Chapter 7: Diction: Writing for Accuracy and Effect

This chapter maps tactics for effective diction:

- Using reference tools to refine ideas
- Sharpening critical vocabulary
- Avoiding inefficient language
- Shaping usage to content and purpose

Becoming Aware of your audience

When people write or speak, they make choices about how they want to sound. Most of the choices reflect an understanding of a relationship with the audience. To friends, you are likely to sound casual. To teachers, you are likely to be formal, and with parents you are likely to be very careful. Think of the various ways that you could report getting a ticket:

1. *To your friends:* "The cops have it out for anybody driving a Camaro. It's gonna be $120 and two points for twenty over."

   To friends, police officers become "cops," and "gonna" replaces "going to." Your friends know that "twenty over" means "twenty miles per hour over the posted speed limit." You and your friends have probably had this experience before, and it makes sense to condense the language and let it be informal. Your audience is automatically sympathetic because you know that they are on your side.

2. *To your teachers:* "I was rushing to class, and an officer stopped me and gave me a speeding ticket."

   This audience requires you to be in class on time. Your more formal diction emphasizes that you were trying to satisfy the audience, but that a police officer (not a "cop") interfered with your good intentions. Here, you cannot assume that the audience is on your side. Part of what you are trying to do is assure them that you

were doing what you were supposed to. Your task is a persuasive task, and your audience is highly skeptical. You do not want to give her/him an opportunity to say, "I only grade your classroom performance, not your automotive misfortunes."

3. *To your parents:* "Be careful. They lowered the speed limit on Main Street. I got ticketed."
   First, note that you are using passive voice to present your information: the ticketing was done to you; you did not "do" the action. It is a good choice because it hides responsibility for the problem. Even better, you have begun by looking out for the audience by warning them that there has been a change in the speed limit. You are placing both yourself and your parents in the same group: people who are not aware of the change in the speed limit and who might "accidentally" be ticketed.

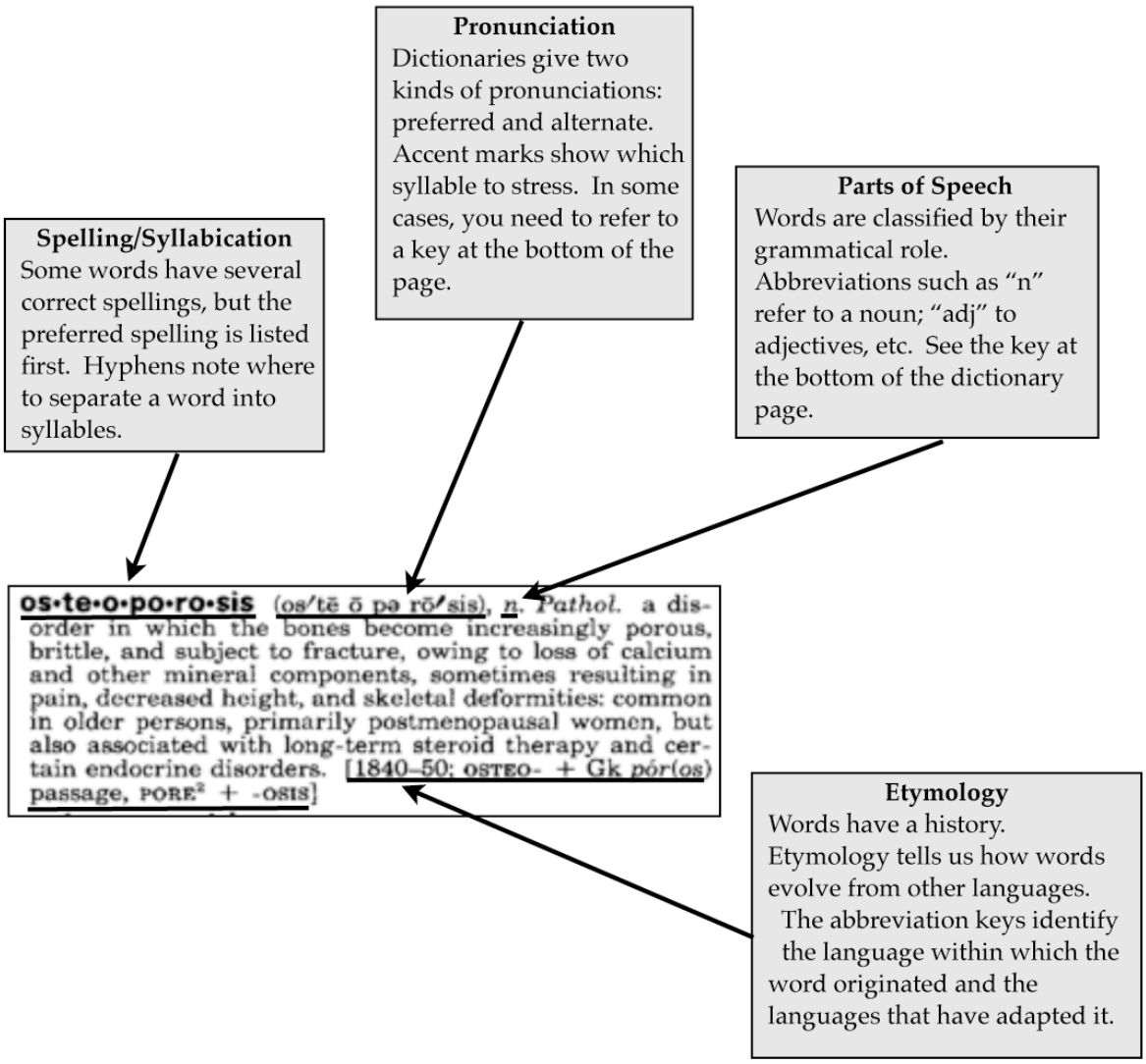
These alternatives have to do with word choice, levels of formality, phrasing, accuracy, and usage. Such choices underlie the diction of anything you write. Audiences have specific expectations, and your diction has to reflect those expectations.

