

Advanced Placement

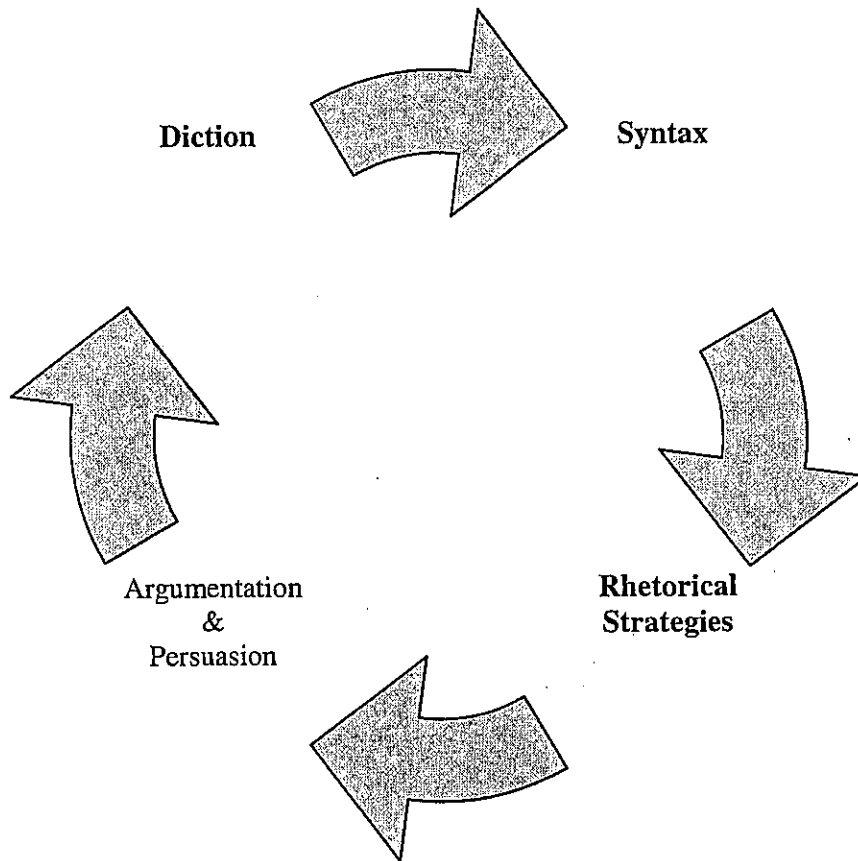
Language  
&  
Composition

Development of Fundamental Skills

DICTION

Edited and Compiled by Jeffrey Norton

# Rhetoric and Persuasion



**It's all tied together**

## DICTION

\*words have three levels to them and are selected based on their efficiency in these three areas: appearance, sound, meaning

## TYPES OF DICTION

mono syllabic	vs	poly syllabic
euphonious	vs	cacophonous
literal	vs	figurative
denotative	vs	connotative
objective	vs	subjective
active	vs	passive
concrete	vs	abstract
hyperbole	vs	understated
pedestrian	vs	pedantic

## LEVELS OF DICTION

non-standard  
vulgarity  
slang  
colloquial/dialect  
jargon  
cliché

informal/standard

formal

## DEVICES OF SOUND

assonance  
consonance  
alliteration  
onomatopoeia

\*\*Never are you allowed to say "the author uses a lot of diction."

\*\*Whenever the word "diction" is used, it must be accompanied by an *adjective* to describe what kind of diction.



## Diction

### Connotation/Denotation 1

Organize the following words from each list into a group of words with positive connotations and a list with negative connotations. Every word must be used in one of the two lists.

1. tight, miserly, frugal, economical, careful, penurious, thrifty, budget-minded, prudent, penny-pinching
2. dislike, resent, lament, hate, scorn, disapprove, decry, deplore, oppose, regret
3. odd, curious, off-the-wall, outlandish, weird, singular, bizarre, unusual, strange, extraordinary, remarkable, eerie, noteworthy

Often two words roughly mean the same thing, except that one has an unfavorable, the other, a favorable, connotation. Thus, although you may like to think of yourself as an *idealist*, people who do not sympathize with your attitudes might call you a *dreamer*. For the following pairs of terms, write a short explanation of why you might like to be described by one term but not the other. (Address both words.)

