

# Diction/Imagery Vocabulary

**abstract diction / abstract imagery:** language that describes qualities that cannot be perceived with the five senses, e.g., calling something “pleasant” or “pleasing” is abstract, while calling something “yellow” or “sour” is concrete; the word “domesticity” is abstract, but the word “housework” is concrete

**concrete diction / concrete imagery:** language that describes qualities that can be perceived with the five senses as opposed to using abstract or generalized language, e.g., calling a fruit “pleasant” or “good” is abstract, while calling a fruit “cool” or “sweet” is concrete

**connotation:** the extra tinge or taint of meaning each word carries beyond the minimal, strict definition found in a dictionary; for instance, the terms *civil war*, *revolution*, and *rebellion* have the same denotation; they all refer to an attempt at social or political change; however, *civil war* carries historical connotations for Americans beyond that of *revolution* or *rebellion*; likewise, *revolution* is often applied more generally to scientific or theoretical changes, and it does not necessarily connote violence; *rebellion*, for many English speakers connotes an improper uprising against a legitimate authority (thus we speak about “*rebellious* teenagers” rather than “*revolutionary* teenagers”)

**denotation:** the minimal, strict definition of a word as found in a dictionary, disregarding any historical or emotional connotation

**diction:** the choice of a particular word as opposed to others; a writer could, for example, call a rock formation by many words-- a stone, a boulder, an outcropping, a pile of rocks, a cairn, a mound, or even an “anomalous geological feature;” the word choice a writer makes determines the reader’s reaction to the object of description, and contributes to the author’s style and tone

**imagery:** a common term of variable meaning, imagery includes the “mental pictures” that readers experience with a passage of literature; it signifies all the sensory perceptions, whether by literal description, allusion, simile, or metaphor. Sight = **visual imagery**, sound = **auditory imagery**, taste = **gustatory imagery**, touch = **tactile** (when evoking touch specifically) or **kinesthetic** (when evoking movements or the sense of bodily motion) **imagery**, and smell = **olfactory imagery**.

**mood or atmosphere:** the emotional feelings inspired by a work, describing the dominant mood of a selection as it is created by diction, dialogue, setting, and description

**synaesthesia** (sometimes spelled *synesthesia*; Gr: “perceiving together”): taking one type of sensory input (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste) and comingling it with another separate sense in an impossible way; in the resulting figure of speech, we end up talking about how a color sounds, or how a smell looks, etc.; simple examples: “feeling blue”, “a sharp taste”

**tone:** a literary technique which encompasses the attitudes toward the subject and toward the audience implied in a literary work

**visual imagery:** imagery that invokes colors, shapes, or things that can be seen

Synonyms for “suggests” (when used in context of diction or imagery): evokes, connotes, “creates the impression,” or implies (but NOT *infers*-- this is what the reader does, not the text).

# More on Tone

Tone is the writer or speaker's attitude toward the material and/or audience.

This definition can be contrasted with **mood** or **atmosphere**, defined as the general sense or feeling which the reader is supposed to get from the text.

tone = the writer's feeling  
tone = at a specific point in the text

mood = the reader's feeling  
mood = a larger unit of the text (often the whole)

## How to Find Tone

Diction and imagery are not the only ways to create tone, but they are the most common. ONE CANNOT DO A TONE ANALYSIS, HOWEVER, WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT CONNOTATION.

It is a **TWO STEP** process where an image or word creates the connotation that creates the tone.

### Example

#### **Fog** **By Carl Sandburg**

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.

Diction means *words and phrases*, and 95% of the time it is better to talk about *words and phrases* rather than use the word *diction*. You should certainly never write things like, "One diction that the author uses..."

**NOT** "tone of mystery"

image from text

Sandburg uses words and images to create the mysterious tone of the poem. For example, for the fog to come on "little cat feet" (2) implies some level of stealth and quiet. Although such a description could connote mental images of cat as hunter, it is clearly not intended to be the case here, as the fog "sits looking ... on silent haunches" (3-5). There is no object of the cat's prowl, no victim to track and kill. Rather, it is the cat's inscrutability that Sandberg stresses. Why it came, why it "moves on" (6) are unanswerable, as the motive is undefined by the poet. The cat, like the fog, is an alien observer who is both of this world and external to it--though more a watcher than a participant. The stealth, the quiet, the sudden movement: all of these are as enigmatic in the fog as they are in the cat, for one will never quite understand either one, this incomprehension of agency producing the tone.

} discussion of connotation

→ diction from text

} discussion of connotation

} connection of connotation to tone