REFERENCE TOOLS

Diction is more than looking up words in the *diction*ary. The diction you use depends on your aim, your audience, and your voice. This chapter will help you make the choices that give a document the diction that serves your needs. The most basic division is between informal and formal diction. Scholarly purposes require formal diction.

Reading Dictionary Entries

Let's take a look at a dictionary entry to see how it organizes information for the reader.



Dictionaries anchor the meaning of the word in its history, pronunciation, and grammatical category. They create the very first step in understanding a word by making it possible to understand the context within which you discovered it. Think of a new word as a set of possible connections. A new word is like a black box with many plugs dangling from its sides. Each plug connects to other information, questions, and problems where it is used. The dictionary does not deal with those connections, but it *does* tell you where it might connect to them. Think of a dictionary as a tightly focused starting point that helps you start to gain control over the larger connections of a word's meaning.

Usage Labels

If you are writing to a friend, then slang and colloquial terms make sense. Think about the example of the speeding ticket that opens this chapter. There, terms such as "cops" are colloquial. The word "colloquial" comes from the word for "conversation" and thus "cops" has the informal quality of a chat between two friends. A good writer chooses between levels of diction according to the audience's expectations.

Diction becomes a tricky question when writing for unfamiliar audiences. For example, academic writing and writing in your workplace require a specific diction. Often, a writer will worry about a particular word: is it too casual; is it accurate; will it strengthen credibility? These are legitimate worries, and dictionaries often answer those questions by labeling words. The labels reflect the audience. Below are definitions of the most common labels for different types of diction. Note that the terms are approximate. A word can fit under several labels.

	Definition	Example	Notes
Colloquial	appropriate to ordinary conversation; casual; informal. Often gives the sense of hearing the person speak.	In an op ed essay: "Perhaps the governor doesn't care, but the rest of us get a sinking feeling every time he attacks public education."	Uses "sinking feeling" and first person. The sentence sounds like a comment to a friend.
Slang	informal language used by a particular class, profession, or age group. Often specialized for a social group. Slang shifts frequently.	In conversation: "That's jacked up."	Meaning that something was poorly designed, badly organized, mistaken, simplistic, or otherwise unsound. "Jacked up" is probably a reference to a car jacked up and stripped of wheel and other parts.

Obsolete	often refers to an outdated spelling of a word, but it also means a word that has lost its meaning or whose associations have proven offensive. Almost no one would understand the word.	In a political pamphlet: "The president is either an unwitting agent or a fellow traveller."	"Fellow traveller" is a term referring to someone who shares the beliefs of an organization and assists it in achieving its goals. The term was commonly used in the late 1940s and early 1950s to accuse people of anti-Americanism.
Archaic	language from an earlier era that is no longer commonly used.	Meseems thou art tardy. [To me, it seems as if you're tardy]	Often found in historical fiction that attempts to represent past eras.
Poetic	vivid, sometimes unusual or unexpected language that is as interesting for its own qualities as for its other values. Tends to be creative and metaphoric.	Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech: "Seared in the flames of withering injustice."	King combines images of flames and burning to suggest that racial injustice has its sources in hellish, damnable belief.
Dialect	the language of a small geographic or social group that has distinct differences from "standard" dialect.	Word such as "you all" or "you ens" or "yous guys" come from specific regions. They are often informal.	The degree of acceptance often depends on a culture's values about class, race, geography, gender, and other determinants of dialect.

