Diction: The Choice of Words

Students often view word choice as a problem. As teachers of writing, we can help students learn to love words by creating situations in which they engage in what Annie Dillard calls “learning worlds.” We may not be able to teach students how to always find the “right” word among all the nearly right words, but we can illustrate what Mark Twain calls “the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” Students learn the power of words by using them: by reading, by talking, by arguing about meanings, by writing and rewriting, and by researching the topics about which they feel most passionate. This is the “simple curiosity” that Annie Dillard speaks of, which creates the compulsion to think about words and their effects on readers. When students feel the power of having been listened to (they feel this when instructors respond to the content of the essays they write), they become enabled to say more, to explore new meanings, to take chances with language, and, finally, to experience new worlds.

Chapter 9 provides general guidelines for diction (appropriateness, specificity, and imagery) and exercises to eliminate vagueness, jargon, triteness, and ineffective imagery. The three readings at the end of the chapter help foster language awareness, and the writing assignments offer ways to explore language in personal and academic contexts.

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

The distinction between denotation and connotation often seems blurry to students because every word has both and because explicit and implicit meanings intertwine. To make the distinction clearer, we sometimes oversimplify connotation, saying that it is positive, negative, or neutral. Actually, connotation embraces all implicit meaning: we sometimes talk about the political or sexual connotations of a word, for example.
Exercises (p. 235)

This exercise demonstrates the differences between denotation and connotation. All the possible word choices are connotatively distinct.

1. a. The roses *climbed* the trellis. Through the use of personification, the word *climbed* describes the growth of the roses up the trellis.
   b. The roses *adorned* the trellis. The word *adorned* emphasizes the decorative function of the roses, their beauty and arrangement on the trellis.
   c. The roses *strangled* the trellis. The word *strangled* suggests a negative quality in the roses’ growth, a malevolent grasping and overtaking of the trellis.

2. a. She was a *compulsive* reader. The word *compulsive* suggests an addiction to reading that is negative. Perhaps she reads to avoid responsibilities, other people, or personal problems.
   b. She was a *critical* reader. The word *critical* implies that the reader is discriminating, serious, and analytical in her approach to reading. However, students may see “critical” as implying someone who is negative about everything she reads: picky, faultfinding.
   c. She was a *perceptive* reader. Clearly, *perceptive* is a compliment; it suggests that the reader exhibits deep understanding of what she reads.

3. a. The children were *sleepy*. The word *sleepy* suggests normal, end-of-the-day drowsiness.
   b. The children were *exhausted*. The word *exhausted* suggests abnormal tiredness, usually caused by a particular exertion or special circumstances.
   c. The children were *weary*. The word *weary* also suggests extraordinary tiredness, usually produced by a taxing activity or circumstances that have occurred for an extended time.

4. a. The reef *appeared* beneath the surface. The word *appeared* suggests that the reef came into view as a consequence of the narrator or speaker’s movement toward it.
   b. The reef *loomed* beneath the surface. The word *loomed* draws attention to the dangers posed by the reef; perhaps divers have been snagged by the reef and have drowned as a result.
c. The reef *glimmered* beneath the surface. The word *glimmered* emphasizes the beauty of the reef, the way in which the reef reflects the water and light in jewel-like fashion.

5. a. The comet *shot* across the night sky. The word *shot* draws attention to the speed with which the comet moved across the sky and to its straight, bullet-like path.
   
b. The comet *blinked* across the night sky. The word *blinked* personifies the comet’s movement across the sky, comparing it to the quick, fleeting opening and closing of the eyes. Thus the word emphasizes the comet’s brief visibility.
   
c. The comet *blazed* across the night sky. The word *blazed* describes the comet in terms of its appearance as a bright flash of fiery light.

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE DICTION: APPROPRIATENESS

Appropriateness is a function of subject, audience, and purpose. This section reminds students of their range of options with regard to diction. One way to help them avoid inappropriate or inconsistent diction is to have them read their papers aloud in small groups. Another is to have them evaluate each other’s essays by answering the question “If you had to judge from word choice alone, what sort of person would you imagine the author to be?” A follow-up question is “Which words or phrases contribute to your image of the author?”