1. self-confident/conceited
2. assertive/pushy
3. firm/stubborn
4. hard-working/workaholic
5. flexible/indecisive
6. casual/sloppy
7. mature/old

For each word listed, give a word of similar meaning (same denotation) that expresses approval and one that expresses disapproval.

- | <u>neutral</u>        | <u>approval</u> | <u>disapproval</u> |
|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1. to teach           |                 |                    |
| 2. thin               |                 |                    |
| 3. fussy              |                 |                    |
| 4. candid             |                 |                    |
| 5. stern              |                 |                    |
| 6. credulous          |                 |                    |
| 7. to fail (a course) |                 |                    |

In each of the following sentences, you will find a word or phrase with the wrong connotation, given the level of the sentence. Decide which word/phrase is inappropriate and substitute a better word/phrase for it.

1. With the U.S. falling behind other industrialized countries, many college people – from chancellors to freshman—consider extracurricular activities a real bummer.
2. Others, of course, regard such entertainments as hot stuff, cultural and educational, and a vital element in college life.
3. Higher education should have the guts and the idealism to widen and ennoble life.
4. Ours is an age of science, and one of the bases of science is mathematics, which, regrettably, some students think of as a real drag.
5. Charles Dickens created characters from the lowest levels of the English-speaking world, but he made these scumbags appear likable because he revealed their universal humanity.
6. Dickens from his youth saw life from just above the starvation level and, though later he earned megabucks and international hoopla, all his characters were based on his poverty-stricken childhood.

## Connotation/Denotation 2

Provide your responses to the following activities on a separate piece of paper.

- A. For each of the following words or phrases, list at least two synonyms that have more negative connotations than the given word or phrase.
- |                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| a. child       | e. scholarly     |
| b. persistent  | f. trusting      |
| c. willowy     | g. underachiever |
| d. large group | h. quiet         |
- B. For each of the following words, list at least two synonyms that have more positive connotations than the given word.
- |                 |             |
|-----------------|-------------|
| a. notorious    | e. fanatic  |
| b. fat          | f. reckless |
| c. politician   | g. sot      |
| d. old (people) | h. quiet    |
- C. List all the words you know for human female and for human male. Then classify them by connotation (positive, negative, neutral) and by level of usage (formal, informal, non-standard). Is there any connection between type of connotation and level of usage? Why are some words more appropriate in some social contexts than in others? Can you easily list more negative words used for one sex than the other? Why?
- D. Although many words have connotations that most of us agree to because they are culturally shared, these same words can be given a different connotation in some contexts. First, for each of the following words, label its connotation as positive, negative, or neutral. Then, for each word with a positive connotation, write a sentence in which the word would convey a more negative connotation. For each word with a negative connotation, write a sentence in which the word would suggest a more positive connotation.
- |              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| a. natural   | d. free     |
| b. old       | e. chemical |
| c. committed | f. lazy     |
- E. Each of the following groups of words might appear together in a thesaurus, but the words actually vary in connotation. After looking up any words whose connotation you are unsure of, write a sentence in which each word is used correctly. Briefly explain why one of the other words in the group should not be substituted.
- |                            |                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| a. brittle, hard, fragile  | d. strange, remarkable, bizarre |
| b. quiet, withdrawn, glum  | e. thrifty, miserly, economical |
| c. shrewd, clever, cunning |                                 |

- F. Read the following paragraph and decide how the writer feels about the activity described. Note the choice of details and the connotative language that makes you aware of the writer's attitude.

Needing to complete a missed assignment for my physical education class, I dragged myself down to the tennis courts on a gloomy afternoon. My task was to serve five balls in a row into the service box. Although I thought I had learned the correct service movements, I couldn't seem to translate that knowledge into a decent serve. I tossed up the first ball, jerked back my racket, swung up on the ball – clunk – I hit the ball on the frame. I threw up the second ball, brought back my racket, swung up on the ball – ping – I made contact with the strings, but the ball dribbled down on my side of the net. I trudged around the court, collecting my tennis balls; I had only two of them.

- G. Select one of the words listed below, and explain, in a paragraph, what the word connotes to you personally. Be precise; illustrate your thoughts with details and examples.
- |             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| a. nature   | d. nerd    |
| b. mother   | e. playboy |
| c. romantic | f. artist  |



Diction Practice  
Connotations

Read the following poem and in one sentence state the speaker's attitude/tone towards books.

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away,  
Nor any coursers like a page  
of prancing poetry:  
This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toll;  
How frugal is the chariot  
That bears the human soul!