Connotation and Denotation

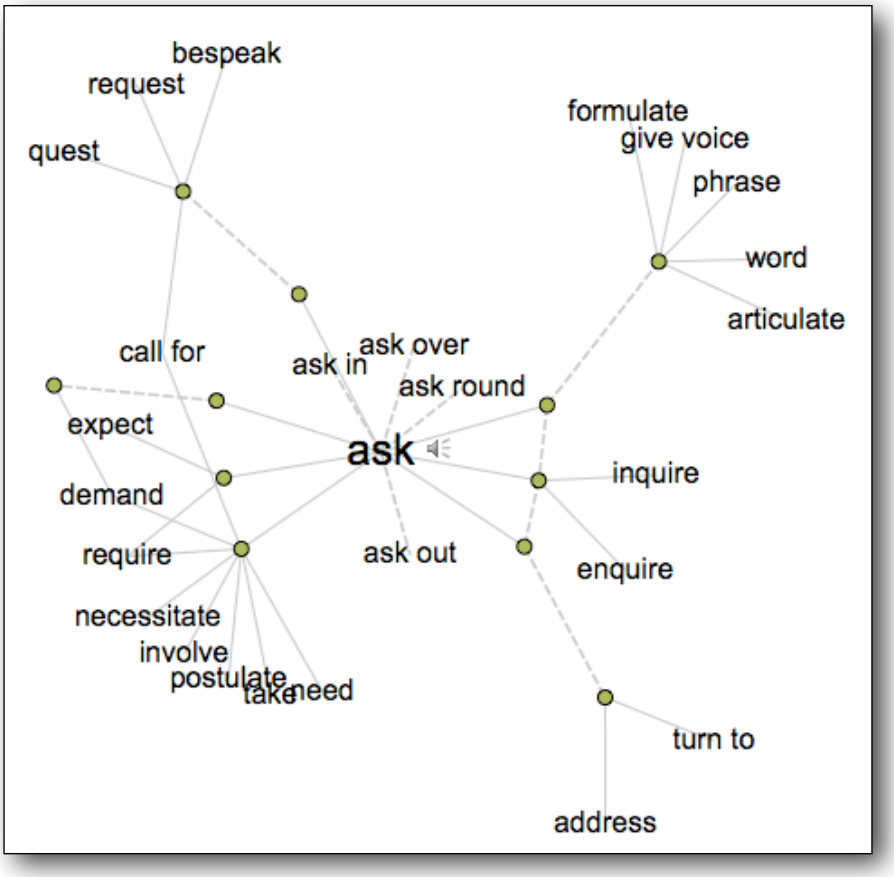
Knowing how to read an entry provides you with basic background information about the word, but that information has to be used carefully. Remember that many words have both a *denotation* and a *connotation.* The denotation is its strict, dictionary definition. The *connotation* is the other meanings that give it various shades of meaning. For example, both "famous" and

"notorious" have the same denotation. They both mean "someone or something that is widely known." However, fame can be based on admirable qualities or on negative qualities. Admirable people and things are famous. Fame that is based on despicable or bad things makes someone notorious. Knowing which word to choose lets you shape *how* you create your meaning. Thus, you have to look on the dictionary as useful, but also as highly limited.

Denotation and connotation remind us to use the dictionary carefully, but it is even more important to know that the dictionary is *not* a research tool. The best way to realize this is to think of bad speeches. Too many times, a speaker begins by saying, "According to Webster, success means . . . . " What follows is a misguided application of a dictionary definition to a complex issue. Why is it misguided? It is misguided because a dictionary is not an analytical tool. It provides simple, condensed information about usage. It provides conventional usages without explaining their relation to larger ideas, to evidence, and to the problematic issues that are worth writing about. The goal of writing is to deal with exactly those things. Thus, the dictionary's purpose cuts it off from participation in the larger context of history, culture, research, and scholarship. Using it as a research source marks your work as naive. Writing usually involves a double-edged sword: we explain what things are, but as we do so, we also what they are not. Definitions have to be recognized as useful, but not as research tools.

