5 Methods of Analyzing Language

Voice Lessons focuses on five elements of voice: diction, detail, imagery, syntax, and tone.

- **Diction** (word choice) is the foundation of voice and contributes to all of its elements.

- **Detail** (facts, observations, and incidents) is used to develop a topic, shaping and seasoning voice.

- **Imagery** (verbal representation of sense experience) brings the immediacy of sensory experience to writing and gives voice a distinctive quality.

- **Syntax** (grammatical sentence structure) controls verbal pacing and focus.

- **Tone** (expression of attitude) gives voice its distinctive personality.

A brief discussion of each element follows:

Diction refers to the author's choice of words. Words are the writer's basic tools: they create the color and texture of the written work; they both reflect and determine the level of formality; they shape the reader's perceptions. When studying serious literature, students should rarely skip words they do not know. That is tantamount to wearing earplugs to a symphony. To understand voice, students must both "hear" the words and "feel" their effects. Diction reflects the writer's vision and steers the reader's thought.

Effective voice is shaped by words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Good writers eschew words like *pretty*, *nice*, and *bad*. Instead they employ words that invoke a specific effect. A coat isn't *torn*; it is *tattered*. The United States Army does not *want* revenge; it is *thirsting* for revenge. A door does not *shut*; it *thuds*. Specific diction brings the reader into the scene, enabling full participation in the writer's world.

Diction depends on topic, purpose, and occasion. The topic often determines the specificity and sophistication of diction. For example, articles on computers are filled with specialized language: *e-mail, e-shopping, web, interface*. Many topics generate special vocabularies as a nexus to meaning.

The writer's purpose – whether to convince, entertain, amuse, inform, or plead – partly determines diction. Words chosen to impart a particular effect on the reader reflect and sustain the writer's purpose. For example, if an author's purpose is to inform, the reader should expect straightforward diction. On the other hand, if the author's purpose is to entertain, the reader will likely encounter words used in ironic, playful, or unexpected ways.

Diction also depends on the occasion. As with clothes, level of formality influences appropriate choices. Formal diction is largely reserved for scholarly writing and serious prose or poetry. Informal diction is the norm in expository essays, newspaper editorials, and works of fiction. Colloquial diction and slang borrow from informal speech and are typically used to create a mood or capture a particular historic or regional dialect. Appropriateness of diction is determined by the norms of society.

When studying diction, students must understand both connotation (the meaning suggested by a word) and denotation (literal meaning). When a writer calls a character *slender*, the word evokes a different feeling from calling the character *gaunt*. A word's power to produce a strong reaction in the reader lies mainly in its connotative meaning.

Finally, diction can impart freshness and originality to writing. Words used in surprising or unusual ways make us rethink what is known and re-examine meaning. Good writers often opt for complexity rather than simplicity, for multiple meanings rather than precision. Thus diction, the foundation of voice, shapes a reader's thinking while guiding reader insight into the author's idiosyncratic expression of thought: the writer's voice.

Detail includes facts, observations, and incidents used to develop a subject and impart voice. Specific details refer to fewer things than general descriptions, thereby creating a precise mental picture. Detail brings life and color to description, focusing the reader's attention and bringing the reader into the scene. Because detail encourages readers

metaphor for a character's despair, or a bird's flight a metaphor for hope. Traditional imagery typically has a history. A river, for example, is usually associated with life's journey. Traditional images are rarely disassociated with their historic meaning. Students should be encouraged to examine the traditional meanings of images, the departure from tradition, and the effect of both on meaning. They should also learn to recognize and analyze nontraditional and nonfigurative imagery used to influence and sharpen reader perception.

Syntax refers to the way words are arranged within sentences. Although the basic structure of the English sentence is prescribed (there must be a subject and verb; word order cannot be random), there is great latitude in its execution. How writers control and manipulate the sentence is a strong determiner of voice and imparts personality to the writing. Syntax encompasses word order, sentence length, sentence focus, and punctuation.

Most English sentences follow a subject-verb-object/complement pattern. Deviating from the expected word order can serve to startle the reader and draw attention to the sentence. This, in turn, emphasizes the unusual sentence's message. There are several ways to change normal word order:

- Inverting subject and verb (<u>Am I</u> ever sorry!);

- Placing a complement at the beginning of a sentence (<u>Hungry</u>, without a doubt, he is);

- Placing an object in front of a verb (<u>Sara</u> I like – not Susan).

Good writers shift between conformity and nonconformity, preventing reader complacency without using unusual sentence structure to the point of distraction.

Another aspect of syntax is sentence length. Writers vary sentence length to forestall boredom and control emphasis. A short sentence following a much longer sentence shifts the reader's attention, which emphasizes the meaning and importance of the short sentence. Many modern writers put key ideas in short sentences. However, this has not always been so. Practice will help students learn to examine sentence length and look for the relationship between length and emphasis in works from different historical periods.

Sentence length contributes to variation and emphasis among sentences. Sentence focus deals with variation and emphasis within a sentence. In the English sentence, main ideas are usually expressed in main-clause positions. However, main-clause placement often varies, and this placement determines the writer's focal point. Sentence focus is generally achieved by syntactic tension and repetition.

Syntactic tension is the withholding of syntactic closure (completion of grammatical structure) until the end of a sentence. Sentences that so delay closure are called *periodic sentences*. Periodic sentences carry high tension and interest: the reader must wait until the end of the sentence to understand the meaning. For example, note that the main idea of the following sentence is completed at the end of the sentence: *As long as we ignore our children and refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care, <u>we will fail to solve the problem of school violence</u>*. The emphasis here is on the problem.

In contrast, sentences that reach syntactical closure early (*loose sentences*) relieve tension and allow the reader to explore the rest of the sentence without urgency. Note the difference in tension when we change the sentence to a loose sentence: *<u>We will fail to solve the problem of school violence</u> as long as we ignore our children and refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care*. The emphasis here is on the cause of failure.

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

repeat parallel grammatical forms such as infinitives, gerunds, and prepositional phrases. This kind of repetition balances parallel ideas and gives them equal weight.

Punctuation is used to reinforce meaning, construct effect, and express the writer's voice. Of particular interest in shaping voice are the semicolon, colon, and dash.

- The *semicolon* gives equal weight to two or more independent clauses in a sentence. The resulting syntactical balance reinforces parallel ideas and imparts equal importance to both (or all) of the clauses.

- The *colon* directs reader attention to the words that follow. It is also used between independent clauses if the second summarizes or explains the first. A colon sets the expectation that important, closely related information will follow, and words after the colon are emphasized.

- The *dash* marks a sudden change in thought or tone, sets off a brief summary, or sets off a parenthetical part of the sentence. The dash often conveys a casual tone.

Students learn to analyze punctuation through careful reading and practice.

Tone is the expression of attitude. It is the writer's (or narrator's) implied attitude toward his subject and audience. The writer creates tone by selection (diction) and arrangement (syntax) of words, and by purposeful use of details and images. The reader perceives tone by examining these elements. Tone sets the relationship between reader and writer. As the emotion growing out of the material and connecting the material to the reader, tone is the hallmark of the writer's personality.

Understanding tone is requisite to understanding meaning. Such understanding is the key to perceiving the author's mood and making the connection between the author's thought and its expression. Identifying and analyzing tone requires careful reading, sensitivity to diction and syntax, and understanding of detail selection and imagery. Students can, with practice, learn to identify tone in writing. Tone is as varied as human experience; and as with human experience, familiarity and thought pave the way to understanding.