Exercise (p. 238)

The words in the paragraph that seem too formal are in brackets; those that seem too informal are in parentheses.

In my [perusal] of the morning paper, I often pause to (take a gander) at my horoscope. This (stuff) is supposed (to be figured out) on a chart of the heavens, which [manifests] the positions of the sun, moon, and the signs of the zodiac at the (honest to goodness) time and location of your birth. These [configurations] are then [juxtaposed] to the twelve hours of the [celestial sphere]. The signs [are presumed] [to hold sway] over certain parts of the body, and the houses are supposed (to tell you what’s happening) in the various conditions of life. The degree of influence [attributed] to these houses depends on a (bunch) of factors. Sometimes my horoscope predicts the [orb] of my daily activities with [confounding] accuracy. But most of the time it’s just (hogwash).
Here is one possible revision in which the diction is more consistent:

As I read the morning paper, I often pause to read my horoscope. Horoscopes are determined by the positions of the sun, moon, and zodiac signs at the time and location of your birth. This arrangement is then superimposed on a chart of the twelve houses. Astrologers claim that the signs of the zodiac influence certain parts of the body and that the houses hold sway over various conditions of life. The degree of influence of the houses, however, depends on many factors. Sometimes my horoscope predicts my daily activities with surprising accuracy, but most of the time it seems to be nonsense.

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE DICTION: SPECIFICITY

Rule 12 in Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* is “Use definite, specific, concrete language.” While this advice is sound, Richard Ohmann warned in a 1979 *College English* article against presenting this advice as a rule to be mechanically applied. Good writing involves both generalities and specificity, which work together to make meaning.

Exercises (pp. 238–239)

1. Animal, quadruped, dog, bird dog, Labrador retriever
2. Molecule, atom, nucleus, protons, electrons
3. Plant, bush, decorative bush, rosebush, Tropicana rosebush
4. Galaxy, Milky Way, solar system, sun, Jupiter
5. Scientist, chemist, Nobel Prize winner, Marie Curie

Exercises (p. 240)

1. The terms that seem most concrete, those that evoke sensual images, are underlined.

A single knoll rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornadic winds arise in the spring, and in summer the prairie is an anvil’s edge. The grass turns brittle and brown, and it cracks beneath your feet. There are green belts along the rivers and creeks, linear groves of hickory and pecan, willow and witch hazel. At a distance in July or August the steaming foliage seems almost to writhe in fire. Great green and yellow grasshoppers are everywhere in the tall grass, popping up like corn to sting the flesh, and tortoises crawl about on the red earth, going nowhere in plenty of time. Loneliness is an aspect of the land. All things in the plain are isolate;
there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but one hill or one tree or one man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.

Without those terms the passage would be thin and flat. There would be no verbal picture, no sensual re-creation of place:

A single knoll is in the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings storms, spring brings wind, and summer brings heat. There is grass along the rivers and creeks as well as hickory, pecan, willow, and witch hazel. At a distance in July or August the trees look hot. Grasshoppers are everywhere in the grass, and tortoises move about. Loneliness is an aspect of the land. All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye. To look upon that landscape in the early morning is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.

2. In the paragraphs about swimming, the right-hand version is clearly more concrete. Compare the following expressions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>in the past</th>
<th>forty years ago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>girls in rural communities</td>
<td>farmer’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some neighboring stream</td>
<td>the crick below the pasture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some discarded article of clothing</td>
<td>her brother’s outgrown overalls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tailored to fit the occasion</td>
<td>trimmed with scissors as her discretion might suggest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the paragraphs about the snake, the left-hand version is more concrete:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the biceps of my right arm</th>
<th>my arm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[detailed description of the feel of the snake’s movements]</td>
<td>I felt the snake moving. . . . I felt the contraction of its muscles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a flat, V-shaped head, with two glistening, black, protruding buttons</td>
<td>its ugly head and its evil-looking eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A thin, pointed, sickening yellow tongue slipped out, then in.</td>
<td>Its tongue kept moving in and out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a sound like that of escaping steam a kind of hissing noise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE DICTION: IMAGERY

Imagery strengthens writing because it provides pictures in words. Images help readers see what the writer is saying, often in new ways. Nevertheless, the use of figurative language is not without potential hazards, such as the tendency to use clichés or strained metaphors: “Without recreational outlets such as sports, drama club, and band, the search for the true self cuts itself short amidst a cold pool of frustration.” Students should use figures of speech not as ends in themselves but as a means of presenting the subject to a particular audience for a particular purpose.

