

An Introduction to Style | Courtesy of Mrs. Linder – Florida PEP

Modern Style Features:

1. **Diction**-(word choice) is the foundation of voice and contributes to all of its elements.
2. **Detail**-(facts, observations, and incidents) is used to develop a topic, shaping and seasoning a voice.
3. **Imagery**-(verbal representation of sense experience) brings the immediacy of sensory experience to writing and gives voice a distinctive quality.
4. **Syntax**-(grammatical sentence structure and length of sentences) controls verbal pacing and focus.
5. **Tone**-(expression of attitude) is the writer's or narrator's attitude toward his/her subject.

Diction

Diction is just a fancy word for WORD CHOICE and it contributes to all of the elements of voice—think about it, you can't create detail, imagery, or tone without making the proper word choice.

- Refers to the author's choice of words
- Specific diction brings the reader into the scene, enabling the reader to fully participate in the author's world. (Specific versus General)
- Effective voice is shaped by words that are clear, concrete, and exact. (Abstract versus Concrete)
- Reflects and shapes the level of formality (Formal versus Informal and Latinate versus Anglo-Saxon)
- Connotation and denotation- A word's power lies mostly in its connotative meaning. When studying diction you will understand both **connotation** (suggested meaning) and **denotation** (literal meaning). For example, when writer calls a character slender, the word evokes a different feeling from calling the character gaunt.
- Reflects the writer's vision and steers the reader's thoughts

Diction depends on Topic, Purpose, and Occasion

1. Topic-are you writing an article on computers? Then you will need special terminology.
2. Purpose—are you writing to entertain, instruct, amuse, inform, or plead. This will affect your word choice. For example, if you are writing to inform, you will use straightforward diction. On the other hand, if writing to entertain, the writer can use words in an ironic, playful, or unexpected way.
3. Occasion—just like how you dress for different occasions, your word choice is different for different occasions. (Consider what is appropriate for the occasion.) Use formal diction for scholarly writing and serious prose (academic writing is what we will be doing the most of this year), informal diction is the norm for newspaper editorial, works of fiction, etc.

Detail

- Good writers choose detail with care, selecting those details which add meaning and avoiding those that detract.
- Includes facts, observations, and incidents used to develop a subject
- Detail shapes reader attitude by focusing attention: the more specific the detail, the greater the focus on the object described.
- Detail makes abstraction concrete.
- Detail can also state by understatement, by a lack of detail. The absence of specific details may be in sharp contrast to the intensity of a character's pain.

Imagery

- The ways an author creates a vision for the reader-and makes us feel what he or she is feeling regarding the subject.
- Verbal representation of sensory experience. All 5 senses may be represented (visual imagery, auditory imagery, tactile imagery, gustatory imagery, and olfactory imagery).
- Depends on both diction (word choice) and author's use of detail.
- Can be figurative (employing metaphors, similes, and personification) but doesn't have to be.
- Traditional imagery has a history. A river for example is usually associated with life's journey. A forest is usually associated with evil.
- Most great novels make active use of imagery to persuade or convince their reader to feel as they do on a subject by manipulating the reader's vision through the senses.

Tone

- Tone is the expression of attitude. It is the writer's or narrator's implied attitude toward his subject.
- Tone is created by the author through deliberate use of language. An author will manipulate all the devices of language you have been studying to create tone: *figurative language, imagery, diction, details, syntax, etc.*
- Understanding tone is requisite to understanding meaning (making the connection between the author's thought and its expression).

Syntax (grammatical sentence structure)

- Definition: Controls verbal pacing and focus. The way words are arranged within sentences and the way sentences are arranged within paragraphs. Believe it or not, this can be very manipulative on the reader. How you make sentences depends on the meaning you want to convey, and the meaning conveyed depends on how the sentence is made. Intonation determines meaning, and meaning determines intonation. Writers or speakers can manipulate the rhythm or sound of sentence(s) for effect.

Syntax Encompasses:

1. **Punctuation**
2. **Word order**
3. **Sentence focus (period and loose, repetition and parallelism)**
4. **Sentence length (rhythm and variety)**
5. **(Paragraphing too)**

Punctuation: Is used to reinforce meaning, construct effect, and express the writer's voice. Look at the semicolon, colon, and dash.

- The *Semicolon* gives equal weight to two or more independent clauses in a sentence. This balance reinforces parallel ideas and imparts equal importance to both or all of the clauses.
- The *colon* directs reader attention to the words that follow. A colon sets the expectation that important, closely related information will follow and words after the colon are emphasized.
- The *dash* marks a sudden change in thought or tone and can convey a casual tone or chaos or confusion.

