Literary techniques are the tools of analysis.

- diction
- modality
- imperative language
- voice
- allusion

## Diction

Diction means "word choice": the specific words that a writer deliberately chooses to use in a piece of writing.

Diction in action looks like this:

- "The writer's use of *emotional diction* in line 5 illustrates..."
- "The religious diction such as 'communion' and 'confession' suggests..."

So how can you tell if a word is interesting and therefore worthy of analysis?

- **Connotations**
  - Every word has a denotation (i.e., a boring, literal meaning found in the dictionary) and connotations.
  - A word is interesting if it has interesting **connotations**. In analysis, we tend to care less about the denotative meaning of word because it's not interesting.

These **ideas, feelings, and impressions** that we naturally **associate** with certain words are called connotations. They are distinct from denotations: Denotation is what the thing literally means; connotation is what we think and feel about that thing. Big difference.

“The town was an infested den of thieves and smugglers.”

What words have interesting connotations?
The word “infested” is interesting. When I read/hear the word “infested”, I immediately think

Eww.

I think of a gross mental image of disgusting cockroaches and rats crawling around in some old basement or sewer. To me, the diction of “infested” connotes disgust, and the writer probably chose this word precisely because it makes the town seem dirty and disgusting.

“Infested” also connotes a sense of corruption; in this case, it’s not so much the biological disease, which is the literal meaning, but instead the moral corruption of these thieves and smugglers who work in morally-questionable professions.

There’s also another really interesting layer of meaning. We usually associate the diction of “infested” with animals and insects, as opposed to humans. So the writer uses animalistic diction to dehumanise these criminals to the level of animals, making us view them with contempt (remember this word from the tone list?).

By thinking about the connotations, we got some great analysis about amorality, disgust and dehumanisation.

Analysis Advice

When you use the word “diction”, try to precede it with an adjective. For example, avoid writing

“The diction in ‘infested’…”

Instead, write

“The animalistic diction in ‘infested’…”
The reason is because ‘diction’ itself is meaningless unless we specify a particular type of word choice. In some cases, the diction is neutral and that is when you have no choice but to just write “diction”.

The same rule applies to tone, atmosphere and mood. Add a preceding adjective. There’s no meaning behind tone unless it’s a specific tone. The same goes for atmosphere and mood.

If you get tired of writing "diction" all the time, you can vary your diction by replacing it with “language”. For example, you can write “emotional diction” or “emotional language”, “formal diction” or “formal language”. They mean the same thing.

**Modality (Used with Tone)**

High modality: “I must have an ice cream, or else!”
Low modality: “You know, I could have an ice cream, but …”

Modality is a measure of certainty, and it’s expressed through words like these.

**High modality words**  **Low modality words**

must               might
should             could
need to           perhaps
have to           maybe

High modality creates an **authoritative** and **certain** tone, which makes the person seem **superior** and **decisive**. High modality = Imperative language
Low modality creates an **uncertain** tone, which makes the person seem **inferior**.

When do we normally analyse modality?

1. In relation to the narrator or speaker.
2. In relation to a character.

We often analyse modality in the **dialogue** between characters, but also in the **inner thoughts** (fancy term: *internal monologue*) of characters. Apart from demonstrating inferiority, a low modality is also used to show internal conflict, when the character can’t decide between different choices.

For example in Act 1 Scene 7 of *Macbeth*, well, Macbeth--yes, the dude's name is the same as the play's title--is standing around wondering if we will kill King Duncan to snatch the crown. Lo and behold, Shakespeare uses low modality to construct his internal conflict:

**MACBETH**

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well*

*It were done quickly: if the assassination*

*Could trammel up the consequence, and catch*

*With his surcease success; that but this blow*

**Might** be the be-all and the end-all here,

*What’s the most important thing to remember about modality?*

After explaining the modality, always mention the tone that is constructed by the high or low modality.
Narrative voice

First person, second person or third person. The voice can also shift back-and-forth between the three voices throughout a single text.

First person

First person voice sounds like diary writing. “I”, “us”, and “we”. This narrative stance is inclusive language. Inclusive language has two distinct effects on the reader:

1. To create a closer relationship between the reader and the narrator or speaker.
2. Inclusive language brings the reader into the immediate situation and emotions operating within the scene. For example, first person voice works really well with imagery to create a vivid impression of a physical scene.

Second person

Second person voice is used when the narrator or speaker directly addresses you, the reader/audience, through the second person pronoun “you.” This technique is also called “direct address”.

Usually, second person voice creates a confronting and accusatory tone, because it singles out the reader and points a finger at them, making them feel like they did something wrong. Common effects on the reader include feelings of guilt and discomfort. However, it is also used to put the reader in the ‘ideal reader zone’, implying that the text is directly addressing you and written for you.

Third person

It’s the ‘normal’ voice that writers use for their omniscient, god-like narrator who can just casually jump into any character’s mind.
Tip on how to analyse

Voice gets really interesting when writer suddenly transitions between first and third person. It usually goes like this:

1. The text starts of with one type of voice, like first person. The use of “us” and “we” includes the reader and makes them feel a sense of belonging.

2. Then the writer sprinkles in “they” here and there—exclusive language. The third person pronoun “they” often refers to other characters who might be enemies or belong to different social groups. We see this in use in Obama’s speech on the Oregon school shootings.

3. The ultimate result of transitioning from first to third person voice is to create an ‘us versus them’ mentality, building themes like conflict and disagreement.

Allusion

When a writer alludes to something, the writer makes a passing reference to a historical event, a work of literature, a religion, or a cultural tradition. Basically, an allusion is a bit of information that:

1. is external to the current text, and

2. contains rich meaning to those who are familiar with the reference.

Why do writers use allusion?

Writers use allusion because it adds deeper layers of meaning that wouldn’t otherwise be easily achieved.

Let’s look at an example. One day, two friends James and Sarah go ice skating, but in a horrific turn of events, they fall on the ice and James accidentally scars Sarah’s face with his sharp, metal skates. Ouch.
To express James’ fear and guilt, we could write:

“I was afraid to look upon her face for fear of staring into the eyes of Medusa herself and turning into a stony slab of guilt.”

Medusa is a monster in Greek mythology. She has a hideous face and turns anyone who looks at her into stone. She is very scary. The first example uses imagery, personification and diction to create fear. The second example only uses allusion to create a similar, or an even stronger, effect. Whether it’s more effective is a subjective decision, but in my opinion, the phrase “staring into the eyes of Medusa herself” is extremely powerful. We can feel the rage of Medusa, I mean Sarah, like a 400-degree oven.

The point is: Allusion takes advantage of the reader’s pre-existing knowledge about other areas of life in order to add extra meaning to the current piece of writing.

**Analysis advice**

So how do we analyse allusion?

- First, explain the meaning, connotations, ideas and feelings associated with the alluded concept, event, person or culture.

- Next, relate these meanings and associations to the current situation in the text.

In the ice skating example, we would analyse the use of allusion by saying that the allusion amplifies the fearful tone of the narrator. The allusion also highlights the apprehension and guilt of the narrator, to the point that he physically, and psychologically, becomes a stone that cannot move as a result of shock, shame and fear of his consequences.