

## Some Common Problems in Writing about Diction and Imagery

### Lose the old “painting a picture” analogy.

Student Example:

In Pablo Neruda’s poem, Sonnet XI, Neruda describes the poet experiencing the anticipation of love. He uses imagery such as “I crave your mouth”, “silent and starving”, “I prowl”, and “I hunt” to paint an image in the reader’s mind of a predator stalking its prey. Neruda paints this picture of the poet to cause the reader to compare the search and longing of love to that of a beast on the hunt.

A common variation of this is “helping the reader to picture.” The problem with phrases like these is that they add nothing to argument, as they are literally defining the concept of a visual image. Often students will even stop after writing some variation of these phrases, content that claiming that *the author describes something in order to help the reader understand the description* is actually saying something worthwhile about the meaning of the poem. These students are engaging a literary definition, not the text itself.

Revision:

In his “Sonnet XI,” Neruda describes a speaker who is anticipating love. To do this, the speaker compares the search and longing of love to that of a beast on the hunt. For example, he writes, “I crave your mouth” (1), describes himself as “silent and starving,” uses the verb “prowl” (2) to characterize his search for love, and explicitly calls this process a “hunt” (4). What all of these have in common is the way that they suggest...

### Address the word, phrase, or image directly in your explanations.

Student Example:

“Sonnet XI” is told from the perspective of a man anticipating love; his feelings are acute. He describes himself in an animalistic manner; comparing himself to a silent predator stalking the night for the nourishment that only a woman can provide. This is apparent in the line “Bread does not nourish me, dawn disrupts me.” His feelings are described as urges, powerful and short lived. Conversely “Tonight I Can Write” is written from the perspective of a man who has lost love, and his remembrance is painful and deliberate.

The student obviously understands how words, phrases, and images create connotations that help the reader to understand the ideas being developed by the poem. However, when writing about it, the student is only describing the overall effect and nearly randomly inserting a quote in the middle of this explanation in order to fulfill the evidence requirement. Instead, the explanation should address the quote directly.

Revision:

“Sonnet XI” is told from the perspective of a man anticipating love; his feelings are acute. To emphasize this, the speaker describes himself in an animalistic manner, comparing himself to a silent predator stalking the night for the nourishment that only a woman can provide. This is apparent in the line, “Bread does not nourish me, dawn disrupts me” (3), as it suggests the carnivorous hunger of the feline predator, one who will not be satisfied with ordinary food. The woman is his prey, and, like a cat, the speaker hunts at night. Thus, his feelings are described as powerful and instinctual urges based on physical need, instead of grounded in emotional connection.

## If you're listing several images, words, or phrases with the same connotation, do it correctly.

Student Example:

Within Sonnet XI Neruda clearly portrays a hunger the narrator possesses for a sexual relationship with the woman he talks about. Towards the beginning of the poem the reader can tell this is merely a lust based relationship when the narrator states in the first stanza "silent and starving...bread does not nourish me,... I hunt for the liquid measure of your steps." Neruda makes it visible through the representation of the desire for lust as the hunger of a wild animal. Within this beginning statement the woman is merely dehumanized to that of prey weaker than the man, and his not her own being.

Don't use a long quote (unless your explanation is going to incorporate snippet quotes drawn from it) and don't try to combine it all into a single quote (especially a long series of seemingly random words connected with ellipses). Treat the words, phrases, and images just like you would any other list.

Revision:

Within "Sonnet XI" Neruda portrays the hunger the speaker possesses for the woman he has targeted for a relationship. Towards the beginning of the poem, the reader understands that this is an attraction based in lust, not love, when the speaker states that he is "silent and starving" (2), that "bread does not nourish [him]" (3), and that he "[hunts] the liquid measure of your steps" (4). In phrases such as these, the speaker makes visible his desire by representing it as the hunger of a wild animal, comparing himself to a feline hunter who stalks fresh meat, not a potential lover looking for an emotional connection. In this way, the woman, as object of the man's prowl, is dehumanized as prey, merely a prize to be won through the man's superior strength.

## Don't confuse paraphrase with analysis

Student Example:

In "Sonnet XI," Neruda describes the anticipation of love. The speaker says things such as "I crave your mouth" (1) and "I want to eat your skin" (5). In both instances, the speaker uses hunger to show desire for someone, which creates a more hopeful or anticipating mood. It is less realistic because he does not actually know what love is yet, he does not know exactly what it is that he desperate for.

Rather than engaging the connotations of the words "crave" and "eat," the writer is content to simply point out that both have the denotative meaning of "hunger." Thus, the explanation reads like a paraphrase of what the words, phrases, and images *literally mean* and not what they *imply*. There's nothing wrong with discussing the denotation of related words, phrases, and images in a list (in order to establish that they have something in common), but it needs to go much further than this to really connect the examples to the way that language choices help to create meaning.

Revision:

In "Sonnet XI," Neruda describes the anticipation of love. In doing this, the speaker says things such as "I crave your mouth" (1) and "I want to eat your skin" (5). In both instances, the speaker uses the language of hunger to show desire for someone, suggesting how the man's feelings are more akin to instinct and lust than romance or love. To "crave" or to "eat" establishes the idea that the pursuit of a partner is a biological need, contrasting with the implied comparison of a mature love that is built upon a foundation of mutual connection. Though the language choices show the speaker "want[s]" and "crave[s]" something, whether he truly understands what actual love entails is an open question.