Word Order: Most English sentences follow a SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT/COMPLEMENT pattern. Deviating from the expected word order can serve to startle the reader and draw attention to the sentence. This can emphasize the unusual sentence's message.

- There are several ways to change the order-
 1. Inverting subject and verb (**Am** I ever sorry!)
 2. Placing a complement at the beginning of a sentence (**Hungry**, without a doubt, he is.)
 3. Placing an object in front of a verb. (**Sara** I like, not Susan)
- Good writers shift between conformity and nonconformity, preventing reader complacency without using unusual sentence structure to the point of distraction.

Sentence focus:

A.) Sentence focus--building tension: Is generally achieved by syntactic tension—withholding of syntactic closure (completion of grammatical structure) until the end of the sentence. Sentences that delay or suspend closure are called **periodic sentences** (expand the sentence between the subject and the verb or before the subject and the verb). They carry high tension—the reader must wait until the end of the sentence to understand the meaning.

- Example withholding the predicate (verb part) by expanding the subject: The **boy**, *who walks with a jaunty step and dreams of proposing*, **loves** the girl. (Here we run the risk of losing our reader if we delay too long!)
- Or we can withhold the entire independent clause: *From the depths of his heart*, the **boy loves** the girl.

Example from LOTF: *Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellation*, Simon's dead **body moved** out toward the open sea.

B.) Sentence focus- relieving tension: We can also relieve tension and allow the reader to relax and explore the rest of the sentence without urgency. **Loose Sentences or Strung Along or Cumulative sentences** relieve tension. The details are strung along after the subject and the verb. This is more like how we experience life in the moment—we see the action and then notice the details. “The mind in the act of coping with the world” (Lantham).

Compare the periodic example from LOTF above with the Strung Along example:

Periodic: *Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellation,* Simon’s dead **body moved** out toward the open sea.

Strung Along: Simon’s dead **body moved** out toward the open sea, *surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellation.*

Repetition is another way writers achieve **sentence focus**. Purposeful repetition of a word, phrase, or clause emphasizes the repeated structure and focuses the reader’s attention on its meaning.

Parallel grammatical forms such as infinitives, gerunds, and prepositional phrases also can balance parallel ideas and give them equal weight.

Varying sentence length: Forestalls boredom and controls emphasis. It also prevents monotony.

Varying sentence length gives the writing rhythm. This would include the use of effective **fragments** as well.

- **Short sentences** can quicken the pace, add a sense of decisiveness, anxiety, terseness, speed, etc. Many short sentences, one after another, create a staccato effect, making every point with finality. A short sentence after a long one shifts the reader’s attention, and can emphasize the meaning and importance of the short sentence.
The most powerful positions in a sentence are the first and the last words. The closer these words come together, the more forceful the message is. Many modern writers put key ideas in short sentences! *If you want to make an idea memorable, compress it in a short space.*
- **Longer sentences** can be used to slow the pace or for contemplative, heavy thoughts. Writers can use sentence length to replicate physical movement of characters.
- **If you don’t vary sentence length you have created “flatliners” a straight line of blips across the screen.** No life. If you write long sentences one after another readers can’t be sure which information to stress (short sentences stress ideas). And if you tend to write many short sentences, readers will stress every sentence. If every idea is emphasized, nothing is. If the stresses do not vary, the pitch remains the same, and the rhythms become monotonous.
Likewise, if we use all long sentences, nothing is emphasized as well. No piece is stressed more than any other. Monotonous.
When readers can’t hear what’s important in sentences, they can’t follow the sense very well. When we listen to someone speak, we pay attention to where the voice rises and where stress falls and where pauses are. The music and rhythm helps us to follow and remember. When we read we need similar cues—we get this by sentence pattern and sentence punctuation.

- **Monosyllabic words vs. Multisyllabic words:** Monosyllabic words are more like what we use in everyday speech. But the length of words have to do with the rhythm of a sentence too. *Monosyllabic words* in succession, tend to make the message seem emphatic and forceful. *Multisyllabic words* can soften the impact—we can show compassion, tenderness, and tranquility. But sometimes they can create distance with the audience—for the sake of objectivity or professionalism/seriousness. Sometimes they create intentional ambiguity in professional circles or like Conrad-on purpose.

Taken from: Voice Lessons, Rhetoric for the Classical Student, Developing a Written Voice, and Silva Rhetoricae