



DICTION

Understanding diction is essential to doing well in AP® English Language. Sure, diction in the literal sense may simply be the “distinctive vocabulary choices and style of expression” an author/speaker uses. But truthfully, there are layers and stages to what diction is and how good writers use it.

Diction affects the tone and complexity of a text. It can make a text formal and elevated or informal and casual, make it strong or weak, and diction can even identify the speaker—Shakespeare comes to mind. If you can learn to speak intelligently about the author’s use of diction, you can own this test!

Denotation and Connotation

Every word has two kinds of meaning:

- **Denotation** is the dictionary definition of a word.
- **Connotation** is the feeling a word conveys.

Consider these two versions of another sentence:

- **Angry** students **protest** dress code policies.
- **Outraged** students **riot** against dress code policies.

The difference between these two sentences is caused largely by the *connotations* of the bolded words: “angry” and “outraged” have the same *denotation*: they both mean something like “mad.” But “angry” students sound like they could be calmed down, while “outraged” students must have their concerns addressed. What about “protest” versus “riot”? Do they have the same *denotation*? What about their *connotations*?

Why Diction Matters

Writers carefully consider which words to use to best accomplish their rhetorical goals.

Consider the evolution of the following sentence:

- The stone looked like it could roll down the hill.
- The rock was about to crash down the mountain.
- The boulder was destined to come crashing down the cliff.

The sentence starts out without a lot of excitement, but it gets progressively more dramatic with each version.

Each sentence conveys more or less the same idea, but each one fulfills a different rhetorical purpose.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DICTION:

In the free-response section of the test, it isn’t enough to just bring diction up; you have to be specific about it. First give a description of the type of language the author uses—is it objective? Subjective? Literal? Abstract? Then be sure to explain why an author has used particular words and how those words helped achieve a specific purpose.

HOW WRITERS MANIPULATE DICTION

Qualifying Language	Imagery
<p>Authors can manipulate the degree of doubt or certainty of something by using qualifying words.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The following words indicate a lack of certainty: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ could, may, might, perhaps, hope, sometimes • Using more absolute language indicates more certainty: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ first, only, never, always, must • An author can also indicate criticism by using words like the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ predictable, dubious, fantastical, unexceptional 	<p>Here are some words used to describe Rome in a passage from <i>The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i> by Edward Gibbon:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • swelled, ripened, decay <p>The words describe the decline and fall of the Roman Empire in a way that makes it sound like an overripe fruit. What if those words were changed to less image-laden ones?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grew, matured, decline <p>These words would give a less nuanced, less dramatic description.</p>

Adjectives for Describing Diction

high or formal	low or informal	neutral
precise	exact	concrete
abstract	plain	simple
homespun	esoteric	learned
cultured	literal	figurative
connotative	symbolic	picturesque
sensuous	literary	provincial
colloquial	slang	idiomatic
neologistic	inexact	euphemistic
trite	obscure	pedantic
bombastic	grotesque	vulgar
jargon	emotional	obtuse
moralistic	ordinary	scholarly
insipid	proper	pretentious
old-fashioned		