-- Emily Dickinson

Identify five key words that help convey the writer's attitude/tone.

1. Write the words, 2. define the words, and 3. identify the emotional connotation linked to the words.

word	1	2	3	4	5
definition					
connotation					
synonym					

Now your job is to change this poem so that it conveys an attitude opposite that of the original author. Spaces have been left out of the poem below where you are to replace the original words with a word that means roughly the same, but has a negative connotation. Also, to maintain the poem's rhythm, you must replace the identified words with another word having the same number of syllables.

There is no \_\_\_\_\_ like a book  
To \_\_\_\_\_ us \_\_\_\_\_ away,  
Nor any \_\_\_\_\_ like a page  
of \_\_\_\_\_ poetry:  
This \_\_\_\_\_ may the \_\_\_\_\_ take  
With \_\_\_\_\_ oppress of toll;  
How \_\_\_\_\_ is the \_\_\_\_\_  
That \_\_\_\_\_ the human soul!

-- Emily Dickinson

Diction Analysis  
Song of Solomon

Read the following passage from Morrison's story analyzing important diction choices in the work. Identify important word(s) in the passage by circling. Next, comment on the importance of the connotative word by drawing an arrow to the margin and discussing the connotations. When finished write a one sentence response describing the prevailing atmosphere/mood of the scene and how diction contributes to identified atmosphere.

Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glance they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves. In his absence his daughters bent their necks over blood-red squares of velvet and waited eagerly for any hint of him, and his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into silence by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it.

Complete the same activity for this passage. This time, on a separate paper, write one paragraph analyzing how diction contributes to the prevailing atmosphere.

Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. Treading as lightly as he could he crept up to the side window where the candlelight flickered lowest, and peeped in. Reba was cutting her toenails with a kitchen knife or a switchblade, her long neck bent almost to her knees. The girl, Hagar, was braiding her hair, while Pilate, whose face he could not see because her back was to the window, was stirring something in a pot. Wine pulp, perhaps. Macon knew it was not food she was stirring, for she and her daughters ate like children. Whatever they had a taste for. No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table. Pilate might bake hot bread and each one of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. Or there might be grapes, left over from the wine making, or peaches for days on end. If one of them bought a gallon of milk they drank it until it was gone. If another got a half bushel of tomatoes or a dozen ears of corn, they ate them until they were gone too. They ate what they had or came across or had a craving for. Profits from the wine-selling evaporated like sea water in a hot wind – going for junk jewelry for Hagar, Reba's gifts to men, and he didn't know what all.

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight. Reba's soft profile, Hagar's hands moving, moving in her heavy hair, and Pilate. He knew her face better than he knew his own. Singing now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice. But he knew that when she was neither singing nor talking her face was animated by her constantly moving lips. She chewed things. As a baby, as a very young girl, she kept things in her mouth – straw from brooms, gristle, buttons, seeds, leaves, string, and her favorite, when he could find some for her, rubber bands and India rubber erasers. Her lips were alive with small movements. If you were close to her, you wondered if she was about to smile or was she merely shifting a straw from the baseline of her gums to her tongue. Perhaps she was dislodging a curl of rubber band from inside her cheek, or was she really smiling? From a distance she appeared to be whispering to herself, when she was only nibbling or splitting tiny seeds with her front teeth. Her lips were darker than her skin, wind-stained, blueberry-dyed, so her face had a cosmetic look – as though she had applied a very dark lipstick neatly and blotted away its shine on a scrap of newspaper.

As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way. They didn't move. They simply stopped singing and Reba went on paring her toenails, Hagar threaded and unthreaded her hair, and Pilate swayed like a willow over her stirring.

## Ernie Pyle: "On World War II"

Ernie Pyle (1900-1945), once popularly known as "the G.I.'s friend" remains one of the most renowned war correspondents in the history of American journalism. In his enormously popular syndicated column, Pyle chronicled the daily life of the American fighting man and tried to make the ordinary soldier feel significant. "I love the infantry," Pyle said, "because they are the underdogs. They are the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts, and they even learn to live without the necessities. And in the end they are the guys that wars can't be won without." As a writer, Pyle was a stickler for detail, always on the lookout for the way a big event can be taken down to size by small – but hardly trivial – facts.

Though Pyle expertly showed how the human-interest story could be brought to the battlefield he was not overly enthusiastic about war. "If I heard one more shot or saw one more dead man I'd go off my nut," he wrote in 1944, the year he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished reporting. A year later he was dead, killed by sniper fire during the terrible fighting on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima.

