Shakespeare "dwells in the heavens." Although he's "self-school'd" (has never had a formal education), he's "self-honor'd" and "self-secure." In other words, Shakespeare wrote according to his own artistic standards, which is notable for its contrast with Arnold, who is writing in Shakespeare's style, rather than his own. Thus, Arnold's tone is double-edged: it professes an admiration for Shakespeare, while betraying, perhaps, an insecurity about his own artistic ability and integrity.
- **Wistful**. Arnold's poem is written in sonnet form, and the traditional subject of a sonnet is unrequited love. Arnold's use of the sonnet to describe Shakespeare, then, emphasizes Arnold's impossible longing to connect with the Bard. This impossibility is due to Arnold's artistic limitations, but also due to how little we actually know about Shakespeare. Arnold's wistful tone thus laments the fact that he (and we) will never be able to communicate with this great literary genius.
- **Triumphant.** In the 9th line of the sonnet there occurs what is known as a "turn," a traditional feature of Italian sonnets that is defined as a shift in the poem's focus from problem to resolution. Arnold ends the poem by celebrating that, despite Shakespeare's remoteness in history, he is still able to express, "All pains the immortal spirit must endure/ All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow."

In Sum: Diction is Powerful

Arnold uses diction strategically in this poem to great effect—his diction not only creates a beautiful, musical piece of writing by the standards of his time, but it also proves a point about the poetic tradition. Modeling his own diction after Shakespeare's allows Arnold to "practice what he preaches" by emulating the classics rather than forging new poetic traditions. Thus, Arnold's diction also subtly presents his opinion on the tradition of poetry as a whole.

EXAMPLES

Diction in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby:*

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald masterfully changes his diction to evoke different atmospheres in describing particular settings. The following passage refers to an industrial area on the border of the prosperous community where the novel takes place:

> This is a Valley of Ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

Fitzgerald's choice of words like "powdery," "crumbling," "leaden," and "ash-gray" refer to the textures and materials of this industrial landscape. Compare that to his description of the Buchanan's mansion, minutes away from the Valley of Ashes, as seen through the eyes of the narrator Nick Carraway:

> We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.
>
> The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon.

In contrast to the specific textures and material adjectives he uses to describe the Valley of Ashes, Fitzgerald's description of the Buchanan's home is very immaterial. There's the breeze, the "frosted" ceiling, shadows, and the women "buoyed" upon the couch. This

evokes the lightness and wealth of the Buchanan mansion, in contrast to the crumbling and grimy industrial landscape next door. Simply by changing the type of adjectives he uses to characterize each place, Fitzgerald creates a dramatically different atmosphere in each. More importantly, by contrasting this airy, immaterial description of the mansion with the gritty, seedy textures of the Valley of Ashes nearby, he's able to emphasize that the Buchanans' wealth—and by extension, the American Dream—is rooted in labor that is "screened from sight."

Diction in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice:*

Fiction writers use diction not only to set the scene, but also in character development. Jane Austen criticizes England's class-based society in *Pride and Prejudice*, using diction as a powerful tool to question the assumption that a person's class is a reflection of his or her intelligence or character. Austen therefore carefully tailors each character's diction to emphasize the ways in which he or she does or does not conform to his or her social class, and to the expectations that come along with it. This is made particularly clear through the examination of two letters included in *Pride and Prejudice.*

Letter from Mr. Collins

Mr. Collins is a pompous clergyman, deeply concerned with class and with impressing others. The following excerpt is from a "sympathetic" letter he writes to Mr. Bennet, whose daughter's elopement plunged the family into scandal.

> I feel myself called upon, by our relationship, and my situation in life, to condole with you on the grievous affliction you are now suffering under, of which we were yesterday informed by a letter from Hertfordshire. Be assured, my dear Sir, that Mrs. Collins and myself sincerely sympathize with you...And it is the more to be lamented, because there is reason to suppose, as my dear Charlotte informs me, that this licentiousness of behavior in your daughter, has proceeded from a faulty degree of indulgence, though, at the same time, for the consolation of yourself and Mrs. Bennet, I am inclined to think that her own disposition must be naturally bad, or she could not be guilty of such an enormity, at so early an age.

