**Diction**

Diction refers to the writer’s *choice of words*. Just as a painter uses colour and light or a musician uses sounds and rhythm, a writer uses words.

**Examine the diction in the following excerpts:**

1. A redhead woman was there with Trout. Kate could see her rummaging through the cabin, dumping drawers and knocking things from the shelves of cabinets.

--Louis Sachar, "Holes"

1. Discuss, what picture do you get in your mind when you read the second sentence?
2. Discuss, how would the meaning of the sentence change if we changed some of the words? For example:

Kate could see her searching through the cabin, emptying drawers and taking things off of the shelves of cabinets.

Task: Write a sentence describing a small boy making a mess in a restaurant. Choose words that are clear, concrete and exact.

2. M.C. heard him scramble and strain his way up the slope of Sarah’s mountain.

--Virginia Hamilton, "M.C. Higgins, the Great"

1. Discuss, what does it mean to scramble and strain up a mountain? Close your eyes and try to get a picture of someone scrambling up a mountain. What do you see?
2. Discuss, how would it change your mental picture if we rewrote the sentence like this?

M.C. heard him walk up the slope of Sarah’s mountain.

Task: Write a sentence describing someone slowly climbing up a flight of stairs. Use Hamilton’s sentence as a model.

3. “Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow,” said the Prince, “far away across the city I see a young man in a garrett (attic room). He is leaning over a desk covered with papers, and in a tumbler by his side there is a bunch of withered violets. His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes.”

--Oscar Wilde “The Happy Prince"

1. Look carefully at the diction in the passage. Is the young man rich or poor? How do you know?
2. What does it mean to have crisp hair? Sketch a picture of someone with crisp hair.

Task: Write a short description of a dog. First, decide whether you want to describe a fancy, pedigreed dog or a scruffy mutt. Then capture the dog by using strong diction. Don’t explain that the dog is fancy or scruffy. Instead, use perfect words to create the picture of the dog for the reader. Use Wilde’s passage as a model.

4. They scuttled for days and days and days till they came to a great forest, ‘sclusively full of trees and bushes and stripy, speckly, patchy-blatchy shadows, and there they hid: and after another long time, what with standing half in the shade and half out of it, and what with the slippery-slidy shadows of the trees falling on themn, the Giraffe grew blotchy, and the Zebra grew stripy, and Eland the Koodo grew darker….

--Rudyard Kipling, “How the Leopard Got His Spots”

1. What is the dictionary definition of the word scuttled? How would your mental picture change if the passage said, They trudged for days and days….?
2. Consider the hyphenated adjectives Kipling uses in this passage: patchy-blatchy and slippery-slidy. How do these adjectives help the reader understand the scene?

Task: Write two sentences about going on a long car trip. Your first sentence should contain a strong verb that creates a vivid picture for the reader. Your second sentence should use a hyphenated adjective that either rhymes (like patchy-blatchy) or has alliteration (like slippery-slidy). It is ok to make up part of hyphenated adjective (like blatchy), but it must be understandable to the reader. You want to make your writing come alive for the reader.

5. There was a scurrying around and then eight of them **snatched** up their guns, formed into twos, and marched out behind the office. He wheeled his horse about and trotted towards me. I jumped back and **plunged** for the tavern doorway.

--James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier, "My Brother Sam is Dead"

1. Look at the boldfaced word in the first sentence. Notice how clearly you can “see” the action because of that strong verb. How would it change the meaning of the sentence, if it read …. “eight of them picked up their guns”?
2. What does the use of the world plunged in the third sentence tell you about the narrator’s attitude toward the other character’s in this passage?

Task: Use the word plunged in a sentence, but instead of having the word express fear and desperation, have it express excitement and happiness. Remember that in many cases the context of the word determines its deeper meaning.