Exercises (pp. 244–245)
(Not every instance of specificity and imagery has been pointed out, just the ones that seem most related to the author’s purpose.)

1. a. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s purpose is to describe a natural phenomenon and convey his sense of its mystery and power. He accomplishes his purpose by contrasting two sets of images—those of domestic animals under ordinary circumstances and those of the same animals under the influence of a flock of wild birds overhead. The barnyard fowl are described in fairly literal terms: They have “hard little heads” that are filled with images of “pools and worms and barnyards.” The wild ducks and geese, by contrast, are described metaphorically and are linked with the large, primal forces of nature. Their flight causes a “strange tide” to rise as they “sweep” over vast territories. The power of this “great triangular flight” is compared to a magnet that attracts the barnyard fowl so that they “leap a foot or two into the air and try to fly.” So transformed are these ordinary fowl by the wild birds overhead that the narrow, everyday images that fill their heads are replaced by “a sense of continental expanse, of the breadth of seas and the salt taste of the ocean wind.”

b. The Skip Rozin paragraph involves less ambitious figures. Its purpose is to persuade us that strip-mining is “terracide,” or murder on a grand scale, and its images are accordingly menacing and nightmarish. The dominant image is of the “giant shovels like mythological creatures, their girdered necks lifting massive steel mouths high above the tallest trees.” You might ask the class whether Rozin is overstating the case and by doing so only preaching to the already converted. Will a neutral audience be persuaded of the destructiveness of strip-mining through images of a mythological
monster controlled by a malevolent and anonymous “they,” or will such readers see Rozin’s imagery as partisan and overly dramatic?

c. Joan Didion’s purpose is to explain something mysterious—the Santa Ana’s effect on people—in factual terms. She accomplishes her purpose through specificity. For example, she offers factual information about the Santa Ana: “It occurs on the leeward slope of a mountain range and, although the air begins as a cold mass, it is warmed as it comes down the mountain and appears finally as a hot dry wind.” And she cites a recent scientific discovery that may eventually explain the Santa Ana’s effect on people: “For the ten or twelve hours which precede them [the winds], the air carries an unusually high ratio of positive to negative ions.” As evidence of the Santa Ana’s strange effect on people, Didion provides specific examples. Whenever it blows, doctors hear reports about “headaches and nausea and allergies”; in Los Angeles “some teachers do not attempt to conduct formal classes”; and in Switzerland the “suicide rate goes up.”

2. a. Wallace’s simile is accurate and funny, consistent with his purpose of being simultaneously informative and amusing. The idea of a “Disneyland mortuary” nicely captures the irony in the situation—Wallace, painter of angst, commissioned to paint a cheery Disneyland character for a nursery.

b. This simile is quite effective because it captures the surprisingly graceful movement of this huge animal and helps the reader picture the movement.

c. Although the comparison of drug abuse in the workplace to a plague is fitting and sustained throughout the sentence by medical terms such as cure and health, it is a trite analogy. All kinds of societal problems are described as plagues; the lack of freshness in the image undercuts its effectiveness.

REVISING DICTION: ELIMINATING VAGUENESS

Exercises (p. 247)

1. a. She is a scientist, but I don’t know what her specialty is.

b. Our medical technologists thought the blood samples were highly infected.

c. One disadvantage of the merger plan is its effect on prices.

d. What an embarrassing surprise to meet so many ex-boyfriends at the wedding reception.
9

e. The price they are charging for lab fees is ten dollars higher than it was last year.