### "On World War II"

1. I took a walk along the historic coast of Normandy in the country of France. It was a lovely day for strolling along the seashore. Men were sleeping on the sand, some of them sleeping forever. Men were floating in the water, but they didn't know they were in the water, for they were dead.
2. The water was full of squishy little jelly fish about the size of a man's hand. Millions of them. In the center of each of them was a green design exactly like a four-leafed clover. The good-luck emblem. Sure. Hell, yes.
3. I walked for a mile and a half along the water's edge of our many miled invasion beach. I walked slowly, for the detail on the beach was infinite.
4. The wreckage was vast and startling. The awful waste and destruction of war, even aside from the loss of human life, has always been one of its outstanding features to those who are in it. Anything and everything is expendable. And we did expend on our beachhead in Normandy during those first few hours.
5. For a mile out from the beach there were scores of tanks and trucks and boats that were

not visible, for they were at the bottom of the water – swamped by overloading, or hit by shells, or sunk by mines. Most of their crews were lost.

6. There were trucks tipped half over and swamped partly sunken barges, and the angled-up corners of jeeps, and small landing craft half submerged. And at low tide you could still see those vicious six-pronged iron snares that helped snag and wreck them.

7. On the beach itself, high and dry, were all kinds of wrecked vehicles. There were tanks that had only just made the beach before being knocked out. There were jeeps that had burned to a dull gray. There were big derricks on caterpillar treads that didn't quite make it. There were half-tracks carrying office equipment that had been made into a shambles by a single shell hit, their interiors still holding the useless equipage of smashed typewriters, telephones, office files.

8. There were LCT's turned completely upside down, and lying on their backs, and how they got that way I don't know. There were boats stacked on top of each other, their sides caved in, their suspension doors knocked off.

9. On this shore-line museum of carnage there were abandoned rolls of barbed wire and smashed bulldozers and big stacks of thrown-away life belts and piles of shells still waiting to be moved. In the water floated empty life rafts and soldiers' packs and ration boxes, and mysterious oranges. On the beach lay snarled rolls of telephone wire and big rolls of steel matting and stacks of broken, rusting rifles.

10. On the beach lay, expended, sufficient men and mechanism for a small war. They were gone forever now. And yet we could afford it.

11. We could afford it because we were on, we had our toe hold, and behind us there were such enormous replacements for this wreckage on the beach that you could hardly conceive of the sum total. Men and equipment were flowing from England in such a gigantic stream that it made the waste on the beachhead seem like nothing at all, really nothing at all.

12. But there was another and more human litter. It extended in a thin little line, just like a high-water mark, for miles along the beach. This was the strewn personal gear, gear that would never be needed again by those who fought and died to give us our entrance into Europe.

13. There in a jumbled row for mile on mile were soldiers' packs. There were socks and shoe polish, sewing kits, diaries, Bibles, hand grenades. There were the latest letters from

home, with the address on each one neatly razored out – one of the security precautions enforced before the boys embarked.

14. There were toothbrushes and razors, and snapshots of families back home staring up at you from the sand. There were pocketbooks, metal mirrors, extra trousers, and bloody, abandoned shoes. There were broken-handled shovels, and portable radios smashed almost beyond recognition, and mine detectors twisted and ruined.

15. There were torn pistol belts and canvas water buckets, first-aid kits, and jumbled heaps of life belts. I picked up a pocket Bible with a soldier's name in it and put it in my jacket. I carried it half a mile or so and then put it back down on the beach. I don't know why I picked it up, or why I put it down again.

16. Soldiers carry strange things ashore with them. In every invasion there is at least one soldier hitting the beach at 11-hour with a banjo slung over his shoulder. The most ironic piece of equipment marking our beach – the beach first of despair, then of victory – was a tennis racket that some soldier had brought along. It lay lonesomely on the sand, clamped in its press, not a string broken.

17. Two of the most dominant items in the beach refuse were cigarettes and writing paper. Each soldier was issued a carton of cigarettes just before he started. That day those cartons by the thousand, water-soaked and spilled, marked the line of our first savage blow.

18. Writing paper and air-mail envelopes came second. The boys had intended to do a lot of writing in France. The letters – now forever incapable of being written – that might have filled those blank abandoned pages.

19. Always there are dogs in every invasion. There was a dog still on the beach, still pitifully looking for his masters.

