

DICTION AND TONE

Diction means a writer's choice of words. Choosing words depends on a number of factors, including the writer's purpose, the intended audience, the writer's tone, and the connotations of words.

If a writer's main purpose is to amuse by explaining why he/she will never ride the Great Scream Machine at Six flags, the writer may feel much freer to use informal, casual, even colloquial language. That is, the diction may resemble that of spoken conversation.

On the other hand, if the writer seeks to inform the reader of the serious ramifications of mandatory drug-testing on the job, his/her word choice is likely to be more formal, careful and less conversational.

The following guidelines will help improve your writing.

1. Avoid unnecessary repetition of words and ideas.

Poor: *The first poem in the book is a masterpiece in itself and quite a work of art.*

Better: *The first poem in the book is a work of art.*

2. Use slang or informal words only when appropriate to the audience, the purpose, or occasion. Also, make sure word choices are consistent with the rest of the paper.

Slang	Informal	Formal
dopey	dense	obtuse
gypped	cheated	swindled
the man	cop	police officer

3. Avoid overblown writing.

Poor: *The lively lad eclipsed the illuminated taper.*

Better: *Jack jumped over the candlestick.*

Poor: *The rotund ovum postured upon the balustrade.*

Better: *Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall.*

4. Avoid sexist language.

Inappropriate	Appropriate
authoress	author
the common man	the average person; ordinary people
weatherman	weather forecaster

Poor: *The professors and their wives attended. (assumes professors are male)*

Better: *The professors and their spouses attended.*

5. Choose a specific and concrete word rather than a general or abstract one.

General	Specific
fast food	pizza
fiction	short stories
city	Cleveland

Bad children: *rowdy, rude, ungrateful, selfish, or perverse children*

Nice teacher: *sympathetic, empathetic, patient, or understanding teacher*

Vague: *She has kept no reminders of performing in her youth.*

Concrete: *She has kept no sequined costumes, no photographs, no fliers and no posters from performances in her youth.*

6. Avoid wordiness.

Poor: In the early part of the month of August, a hurricane was moving threateningly toward Houston.

Better: In early August, a hurricane threatened Houston.

7. Avoid wordy expletive constructions, such as *There are*, *It is*, etc.

Poor: *There were* four children playing in the yard.

Better: Four children were playing in the yard.

8. Change passive voice to active when appropriate.

Poor: Calculus is studied by many college students.

Better: Many college students study algebra.

9. Avoid substituting *would* for simple past tense.

Poor: When the bell rang, he would quickly disappear

Better: When the bell rang, he quickly disappeared

Tone

Tone refers to the writer's attitude toward both the subject and the intended audience. Words like sarcastic, ironic, insulting, flippant, and angry may be used to describe tone. Diction plays an important role in setting the tone of a piece of writing.

Consistency and appropriateness are keys to recognizing diction problems. As you evaluate passages, ensure that the writing does not shift from one level of diction to another. Consider the example below.

Dear Dean Driscoll:

Having received your letter of May 2 and given much thought to nominating me to the executive Council, I would definitely like to respond by hollering at the top of my lungs, "Wow! Let me at it!" So even though a lot of my buddies say this job stinks to high heaven, man, you can bet I'm grabbing it in a flash. Is it OK if I get at it pronto?

Not only does the diction lapse into very informal, colloquial usage, (after beginning on a fairly formal note), but given the intended audience – a college dean – the colloquial diction is most inappropriate, even if it were used throughout the piece.

Notice also how the exclamation marks affect the tone of the writing, making it over-charged emotionally, even hysterical.

In addition, many words have connotations which may affect the tone of writing. A connotation is an implied or suggested meaning. Be careful of words connoting certain things to your audience that you may not intend or be aware of.

Example: *Professor Finch discussed his relations with international students very casually.*

The writer may simply have meant to convey how relaxed the professor was in his discussion. However, for some readers, the phrase "very casually" might connote a certain insensitivity and flippancy, as if Professor Finch did not take international students or his relations with them very seriously.