2. The more specific expressions are underlined in the following version of the paragraph:

The whole surface of the ice was a chaos of movement. It looked like an enormous jigsaw puzzle stretching away to infinity and being crushed together by some invisible but irresistible force. The impression of its titanic power was heightened by the unhurried deliberateness of the motion. Whenever two thick floes came together, their edges butted and ground against one another for a time. Then, when neither of them showed signs of yielding, they rose quiveringly, driven by the implacable power behind them. Sometimes they would stop abruptly as the unseen forces affecting the ice appeared mysteriously to lose interest. More frequently, though, the two floes—often ten feet thick or more—would continue to rise, tenting up until one or both of them toppled over, creating a pressure ridge.

REVISING DICTION: ELIMINATING JARGON

There may be times when special terminology is necessary, but such terms should always be explained for the nonspecialized audience.

Exercise (p. 249)

Here is one possible revision of the paragraph:

While walking through the stacks last month, I spotted a book about volcanoes. Since I did not know much about geological formations, I was surprised at how fascinating the book was. Struck by the dramatic and somewhat frightening color photographs of the eruptions of Washington’s Mt. St. Helens and Hawaii’s Kilauea, I decided to do my research paper on volcanoes.

REVISING DICTION: ELIMINATING TRITENESS

Although alerting students to the problem of triteness is necessary, telling them to avoid clichés at all costs is unproductive because such an admonition is unrealistic. Good writers do use clichés from time to time to add a colloquial touch. However, the key is limited and intentional use.

Exercises (p. 250)
The football passage is as trite in its content as it is in its expression. Because the passage provides no new insight, it cannot be made fresh by a trick of rephrasing. The following revision (cut from 244 words to 53 words) is merely less offensive:

Wherever American men play football—on a sandlot, on a high-school field, or in a college or professional stadium—they learn that they can win only through cooperation. They remember this lesson when they leave the field. In society, former players are not renegades but responsible citizens, reliable husbands, and loyal employees.

**REVISING DICTION: ELIMINATING INEFFECTIVE IMAGERY**

**Exercises (pp. 251–252)**

1. Music fans flocked into the arena like a gaggle of geese.
2. The president’s ill-advised action has derailed national policy, and unless Republicans and Democrats in Congress work together, it may take months to get policy back on track.
3. When I try to focus my microscope, I do something that disturbs the delicate alignment of the instrument.
4. NASA expressed confidence that the hearing would allow the real facts of the case to emerge.
5. Although the members of our writing group still nursed hurt feelings, we decided it was time to forgive each other.

**CORRECTING DICTION ON YOUR COMPUTER**

- Recommend that students not spend time puzzling over word choice when they write discovery drafts on the word processor. They might put several word choices in brackets or put a question mark after questionable word choices. That way, their drafting does not grind to a halt because of word choice. Such word choices may be easier to make when the draft is complete. Besides, subsequent drafts might have a different focus and not even need a particularly troublesome phrase or idea.
- Show students how to use the computer’s thesaurus, but warn them that the term they select must be both denotatively and connotatively appropriate to
their purpose. In addition, the thesaurus may hold only a limited number of choices.

- Encourage students to use the spellchecker. However, advise them that names of people and cities will almost always be highlighted, whether or not they are correctly typed. The advantage is that students will double-check the spellings of names and places. Students might want to maintain a spelling dictionary of their own by creating a file and noting the words they have trouble spelling. Help them categorize the words. (Do you usually misspell *ie* words? Words with double consonants? Words ending in *ing*) By isolating the patterns of their errors, they can become aware of what to look for. Students might also want to keep a “new vocabulary” file in which they list new words and their meanings and then practice writing sentences that use the new words.

**READINGS**

“The Microscope,” James Thurber

Thurber’s account of his failure to see anything through the microscope becomes a metaphor for all of us in our inability, at times, to see what’s right in front of our noses. It might be therapeutic at this point for students to spend some time trading their own accounts of failure and find ways to contextualize the failure, as Thurber did within a framework of his total university experience. Most important, of course, is the emphasis on how he tells the story and on how the various linguistic registers contribute to the humor of the piece.

**Discussion questions (p. 253).** How would you characterize the *appropriateness* of Thurber’s diction? On the scale ranging from most formal to least formal, where would you place Thurber’s choice of words?