20. He stayed at the water's edge, near a boat that lay twisted and half sunk at the waterline. He barked appealingly to every soldier who approached, trotted eagerly along with him for a few feet, and then, sensing himself unwanted in all the haste, he would run back to wait in vain his own people at his own empty boat.

21. Over and around this long thin line of personal anguish, fresh men were rushing vast supplies to keep our armies pushing on into France. Other squads of men picked amidst the wreckage to salvage ammunition and equipment that was still usable.

22. Men worked and slept on the beach for days before the last D-day victim was taken away for burial.

23. I stepped over the form of one youngster whom I thought dead. But when I looked down I saw he was only sleeping. He was very young, and very tired. He lay on one elbow, his hand suspended in the air about six inches from the ground. And in the palm of his hand he held a large smooth rock.

24. I stood and looked at him a long time. He seemed in his sleep to hold that rock lovingly, as though it were his last link with a vanishing world. I have no idea at all why he went to sleep with the rock in his hand, or what kept him from dropping it once he was asleep. It was just one of those little things without explanation that a person remembers for a long time.

25. The strong, swirling tides of the Normandy coast line shifted the contours of the sandy beach as they moved in and out. They carried soldiers' bodies out to sea, and later they returned them. They covered the corpses of heroes with sand, and then in their whims they uncovered them.

26. As I plowed out over the wet sand, I walked around what seemed to be a couple of pieces of driftwood sticking out of the sand. But they weren't driftwood. They were a soldier's two feet. He was completely covered except for his feet; the toes of his GI shoes pointed toward the land he had come so far to see, and which he saw so briefly.

27. A few hundred yards back on the beach was a high bluff. Up there we had a tent hospital, and barbed-wire enclosure for prisoners of war. From up there you could see far up and down the beach, in a spectacular crow's-nest view, and far out to sea.

28. And standing out there on the water beyond all this wreckage was the greatest armada man has ever seen. You simply could not believe the gigantic collection of ships that lay out there waiting to unload. Looking from the bluff, it lay thick and clear to the far horizon of the sea and on beyond, and it spread to the sides and was miles wide.

29. As I stood up there I noticed a group of freshly taken German prisoners standing nearby. They had not yet been put in the prison cage. They were just standing there, a couple of doughboys leisurely guarding them with tommy guns.

my hair wasn't so nappy and the white folks' shirt fit me better. I'd run out on the street. If I knew my place and didn't come too close, she'd wink at me and say hello. That was a good feeling. Sometimes I'd follow her all the way home, and shovel the snow off her walk and try to make friends with her Momma and her aunts. I'd drop money on her stoop late at night on my way back from shining shoes in the taverns. And she had a Daddy, and he had a good job. He was a paper hanger.

3 I guess I would have gotten over Helene by summertime, but something happened in that classroom that made her face hang in front of me for the next twenty-two years. When I played the drums in high school it was for Helene and when I broke track records in college it was for Helene and when I started standing behind microphones and heard applause I wished Helene could hear it, too. It wasn't until I was twenty-nine years old and married and making money that I really got her out of my system. Helene was sitting in that classroom when I learned to be ashamed of myself.

4 It was on a Thursday. I was sitting in the back of the room, in a seat with a chalk circle drawn around it. The idiot's seat, the troublemaker's seat.

5 The teacher thought I was stupid. Couldn't spell, couldn't read, couldn't do arithmetic. Just stupid. Teachers were never interested in finding out that you couldn't concentrate because you were so hungry, because you hadn't had any breakfast. All you could think about was noontime, would it ever come? Maybe you could sneak into the cloakroom and steal a bit of some kid's lunch out of a coat pocket. A bit of something. Paste. You can't really make a meal out of paste, or put it on bread for a sandwich, but sometimes I'd scoop a few spoonfuls out of the paste jar in the back of the room. Pregnant people get strange tastes. I was pregnant with poverty. Pregnant with dirt and pregnant with smells that made people turn away, pregnant with cold and pregnant with shoes that were never bought for me, pregnant with five other people in my bed and no Daddy in the next room, and pregnant with hunger. Paste doesn't taste too bad when you're hungry.

6 The teacher thought I was a troublemaker. All she saw from the front of the room was a little black boy who squirmed in his idiot's seat and made noises and poked the kids around him. I guess she couldn't see a kid who made noises because he wanted someone to know he was there.