Mr. Collins' uses what was considered to be high diction at the time: his writing is formal and flowery, his sentences carefully balanced and constructed. However, hidden within his formal register are insults directed at Mr. Bennet—he implies that his wife thinks Mr. Bennet did a poor job of raising his daughter, and he hints at his own social superiority. Mr. Collins, whose marriage proposal was refused by Mr. Bennet's other daughter, barely hides his sense of good luck at *not* being married to Elizabeth, thereby avoiding close connection to the scandal, yet his vindictive tone shows that he hasn't fully recovered from the humiliation of being refused. While his social position may be better than the Bennets', his high-class speech is anything but "classy": instead, it betrays small-mindedness and pettiness.

Letter from Jane Bennet

In contrast, Austen gives Jane Bennet informal, low diction in her letters to her sister Elizabeth, which emphasizes the sisters' closeness. This is particularly notable because of the contrast between the sisters' use of low diction in their private letters and their use of high diction for public speech. In this letter, Jane breaks the news of their sister's elopement:

> Since writing the above, dearest Lizzy, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature; but I am afraid of alarming you—be assured that we are all well. What I have to say relates to poor Lydia. An express came at twelve last night, just as we were all gone to bed, from Colonel Forster, to inform us that she was gone off to Scotland with one of his officers; to own the truth, with Wickham!—Imagine our surprise. To Kitty, however, it does not seem so wholly unexpected. I am very, very sorry. So imprudent a match on both sides!—But I am willing to hope the best, and that his character has been misunderstood.

Jane address Elizabeth as "Lizzy," and her choice of words is simple. Compared with Mr. Collins' more formal style, Jane's sentences are rushed, punctuated with dashes and colons. This manner of writing shows her distress at what's happened with her sister, and also the level of comfort she has with Lizzy, allowing her to show how she really feels.

Why Do Writers Use Diction?

Diction allows writers to develop characters, manipulate tone, and reference past literary works, which are all core aspects of literary writing. Perhaps more important, though, is that a writer's diction determines their ability to connect with a particular audience. Diction is not simply about manipulating language to achieve an effect; it's also about shaping language so that it is clear enough for the reader or listener to understand.

When evaluating a writer's diction, it's important to note that the way readers and listeners interpret diction is relative, and it changes over time. A type of speech considered "low" diction can become "high" diction as norms shift (think about the way contemporary readers understand Shakespeare's writing as "high" diction, when his diction was, for his own time, quite varied). Likewise, diction that was once considered to be perfectly clear can become opaque as certain words or grammatical conventions fall out of use.

One particular example of this is Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the 1300s. Because *The Canterbury Tales* are written in Middle English, today's readers interpret the book's style as formal. Take this example from the prologue:

> And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
> Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
> For he shal fynde ynow, gret and smale,
> Of storial thing that toucheth gentilesse,
> And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.

> Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
> The Miller is a cherl, ye know wel this.

If someone were to write this way today, we might call it high diction, or we might question the choice to write such inaccessible verse. However, in Chaucer's time, most people wrote in Latin, French, or Italian. Chaucer's decision to write in Middle English, the language spoken by common people at the time, actually made the stories more accessible to a popular audience. Thus, in considering a writer's choice to use a certain type of diction, context is key.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Diction:** A quick explanation of the different elements of diction.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Diction:** A definition and etymology of diction.
- **F. Scott Fitzgerald's Diction:** A Time Magazine article about the many words F. Scott Fitzgerald contributed to American english, including "t-shirt" and "daiquiri."

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Scopa, Sally. "Diction." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Scopa, Sally. "Diction." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/diction.