Thurber’s diction falls into the middle area of the scale, although as the narrative progresses, the level of formality increases. He begins with a conversational account of his inability to recognize anything under the microscope: “All botany students had to spend several hours a week in a laboratory looking through a microscope at plant cells.” The vocabulary here is casual (he writes “had to spend” rather than “were obliged” and “looking through a microscope at plant cells” rather than “examining cell structures”). He also says, “I never once saw a cell through a microscope” rather than something more formal such as “I never succeeded in identifying the appropriate shapes.” At this point, however, he notes that “this used to enrage my instructor.” The word *enrage* reaches a more formal linguistic register than the rest of the sentence, which establishes his instructor’s anger and prepares the reader for a conflict.
Although Thurber’s language is overall relatively informal, it is this masterful control of more than one level of formality that contributes to the effectiveness of the piece. Thurber never refers to the instructor as being “mad” or even “angry” but instead describes him as being “in a fury.” As we reach the climax of the story, the level of learned vocabulary and formality increases: “With only one [adjustment to the microscope] did I see anything but blackness or the familiar lacteal opacity.” The learned vocabulary here is not restricted to an isolated word but instead involves a series of phrases that are exaggerated in their level of formality. We then read that “I saw, to my pleasure and amazement, a variegated constellation of flecks, specks, and dots.” The mixture of formal (“pleasure and amazement” and “variegated constellation”) with less learned (“flecks, specks, and dots” are hardly high science) should prepare us for the downfall that follows, although the next sentence uses an inverted word order as well as the more formal lexical item hastily, which sustains both the formality and the suspense: “These I hastily drew.” The effect of this heightened language increases the tension and anticipation for the reader and also creates a greater distance between Thurber and the instructor. The high degree of formality at this point also makes us feel more intensely the fall that comes when the instructor screams, “That’s your eye! . . . You’ve fixed the lens so that it reflects! You’ve drawn your eye!” In his usual turn of phrase, Thurber manages to create a verbal irony: the student uses formal and learned language, thinking he’s finally “got” it when he hasn’t, and the instructor’s diction is informal and colloquial.

“Knothole Cavern,” Edwin Way Teale

Teale’s essay is a perfect example of how writers not only “learn new worlds” but also create new worlds for readers. A scientific textbook definition of the larvae of the Syrphid fly would supply an excellent contrast to Teale’s lively description and promote discussion of “good writing” in the context of purpose and audience.

Discussion questions (p. 254). In what ways does Teale use imagery to describe the events he observes in the “knothole cavern”? What specific figures of speech does he use to describe the “larvae of a Syrphid fly, Eristalis tenax”?

You might want to give writing assignment 7 as an introductory collaborative exercise for this reading selection and then discuss the various metaphorical techniques students have identified in Teale’s essay.

The imagery in “Knothole Cavern” vividly opens the world of the naturalist to the novice reader. Like the insect life described, similes and metaphors abound in the piece, which is constructed on a “lake” analogy as Teale describes the rich
community life that has grown up in the rainwater of the knothole. He compares what he sees to such common objects as “knothole” and “lake,” these metaphors providing not only a way to understand how the lake is constructed (in a knothole), but also conveying the idea of a whole world—a lake—in miniature.

The central metaphor Teale uses for the Syrphid fly larvae is that of divers and air-hoses, which effectively helps the reader understand how the larvae work to get food and air. *Eristalis tenax* larvae, he tells us, “feed upon decaying matter under water. Their tubelike, telescoping tails reach to the surface and carry air to the creatures below.” He goes on to extend the metaphor into an analogy: “Nature thus invented the prototype of the diving gear.” Teale has already given us a sense of the scope of these tiny creatures, earlier referring to them as “dimples” that do not reach beyond the surface of the “pond” where he discovers them. At first he believes them to be “sprouts,” but a closer look reveals the structure of the larvae, “at most only two-thirds of an inch long” with “remarkable tails, formed of two tubes.” Teale’s straightforward description in his last paragraph of how the tubes are extended and contracted is effective because of the earlier use of diving paraphernalia, now firmly established as an image in our minds. He then reestablishes the image of deep-sea diving in the concluding sentence: “The larvae either crept up the side of the vessel or floated up to a height from which their breathing tubes could reach the air supply.”