7 It was on a Thursday, the day before the Negro payday. The eagle always flew on Friday. The teacher was asking each student how much his

Dick Gregory (b. 1932) is a Black political activist, comedian, and writer. He attended Southern Illinois University, where he was named Outstanding Athlete in 1953. Gregory has been much admired for his interest in social issues, such as world famine, and for his outstanding ability as a stand-up comedian. In 1966, he ran for Mayor of Chicago, and in 1968, he was the presidential candidate of the Freedom and Peace Party. Gregory has written several books, including *From the Back of the Bus* (1962), *The Shadow That Scares Me* (1968), *Dick Gregory's Bible Tales* (1974), and his autobiography, *Up from Nigger* (1976). Gregory was one of the first comedians to break the "color barrier" and perform for white audiences. His popularity is based on his ability to satirize race relations without being derogatory.

*Even if you have never felt the poverty described by the narrator in the story that follows, you can probably remember someone from your childhood or adolescence who somehow represented all of the romance and beauty for which you longed. Ponder the details that make the narrator's experience so heartbreaking.*

1 I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that. I was about seven years old when I got my first big lesson. I was in love with a little girl named Helene Tucker, a light-complected little girl with pigtailed and nice manners. She was always clean and she was smart in school. I think I went to school mostly to look at her. I brushed my hair and even got me a little old handkerchief. It was a lady's handkerchief, but I didn't want Helene to see me wipe my nose on my hand. The pipes were frozen again, there was no water in the house, but I washed my socks and shirt every night. I'd get a pot, and go over to Mr. Ben's grocery store, and stick my pot down into his soda machine. Scoop out some chopped ice. By evening the ice melted to water for washing. I got sick a lot that winter because the fire would go out at night before the clothes were dry. In the morning I'd put them on, wet or damp, because they were the only clothes I had.

2 Everybody's got a Helene Tucker, a symbol of everything you want. I loved her for her goodness, her cleanliness, her popularity. She'd walk down my street and my brothers and sisters would yell, "Here comes Helene," and I'd rub my tennis sneakers on the back of my pants and wish

father would give to the Community chest. On Friday morning, each kid would get the money from his father, and on Monday he would bring it to the school. I decided I was going to buy me a Daddy right then. I had money in my pocket from shining shoes and selling papers and whatever Helene Tucker pledged for her Daddy I was going to top it. And I'd hand the money right in. I wasn't going to wait until Monday to buy me a Daddy.

8 I was shaking, scared to death. The teacher opened her book and started calling our names alphabetically.

9 "Helene Tucker?"

10 "My Daddy said he'd give two dollars and fifty cents."

11 "That's very nice, Helene. Very, very nice indeed."

12 That made me feel pretty good. It wouldn't take too much to top that. I had almost three dollars in dimes and quarters in my pocket. I stuck my hand in my pocket and held onto the money, waiting for her to call my name. But the teacher closed her book after she called everybody else in the class.

13 I stood up and raised my hand.

14 "What is it now?"

15 "You forgot me."

16 She turned toward the blackboard. "I don't have time to be playing with you, Richard."

17 "My Daddy said he'd..."

18 "Sit down, Richard, you're disturbing the class."

19 "My Daddy said he'd give...fifteen dollars."

20 She turned around and looked mad. "We are collecting this money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory. If your Daddy can give fifteen dollars you have no business being on relief."

21 "I got it right now, I got it right now, my Daddy gave it to me to turn in today, my Daddy said..."

22 "And furthermore," she said, looking right at me, her nostrils getting big and her lips getting thin and her eyes opening wide, "we know you don't have a Daddy."

23 Helene Tucker turned around, her eyes full of tears. She felt sorry for me. Then I couldn't see her too well because I was crying, too.

24 "Sit down, Richard."

25 And I always thought the teacher kind of liked me. She always picked me to wash the blackboard on Friday, after school. That was a big thrill, it

made me feel important. If I didn't wash it, come Monday the school might not function right.

26 "Where are you going, Richard?"

