The Big Three of Literary Analysis
Diction, Syntax and Imagery

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INTRODUCTION

- Students must learn some basic “analysis” vocabulary and how to apply it to what they read, so they may generate meaningful commentary.

- The “Big Three” of analysis: diction, syntax and imagery.

- Rhetorical terms (vocabulary) is necessary to accurately convey style (The Big Three).
DICTION

- **Diction Defines Style / Character:**

  - Diction is an author’s choice of words modified by **his own unique style** also called the **author’s “voice”**.

  - Like a good closet of clothes, a skillful author selects the appropriate **“verbal wardrobe”**:
    - to fit the occasion or situation
    - to reach his audience
    - to achieve his purpose.
Some writers, like John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*, use a very wide range of diction to make their characters distinctive.

For instance, the used car salesman speaks in repeated *clichés and slang* such as, “It’s a real bargain”, or “The deal’s a steal”;

Some characters speak in more *formal language* when they are repeating the edict from the bank, “You must vacate the premises immediately”.

Other characters speak in *colloquial language* showing their lack of “proper” education. “Shucks”, pa, “Ain’t no use fightin’ ‘em…”. Many authors use various sorts of diction to distinguish their characters one from the other.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Diction</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophisticated</td>
<td>Highly educated or refined</td>
<td>To impress</td>
<td>The meal was exquisite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Strangers, notables; professional</td>
<td>To show good manners</td>
<td>My stomach is full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Friends and Colleagues</td>
<td>To share feelings</td>
<td>My belly is stuffed with food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colloquial</td>
<td>Family and close friends</td>
<td>To share feelings</td>
<td>That there finger lickin’ grub stuffed my gut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slang</td>
<td>Close friends</td>
<td>To be cool and “in”</td>
<td>That belly-buster filled me up.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Denotation and Connotation are Cultural Nuances of Diction:

- In analysis, the dictionary definition of the word “birthday” is simply the day one is born, or the annual celebration of the date of birth. We call the dictionary definition, “denotation”.

- Authors, and especially poets, use “loaded words” we call “connotation” that are packed with extra meaning from their cultural experience.

- For instance, what American 16 year-old doesn’t know that “birthday” means driver’s license, and if he is lucky, maybe even a car.

- But those definitions are NOT to be found in the denotation of the word, “birthday”.

SYNTAX

Syntax Defines Style Through Variety of Sentence Structure:

Syntax refers to sentence structure and the variation of phrases and clauses within, which the author manipulates:
- to fit the occasion or *situation*
- to reach his *audience*
- to achieve his *purpose*. 
SYNTAX

NOUN MODIFIERS - Adjectives, Preposition Phrases, Appositive Phrases, Verbal Phrases

VERB MODIFIERS - Adverbs, Preposition Phrases, Verbal Phrases

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE

CONJUNCTION

COORDINATING CONJUNCTION
SYNTAX

A Sentence is a Clause:

All clauses have a subject (S), a verb (V), and sometimes a direct object (DO) and an indirect object (IO).

A sentence with only one subject (S) + verb (V) combination is called a simple sentence. Adding phrases to a simple sentence can make it very long, but it is still simple.

Sometimes a sentence has two or more clauses (S+V) + (S+V), joined by a coordinating conjunction such as: and, but, or, and the result is a compound sentence.
SYNTAX

- Sometimes, long sentences are **complex**, with **two** or more subject-verb-object combinations \((S+V) + (S+V)\) joined by a **subordinating conjunction** such as: however, although, which, that, nonetheless, and many of the personal pronouns that can sometimes be used as subordinating conjunctions.

- So the terms, **simple, compound and complex** refer to the **type of sentence structure** used by the author.
Another way to distinguish sentences is by their function: declarative, interrogatory, exclamatory or imperative. Their end punctuation provides the biggest clue to the sentence type.

The declarative sentence makes a statement and ends with a period (.). The interrogative sentence ends with a question mark (?), and the exclamatory sentence ends with an exclamation point (!).

The imperative sentence ends with a period (.), but it is distinguished because it starts with a verb and the subject is understood.

The imperative is easiest to remember by associating it with authority figures giving orders: “Clean up”, “Be quiet”, “Sit down”.
SYNTAX

- **Beginning students**, without sophisticated vocabulary, can spot **long sentences or short sentences**. To notice and comment on such simple observations is helpful in discussing the **author’s style**.

- **Upper level students**, **should expand their vocabulary to properly name** the long and short sentences and also noting the **placement of the main clause** or subject and verb (S+V) of important sentences.
Syntax also includes the author’s variations of sentence components as an element of style used to emphasize his message.

Some common variations of emphasis are:

- word order (inversion)
- juxtaposition of opposites (oxymoron)
- repetition of words, phrases or clauses
- rhetorical questions to explore ideas (not expecting and answer)
- variations of punctuation

The careful reader will spot them easily.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntax variations</th>
<th>Examples of syntax variations for emphasis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inversion</td>
<td>Carried (V), she (S) was, by others in her study group. The verb of the sentence is placed before the subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juxtaposition</td>
<td>Do not weep, maiden, for <em>war is kind</em>. The italicized words are opposite in meaning giving a sudden contrast of ideas that signals something is wrong.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td><em>I have a dream</em> that all men are equal; <em>I have a dream</em> that my sons can aspire to the highest positions; <em>I have a dream</em>… is a clause that is repeated 17 times in the famous Martin Luther King speech for dramatic effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Question</td>
<td>Shall we not rise up and be counted, make our cause be known? If we do not, we are fool-hardy in that choice. <em>A question posed, and then answered. The function is to prod the listener to thought.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parallel Structure</td>
<td>Marlene enjoyed the outdoor sports of skiing, hiking and riding horses, but much preferred the indoor sport of ice-skating. <em>Items or ideas in a series must appear in the same grammatical form.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>I heard a fly buzz when I died – He landed – Where I could not see to see. <em>Here, the dash is used to signal an extended pause for dramatic effect.</em></td>
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IMAGERY

- Imagery refers to words that appeal to the **five senses**: sight, sound, taste, feel, smell; or create a mental picture for the reader.

- The **figurative language** of imagery also includes **simile** ("like" or "as" comparisons) and **metaphor** (direct comparisons with "is").
Students who can recognize the nuances of **diction, syntax and imagery** in what they read are well along the way toward using those same tools to write an effective **analysis** of prose or poetry; fiction or non-fiction.