“Total Eclipse,” Annie Dillard

Some students may have observed the total eclipse of the sun visible in Hawaii and in the southwestern United States in July 1991. What were their impressions? They might recount their own experiences, interview someone who saw the eclipse, or research accounts of it. How do newspaper accounts or scientific descriptions compare with Dillard’s description?

Discussion questions (p. 256). Compare Annie Dillard’s comments (p. 233) on choosing and using words with her diction in this excerpt from “Total Eclipse.” Select specific examples where her word choice exhibits the three qualities of effective diction—appropriateness, specificity, and imagery. How does each example advance her purpose?

Annie Dillard’s purpose is to describe the psychological dislocation she experienced while witnessing a total eclipse. She gradually prepares the reader for this altered mental state, this madness, by using analogies that explain the extraordinary in terms of the ordinary. For example, in paragraph 6, she describes the coldness she felt by saying it is “as if someone were standing between you and
the fire.” She announces the transition into this altered state at the end of paragraph 10—“and that was the last sane moment I remember.” The remaining paragraphs graphically re-create this bizarre, surreal experience. As her comments at the opening of Chapter 9 suggest, she carefully selects her words for effect and “pommels” the reader with unsettling concrete details.

Although there are numerous examples of effective diction in this excerpt, here are three you might use as illustrations of appropriateness, specificity, and imagery. In each example, diction clearly serves purpose.

Like the example mentioned earlier, the analogy in the fourth sentence of paragraph 6 prepares the reader gradually for the totally disorienting experience that is about to be described. “Seeing a partial eclipse,” Dillard writes, “bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him, or as flying in an airplane does to falling out of an airplane.” These analogies accomplish several purposes at once. They name experiences that everyone can relate to or imagine; almost all readers have had romantic relationships and have ridden in planes. Yet these analogies also illustrate that “although the one experience precedes the other, it in no way prepares you for it.” Two events may share some commonality and still be different orders of experience.

Another example of Dillard’s effective use of diction appears in paragraph 11: “The hues were metallic; their finish was matte.” The word metallic calls forth a surreal mental picture; the phrase their finish was matte suggests a photographic metaphor—things looked unreal, as though the people and surroundings were a photograph, not a present, living reality. Her intention here is to convey her altered perception. In the same paragraph, she conveys the way in which time was dislocated by mixing time references: “The hillside was a nineteenth-century tinted photograph,” and “I was watching a faded color print of a movie filmed in the Middle Ages.”

A third example of Dillard’s deft use of language is the series of short descriptive sentences in the last paragraph in which she creates the final stage of the eclipse: “The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. . . . The hole where the sun belongs is very small. A thin ring of light marked its place. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed.” Following the scene of madness, where the living appear dead and screams of horror fill the air, there is calm. The short, parallel sentences and simple, concrete words and phrases communicate the sense that the madness is over.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**
1. Narrate: Students might recall an embarrassing or humorous incident in which they could not communicate effectively because of word choice. Such incidents frequently occur cross-culturally: one Japanese woman looked at a series of photographs taken by an American and commented that the photographer had an “artificial eye” when she meant “artistic eye.” Such occurrences are common—sometimes funny, sometimes not, especially before the point at which the participants are able to sort out the specific reason for the miscommunication. This is an assignment that students will probably enjoy and that can help make a strong point about appropriateness of diction.

2. Observe: This exercise could be assigned collaboratively as an exercise in linguistic fieldwork in which students observe spoken language in the context of a particular speech community. When compiling lists, students will want to note the following: the gender and age of the speaker, the gender and age of the person addressed, the particular social context (formal, informal), and the level of familiarity. Do the speakers know each other well, or are they just becoming acquainted? Are students speaking to professors, secretaries, janitors, other students? Do these variations contribute to different applications of slang? Has the meaning of the words observed changed in any significant way? This could suggest a language shift, particularly if a word once used only by students is now more widely used by professors, secretaries, and janitors.