27 I walked out of school that day, and for a long time I didn't go back very often. There was shame there.

28 Now there was shame everywhere. It seemed like the whole world had been inside that classroom, everyone had heard what the teacher had said, everyone had turned around and felt sorry for me. There was shame in going to the Worthy Boys Annual Christmas Dinner for you and your kind, because everybody knew what a worthy boy was. Why couldn't they just call it the Boys Annual Dinner, why'd they have to give it a name? There was shame in wearing the brown and orange and white plaid mackinaw the welfare gave to 3,000 boys. Why'd it have to be the same for everybody so when you walked down the street the people could see you were on relief? It was a nice warm mackinaw and it had a hood, and my Momma beat me and called me a little rat when she found out I stuffed it in the bottom of a pail full of garbage way over on Cottage Street. There was shame in running over to Mister Ben's at the end of the day and asking for his rotten peaches, there was shame in asking Mrs. Simmons for a spoonful of sugar, there was shame in running out to meet the relief truck. I hated that truck, full of food for you and your kind. I ran into the house and hid when it came. And then I started to sneak through alleys, to take the long way home so people going into White's Eat Shop wouldn't see me. Yeah, the whole world heard the teacher that day, we all know you don't have a Daddy.



Gloria Naylor (b. 1950)

An American novelist and essayist, Gloria Naylor was born in New York City. She served as a missionary for Jehovah's Witness from 1967 to 1976 and then worked as a hotel telephone operator until 1981. That year she graduated from Brooklyn College of the City of New York with a B.A. and went on to do graduate work in African American studies at Yale University. Since receiving an M.A. from Yale, Naylor has published five novels dealing with the varied histories and life-styles often lumped together as the black experience"; The Women of Brewster Place (1982), about the lives of eight women, which won the American Book Award for fiction and was made into a television movie; Linden Hills (1985), about a black middle-class neighborhood; Mama Day (1988), about a Georgian woman with visionary powers; Bailey's Café (1992), about a group of people whose lives are at crossroads; and The Men of Brewster Place (1997), about the men whose lives intersect those of the women of Brewster Place.

#### The Meaning of a Word

*Recalling an experience as a third-grader leads Naylor to probe the meanings of a highly sensitive word. At the same time she explores how words acquire their meanings from use. This essay first appeared in the New York Times in 1986.*

1 Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I've managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

2 I'm not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. The battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns "meaning." And building from the meanings of what we hear, we

order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.

3 I remember the first time I heard the word *nigger*. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a "bad" word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face — "Mommy, what does *nigger* mean?"

4 And what exactly did it mean? Think back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel, or referee the ongoing checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyard of New York.

5 Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions — two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby's crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street — there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about "you-know-who" up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself "p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!" But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word *nigger*

was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else.

6 In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive:

7 "Did Johnny *really* do that?"

8 "I'm telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house."

9 When used with a possessive adjective by a woman – "my nigger" – it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood – a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: "Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough – you don't mess with a nigger."

10 In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it. Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all "trifling niggers." This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression – they had gone through all of that themselves – but the unforgivable sin was a lack of self-respect.

11 A woman could never be a "nigger" in the singular, with its connotation of confirming worth. The noun *girl* was its closest equivalent in that sense, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. *Girl* was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit, nerve, or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion.

12 "G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?"

13 But if the word was used in the third-person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element of communal disapproval. And age became an important factor in these exchanges. It was only between individuals of the same generation, or from any older person to a younger (but never the other way around), that *girl* would be considered a compliment.

14 I don't agree with the argument that use of the word *nigger* at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite; the people in my grandmother's living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naïve enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

15 So there must have been dozens of times that *nigger* was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn't "hear" it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.

1. Naylor write that "the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns 'meaning'" (paragraph 2). Explain this statement in your own words. How did this statement apply to the word *nigger* for the young Naylor?
2. What is Naylor's main idea? Where does she express it?
3. In paragraph 14 Naylor disagrees with those who claim that the African American community's use of the term *nigger* constitutes "an internalization of racism." What alternative explanation does she offer? Do you agree with her interpretation? Why or why not?
4. At the beginning of paragraph 15, Naylor says that although the word *nigger* had been spoken in her presence many times, she didn't "hear" it until her classmate called her that name. What does she mean by this statement? Why had she not "heard" the word before?

Idiomatic or idiot speech? Elizabeth Schuett withstands the stunner...small talk of someone who wants to communicate in the workable way – and does.

# So you, like, just had to be there

Gibsonburg, Ohio – This morning, by popular demand and in accordance with Village Ordinance 2791-3 (enacted to keep ugliness off the streets), I went to the beauty parlor. It was a bust.

