



Diction

Introduction

Diction refers to the author's choice of words. Words are the basic tools of the writer. Just as a painter uses color and light or a musician uses sounds and rhythm, a writer uses words. In order to write well, you have to find the perfect word.

The perfect word is clear, concrete, and exact. In other words, it says exactly what you want it to say, is specific, and creates just the picture you see in your mind. A character doesn't just *look for* something; she *rummages*. You don't *hang* around the house; you *sop* around the house. The perfect word perfectly expresses the feeling and idea you want to get across. It is not always easy to find the perfect word, however. If the word you already know isn't the perfect word, stretch yourself a little. Ask someone for a better word. Look up the word you know in a dictionary and look for synonyms. Or you can try a thesaurus, one of the writer's most valuable tools.

Some words are especially overused and tired, certainly not perfect. These words have lost their freshness and impact. Avoid them at all times. Below is a short list of words that you should avoid. They are general, abstract words that create no clear picture in the reader's mind. Consider these "Forbidden Words" and eliminate them from your vocabulary. You'll be a better writer for it.

Forbidden Words

good
nice
pretty
beautiful
fine
bad
thing
really
very
terrible
wonderful
a lot

As you study diction and improve your vocabulary, you may want to add more words to the "Forbidden Words" list.

Words don't simply have meaning. Words also have denotation and connotation. Denotation is the literal meaning of the word, and connotation is the meaning suggested by a word, the feeling evoked by a word. It's important to know both aspects of a word's meaning. For example, the words *ambitious* and *eager* have roughly the same denotation: desirous of reaching a goal. However, the connotations of these words are quite different. *Ambitious* carries with it the feeling of wanting something for selfish reasons and with a determination that sometimes ignores the effects of actions on others. *Eager* has a different connotation altogether: a feeling of enthusiasm and fresh-faced optimism. It is a more positive word. When you are thinking about diction, it is important to consider the full meaning of a word.