3. Investigate: This assignment could be an interesting follow-up to assignment 2 or a sequel to assignment 1. This assignment helps students understand when jargon is effective and gives them much-needed practice in explaining terms to a lay audience. Interested students might turn this into a longer project—writing a helpful user’s manual for a novice audience or creating a specialized glossary for beginners.

4. Collaborate: This assignment could be used to introduce students to linguistics and the study of language shifts as they study how words make their way into the “mainstream” lexicon. Because language is constantly evolving through use, new words are being added while older words are slowly falling away from lack of use. Students might want to compare “Word Watch” columns from earlier Atlantic Monthly issues to see which words have managed to become everyday words and which words have failed to take hold.

5. Read: You might want to refer students to Chapter 5 for a review of “definition.” This assignment could introduce them to the complexities and
levels of meaning that words acquire. Particularly eye-opening for students are obsolete meanings that are sometimes the opposite of current meanings. Students might examine the *OED* to see how particular words have been applied in various contexts and augment this study through their own linguistic fieldwork.

6. **Respond:** This could become a narrative in which students describe their own cognitive processes. You might guide them by asking, “What experiences have you had that seem similar to what Thurber describes? Did you respond in a similar way, or did you do something entirely different?” Students might work in small groups to discuss their experiences before they begin to write, or you might lead a whole-class discussion so students can brainstorm together the kinds of experiences they have had. The assignment does not need to be limited to science; it can be extended to any situation that required students to “perform” their knowledge for an expert.

7. **Analyze:** This assignment can help students understand the importance of using common analogies to explain less familiar concepts. Some of the tropes they may identify as they examine the Teale essay are as follows:

- **Similes:** “resembles some unexplored cave or subterranean lake” (paragraph 3); “like trilobites from a remote geological past” (paragraph 3); “as though drinking on the shore of a lake” (paragraph 3); “like slender, whitish tadpoles” (paragraph 6); “like the poles of a tepee” (paragraph 8); “like a moving picture” (paragraph 10)
- **Metaphors:** “teacup-sized cavern” (paragraph 3); “lip of the opening” (paragraph 5); “water midgets” (paragraph 5); “knothole lake” (paragraph 6); “whip-tails in action” (paragraph 6); “midget swimmers” (paragraph 6); “little acrobats of the surface film” (paragraph 10); “the pond-bottom” (paragraph 11); “air-hoses of the world’s first diving suits” (paragraph 11)
- **Analogies:** extended lake metaphor throughout the essay; acrobat analogy of paragraph 5; extended swimmer/diver metaphor (second half of essay)
- **Personification:** “the black, unblinking eye of a knothole” (paragraph 2); “two black ants are bending down” (paragraph 3); “telescoping tails reach to the surface and carry air” (paragraph 12); “Nature thus invented” (paragraph 12)
- **Allusions:** “Lilliputian lake” (paragraph 6, a reference to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*)

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8. Evaluate: This assignment is particularly suited for collaborative work. Students might also examine whether learned words tend to appear in more complex or formal sentence constructions. As students work on “assessing” and “evaluating,” you might remind them that the best place to start is with their own reactions to the reading. It might be helpful for them to reread the piece and note their reactions in the margins. From here, students can categorize the words and phrases and try to figure out why they responded as they did.

9. Argue: You might want to ask students to construct a hypothesis and a research plan to help them focus and avoid a simplistic approach such as “Humid weather makes me lazy; one day last summer. . . .” They might begin with such a statement but then expand it to argue for the impact of environment on personality or national character. For example, what is the average temperature of Kuala Lumpur? And how do weather and climate conditions shape the social life of Malaysian people? Students might conduct interviews, read sociological studies, and evaluate scientific accounts of weather patterns throughout the year.

10. Argue: This assignment asks students to study language as it is used in society. Students will first have to define for themselves what it means to “purify” the language, if they are offering prescriptions or descriptions of the language, and how much their own attitudes toward language might be interfering with their observations. Particularly useful for students will be the exercise of examining written language arising out of everyday contexts. They might begin by brainstorming a series of questions: Does this piece of writing say anything? Who is the intended audience? What is the speaker’s point of view? What kinds of tropes have been used? What are the effects?

