

One Page Concept Review: Diction and Imagery

What is it?

Though different concepts, these are analyzed almost exactly in the same way-- hence why they are grouped together. When you analyze either, you are looking at the text on the language level, and you are trying to uncover how that text generates meaning through specific language choices.

Diction is word choice. In terms of literary analysis, it is the way that the text develops ideas by choosing one set of words over another. This can be by choosing a specific word for a specific purpose (as in the difference in connotation between *house* and *home*), or it can be in larger units of text like a phrase or clause. Diction analysis does not really work at the sentence or paragraph level.

Images are descriptions that evoke sense experiences. Essentially, anything that helps the reader to imagine what it would be like to see, hear, taste, touch, smell, or otherwise experience a concept is an image. Sometimes this can be a single word if the text is detailing an idea that is particularly evocative (for instance, the visual image of a *skull* implies *death* without the need for further elaboration), but more commonly you will be analyzing short descriptions that suggest a sense experience.

Why should I care?

Close reading is largely a matter of analyzing the author's language choices (how he or she phrases and describes ideas).

This is particularly true in poems, where the salient difference between prose and poetry is the fact that a poem concentrates language-- achieving its effects by what is implied and how it makes a reader feel. Since writing about poems is something you will be required to do on the text, being able to describe how they work is obviously an important skill to master.

How do I do it?

- **Diction choices and imagery work by implying information that the text wants to communicate to the reader.** This means connotation, and if you are not discussing this, you are doing something wrong.
- **Diction and imagery analysis should be your go-to strategy for poems.** Whatever else a poem is doing, it is achieving its effects through diction and imagery. Almost by definition a poem is concentrating language, and it needs to be analyzed on the language level.
- **Look for patterns of diction and imagery.** If you want to understand what the text is trying to communicate, look for the way that language sets up themes or develops ideas and/or characters. This means that you should be looking for ideas that convey the same emotional overtones or imply the same ideas (connotation). This becomes the evidence you use in body paragraphs.
- **Trust the process.** Especially in poems, if students don't immediately understand what the text is communicating, they often start panicking. Look for patterns of diction and imagery and trust that these will reveal something useful that the text is trying to say. You are never under any obligation to discuss *everything* about a text anyway, and diction and imagery analysis give you a legitimate way focusing on what you do understand (instead of what you don't).
- **You do not have to use the words "diction" or "image" to analyze them.** In fact, in the case of diction analysis, it's usually better if you don't (little grates as much as reading a student essay that includes the words, "One diction is..."). Because they are analyzed in the same way, it's not

even terribly important if you differentiate between the two at all, since an image (a description) is also going to be either a word or phrase.

How do students screw this up?

Over-quoting

- **Use only the portion of the quote that contains the word, phrase, or image that you are analyzing.** If you are claiming that the author uses precise language to establish an effect, and then you go on to quote an entire sentence or more from the text, you are doing nothing to establish this precision.
- **Quotes for diction and imagery analysis should almost never be complete sentences.** The effects created by the connotation of word choice work in isolation, not as conclusions drawn from large chunks of text.
- That said, **do not under-quote either.** Yes, you can analyze single words as examples of strategic word choice or as an isolated image, but the richer analysis usually lies in looking at phrases, especially with imagery. This will still usually not be a complete sentence, though.

Failure to Write about Connotation

- **Diction or imagery analysis requires that you connect these ideas to the connotation of the words, phrases, or images.** This is not optional.
- **You must explain.** An image of a skull almost certainly implies death, but anything less obvious than this needs more work on your part to explain how these emotional overtones or implied ideas are being created. Do not take for granted that your reader sees what you see when you discuss literature at the language level. You have to convince them.

Not Connecting Analysis to an Argument

- **Treat the text as an argument.** It will either develop a particular worldview that it supports or criticizes and/or describe something about the nature of people's place in the world. Use phrasing and descriptions as clues to figure out what this implied argument is asserting.
- This means, **your task is to uncover this implied argument.** That is the point of your writing, as you are breaking down the techniques that an author is using to develop ideas in the text. Diction and imagery are powerful tools to accomplish this-- but only if you clearly understand your purpose as a writer. Thus, any kind of analysis needs to be connected to a point you are making, as in, "Here's what I claim the author is doing. The way that he or she uses language is one way that the author uses to accomplish this goal."

Using the Concepts as a Way to Structure Essays

- Unless you are purposefully writing a superficial essay, **having one body paragraph devoted to diction and another to imagery is almost always lazy, superficial writing.** Kids do this because it's easy, but that doesn't mean it's good. For one thing, it's repetitive (since you will be making the same point, in exactly the same way, in two separate paragraphs). For another, you should be structuring your essays so that they actually develop as an argument, not writing a series of mini-essays that could be randomly re-arranged without it changing your argument.
- In general, **divide your argument by ideas, not the techniques that you will be analyzing.** If nothing else, doing it the easy way does not force you to grapple meaningfully with the big picture. Take the time to actually figure out how the text functions as an argument (and come up with an appropriate structure according to this determination).