



DICTION

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

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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.

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- 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

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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

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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

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- 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

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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?

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- 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?