Students who choose to look at political speeches might want to research other speeches by the same politician or examine a series of speeches on a particular issue, such as child care or health care, presented in the House and Senate and transcribed in the official record. Others may be interested in studying sexism in everyday language—the “generic” male pronoun, for example, or the ways in which language reveals an assumption of particular gender roles. Does the language appear to be changing? How can we promote change (or prevent it)? In what ways could such change reflect social harmony or discord?
USING THE WRITING CENTER

Students often want to turn to the thesaurus to find words that will make their writing “sound good.” Although working with a thesaurus does introduce students to new words, it is easy to spot words pulled out of a thesaurus and stuck into an essay without careful attention to connotation and denotation. Writing Center tutors can help students choose words appropriate to the subject, purpose, and audience of their papers. If students want to work on such tasks as vocabulary building, tutors can help them within the contexts of their writing.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM

Besides recasting some of the chapter’s exercises as collaborative activities, you may wish to try one of the following:

• Ask students to collect everyday figures of speech. They might do this by meeting in groups to decide where to go to overhear conversations, conducting fieldwork in which they record the gender and age of the speaker and a little bit about the context in which the metaphors occur, and then reconvening to compile their lists of metaphors. They might compare their lists for patterns of images or for differences in language usage between men and women.

• Annie Dillard’s comment that “I learn words by learning worlds” suggests a second language-awareness activity. To demonstrate the truth of Dillard’s statement, remind students of the “worlds of words” they already know through their membership in various speech communities: jobs, special interests, hobbies, family, ethnic background, geographic location. Ask students to think of three speech communities to which they belong and the special vocabularies associated with those communities. For example, serious runners would never call themselves joggers and would never mistakenly call a 10K race (6.2 miles) a marathon (26 miles, 385 yards). Computer hackers use a vocabulary so specialized it seems like a foreign language to outsiders.

• To provide students with practice in distinguishing between denotation and connotation, ask them to pretend they are a college student who is taking her steady boyfriend home for Christmas vacation. If the grandparents come to visit, what words could she use to introduce him? Students may suggest some of the following terms:
boyfriend    lover
gentleman friend  spouse equivalent
co-hab     beau
significant other  admirer
suitor     live-in
young man   fiancé
flame      squeeze
steady     one and only
sweetheart guy I’m hanging around with
heartthrob intended

Once these expressions are on the board, ask the class to group them into those that differ in connotation only and those that differ in denotation. There is no definitive grouping, but the students may arrive at a consensus that “co-hab,” “spouse equivalent,” “live-in,” and perhaps “lover” belong in a separate denotative group. “Fiancé,” “intended,” and “suitor” also have denotations that separate them from the bulk of the expressions. But among those left, the student can choose largely on the basis of connotative differences between introducing the fellow as, for instance, “my young man,” “my significant other,” and “the guy I’m hanging around with.” Does “young man” imply a formal or traditional relationship that will be reassuring to grandparents? What does “significant other” imply? Does “guy I’m hanging around with” suggest that the relationship is casual or “loose” in a sense that will alarm the grandparents?

Peer Evaluation

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<tr>
<th>Peer respondent:</th>
<th>Writer:</th>
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1. Using the scale on page 237, characterize the type of diction used in this draft. Support your categorization with several examples.
2. Is the diction consistent in its level of formality?
3. Is the level of formality appropriate to the subject, audience, and purpose? Why or why not?
4. Underline examples of specific and concrete words and phrases. How do such words and phrases advance the author’s purpose?
5. Draw a wavy line under passages that are vague and that might benefit from more specific wording.
6. Put brackets around any sentence or sentences that contain images or figures of speech. Is each image or figure effective? Are there any that are ineffective (that is, mixed, inappropriate, hackneyed)?
7. Put an asterisk in front of any clichés or trite expressions.
8. Circle any words or phrases that seem to be jargon.

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


Roland Bartel provides practical classroom guidance in presenting the study of metaphor to students in *Metaphors and Symbols: Forays into Language* (Urbana, IL: NCTE), 1983.

Dennis Brown’s *Guide to Home Language Repair* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994) may provide you with a humorous approach to current language usage that you can share with your class.