

Elements of Diction by George Alizadeh

In this document, I have listed five important elements that you need to take into account in order to improve your diction or the choice and use of words and phrases in speech or writing. These five elements can help you not only refine your own diction but also analyze it in other writers' works.

Elements of Diction

Confusing Words or Confusing Thoughts?

Too many people, at least implicitly, believe that words are disposable and interchangeable vehicles for ideas. This is a mistaken view of the relationship between words and ideas. Your words are not the vehicles for your ideas – they *are* your ideas.

“If you can't say it clearly, you don't understand it yourself,” said the philosopher John Searle. In other words, a confusingly worded argument may not be the result of someone with a clear understanding of an argument choosing the wrong words. Rather, it may be the result of someone lacking a clear understanding of the argument – the confusion in the mind produces confusion on the page.

Therefore, before you can blame your diction for the confusion in your writing, you need to ensure that you have a clear understanding of your arguments. If that *is* the case, then you can start refining your diction.

What is diction?

Diction can be defined as the choice of words especially with regard to clarity, precision, appropriateness, accuracy, and effectiveness.

Clarity:

Clarity is the quality of being lucid and transparent. In order to achieve clarity, you need to avoid ambiguity or obscurity in your diction. Unless you intend to sound ambiguous or obscure, you should always try to be clear in your diction. A phrase can lose its clarity for a number of reasons, which will be discussed in the lesson on clarity. An example of an unclear statement is “My work here is finished.” By this statement, the speaker might mean that she has finished the account she was working on, or that her whole week's work is done and she's leaving for the weekend, or that she's fed up with her job and is leaving the company. Achieving clarity is more challenging in writing than in speaking as certain elements such as the physical context, the tone, the facial expression, and the body gestures are all left out once the statement is written for others to read.

Precision:

Precision is the quality of being definite and exact. In order to achieve precision, you need to avoid vagueness in your diction. A word or phrase is vague if the group of things to which it applies has borderline cases. Consider the word “bald.” Bald, which means having a

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scalp wholly or partly lacking hair, is a vague term. In fact, your reader or listener cannot decide if the person is wholly or partly lacking hair, and in case it is partial loss of hair, your reader or listener cannot determine which part of the head lacks hair. Please note that you can use the word *Bald* if and only if you intend to sound vague. Otherwise, more precise words, such as receding hairline, thinning hair, should be used.

Appropriateness

Appropriateness is the quality of being suitable or proper in the circumstances. Words are appropriate when they are suited to your *subject*, *targeted audience*, and *purpose*. Imagine a pediatrician giving a lecture at a University on the “growth of a fetus” to second-year med students and then to second-graders at a health fair. The *subject* is the same, but the *audience* and *purpose* are so different that the doctor alters the content, manner, and language before talking to elementary students. Some words inappropriate in some situations are perfectly acceptable in others. In order to write appropriately, you need to learn a number of points; for instance you need to get familiar with the four types of words, namely *learned*, *popular*, *colloquial*, and *slang*. You also need to consider the connotative meaning of words when deciding on their appropriateness for your audience and purpose.

Accuracy

Accuracy is the quality of being correct. It refers to the correct word usage. Lexicographers gather samples of written or spoken instances where a word is used and analyze them to determine patterns or collocations of regional or social usage as well as meaning. In order to use a word accurately, you need to be aware of these patterns and collocations. For example, you need to know that the word *Justice* is usually collocated with certain verbs, such as serve, administer, etc.

The idea of accuracy in your diction may sound contrary to the idea of creative writing. However, remember that being creative in your writing does not mean inaccurate or incorrect word usage; rather, it is the fresh and novel structures and images that will render your writing creative. Every once in a while, writers may also use an unusual collocation in their writings to serve a unique purpose; however, this is very different from the mistakes that you may make due to ignorance of the existing collocations that can already serve your purpose well.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is the degree to which something is successful in producing a desired result. Therefore, effectiveness is closely tied to the purpose of the writing. For instance, if you are writing a persuasive paragraph, the degree to which your diction helps you in convincing the audience is your effectiveness. Remember a word that is clear, precise, appropriate, and accurate may not exactly help you achieve your desired result. For instance, how the passage sounds can affect its effectiveness.