The hair came out OK but it made the rest of me look bad. I keep telling Karen it must be the lights. I've begged her to ditch the daylight fluorescents and screw in some of those nice pink bulbs – the ones that softly shave 10 years off the face in the mirror. She says if she did that, hair colors in our town would turn freaky – fast.

Occasionally, conversation helps to divert my attention from the mirror, but I'm not big on talking with hair in my mouth. That's why it's almost impossible not to overhear nearby chat.

"So he goes, like, 'Wow! That dress is like, blue!' and I go like, 'So? Yeah' and he goes, 'Take it back.'"

What was passing from conversation in the next booth was interfering with my concentration on an article explaining the problem of presidential candidates and soft money.

Worst of all, the person on the other end of that babble responds, "Really?" which encourages that monosyllabic raconteur.

"So I go, like, 'You stupid or something? What do you hate about blue?' and he gets all crazy like I'm badmouthing his mother or something, ya know?"

The operator says she fully understands – which puts her way ahead of me.

Idiomatic speech based on geography is nothing new. I've lived in many places and actually come to enjoy and understand much of it. But this is different.

In Chicago, I met storytellers with a rapid-fire, third-person delivery I've never heard anywhere else.

Sez him, "Get away from my sister." Sez me, "Y our old lady chews!" Sez him, "Who ya yelling at monkeymouth?"

When I moved to Georgia, back to the land of the soft drawl of my southern coastal ancestors, I thought I'd have no trouble speaking like a native. I was wrong.

"He-ey, Libuth," friendly souls would greet me on the street. "Howsyermommerem?"

I remember spending a lot of time standing in front of the hardware store looking stupid and grinning, which I imagine left some folks with the impression I was on heavy medication.

One day the florist lady noted my confusion and explained. "They're asking about your health. What they're saying is, 'Hi, Elizabeth, How is your mother and all the rest of your family?'"

Then she taught me an answer:

"Jessfinethankeehowboutyessef?" Which translates to: I and mine are well, thank you and how about yours?

The jarring voice in the next booth rattles through the lattice partition. "So I'm like, 'It's

just a dress,' and he goes, 'So take it back.' I'm like, 'OK.' Then I go, "I'll take it back." Like I don't really mind taking it back cause it like ... a ... don't fit good across the boobzums anyway. Ya know?"

I stick my fingers in my ears. This is not dialect. This is laziness. This woman with the ugly blue dress and the oversize bosom surely has to know more of the half-million English words available to her than the handful she's using in her tedious attempt to communicate. "What?" I want to shout, "are you trying to say?"

But I don't. Instead, I amuse myself with thoughts of how a historical document such as The Declaration of Independence might have read had Thomas Jefferson had as little grasp of syntax and vocabulary as the woman in the next booth.

"So, like, um... when in the course of...like human events, it like becomes necessary for one people to like a dissolve the ... a... political bands which have like connected...?" See what I mean?

At this rate, Great Britain would never have figured out what it was the colonists were griping about and Jefferson and his buddies would still be trying to find words for "usurpation" and "unwarrantable jurisdiction." One thing for sure; the lady with the ugly blue dress couldn't have helped.

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Diction Analysis  
"The Secret Sharer"

Read the following passage from Conrad's story and analyze the author's diction choices and how they convey effect and meaning in the work. Analyze the levels and types of diction used in the passage using your marginalia skills as you read the passage (identify and comment). On the reverse side of the page write a one paragraph response about the purposeful use of diction in the passage.

The side of the ship made an opaque belt of shadow on the darkling glassy shimmer of the sea. But I saw at once something elongated and pale-floating very close to the ladder. Before I could form a guess a faint flash of phosphorescent light, which seemed to issue suddenly from the naked body of a man, flickered in the sleeping water with the elusive, silent play of summer lightning in a night sky. With a gasp I saw revealed to my stare a pair of feet, the long legs, a broad livid back immersed right up to the neck in a greenish cadaverous glow. One hand, awash, clutched the bottom rung of the ladder. He was complete but for the head. A headless corpse! The cigar dropped out of my gaping mouth with a tiny plop and a short hiss quite audible in the absolute stillness of all things under heaven. At that I suppose he raised up his face, a dimly pale oval in the shadow of the ship's side....I only climbed on the spare spar and leaned over the rail as far as I could, to bring my eyes nearer to that mystery floating alongside. As he hung by the ladder, like a resting swimmer, the sea lightning played about his limbs at every stir; and he appeared in it ghastly, silvery, fishlike.

Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*. New York: Dover Publications, 1993