A Thesaurus Makes Language More Accurate

If dictionaries have limited value in understanding the denotation and connotation of words, where can you turn for help with such questions? First, you can turn to the thesaurus. These handy collections of synonyms help in several ways. They improve vocabulary by offering alternatives to words that are not sufficiently explicit. They prompt you to think about associated ideas by pointing to words that have a different context for their meaning. Dictionaries do not do this. Thesauruses do it in detail. Together, the dictionary and the thesaurus are tools for making the words on the page express the specific ideas that fill your head. Let's look at an example: "ask." We all know what "ask" means, but it is a neutral word. It is good enough to convey a *basic* meaning, but it also has many synonyms that convey additional information.



A visual thesaurus shows that the synonyms break off in different directions. Those directions indicate various shades of meaning. The words clump into groups that are closer in meaning to each other than they are to the more distant words. For example, the difference between "enquire" and "demand" is important. The great difference in meaning is shown by their physical distance from each other on the chart.

Traditional, printed thesauruses also categorize synonyms. However, they do not do it visually. Instead, they do it through lists that tend to be close in meaning. These are like the "clumps" in the visual thesaurus. Consider the following synonyms in *The American Century Thesaurus* for "Ask."

1. *question, interrogate, query, quiz, inquire*
    a. all are about extracting information
    b. they suggest a dynamic between the asker and the source

2. *require, expect, request*
    a. each embodies an expectation of a response
    b. all seem to suggest that asking comes with power, and that
    c. the power lies with the asker

3. *beg, appeal, seek, solicit, petition*
    a. power lies with the source that has the information
    b. the asker is relatively powerless

4. *invite, bid, summon*
    a. suggests that the asker has power
    b. suggests that the recipient will meet a need of the audience

5. *ask after, ask for, ask about, encourage*
    a. suggests that the asker already has some baseline information
    b. suggests that the asker wants additional detail

A Thesaurus Discovers Ideas

A thesaurus does not provide lists of *equivalent words.* There is no point in using one just to find a "smarter sounding word." Instead, a thesaurus helps identify exactly what you want to say. There is a difference between the words, and your job is to recognize which one exactly serves your needs. Writers who simply substitute one word for another produce awkward sentences with unclear meanings. On the other hand, many good writers will turn to a thesaurus to help develop ideas. The differences in words are differences in ideas, and some of them can turn a paper to entirely new aspects of a topic.

Questions for Discussion

Look at the list of words below. Each fits with one or more of the different synonyms for "ask." For each word, create a list of the four other synonyms that closely resemble its sense of "ask."

• demand • plead • implore • cross-examine • coax

Figurative Language

When you write a love note, you are not the same person who writes a paper for a history class. You know who to "be" in each case. Part of your choice reflects your understanding of the audience, and the other part reflects your ability to use the right diction. When you create a particular version of yourself for the voice of a document, you create a *persona*. Most writers do this automatically. You can do an even better job of creating an appropriate persona by thinking about diction. The persona for a professional document or an academic document *tends* to rely on formal diction. Carefully selected idioms, third person, precise language, and standard dialect *tend* to create the persona for such documents. Remember that a skilled writer uses diction as a tool for creating specific effects.

Idioms

Idioms are phrases that do not literally mean what they say. For example, to "Take a stab at" something doesn't literally have anything to do with knives. It means "to try." The *literal* meaning is "to stab"; the *figurative meaning* is "to try." Often, idioms are casual; thus, they seem outside of formal writing. On the other hand, idioms create power. Lincoln's "House Divided" speech has this famous idiom: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Lincoln's source for the idiom is the Bible: "And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (Mark 3:25). Good writers know how to craft a place for idioms.

> Note: Idioms can make writers say foolish things. If you write, "I was so angry that my head literally exploded," you have said something ridiculous. After all, if your head has *literally* exploded, you would not have a mouth with which to speak.

Understanding the audience and the context for the writing lets you choose which words to include or exclude.

Metaphor, Simile, and Kindred Figures of Speech

Metaphors and similes can make your language clear and powerful by helping the reader understand abstract ideas. Using an image, story, or object to represent a more general concept

gives the reader a concrete sense of something new. A scientist might explain the flow of cold water from the Arctic to Europe (thermohaline circulation) by saying that it is an "oceanic conveyer belt." An ocean current obviously is not a conveyer belt, but the metaphor does give a sense that the water travels in a circle and also that it rises and falls in depth. It helps the reader understand the ocean's movement. When the scientist says that thermohaline circulation *is* a conveyer belt, then s/he is using a metaphor. Metaphors say that something *is* something else. Of course, there is a tacit understanding that there is not some real equivalence. A simile tries to be a bit more honest. It uses "like" or "as" to assert a similarity.

Both metaphor and simile help create a particular persona for the writer, but also they help convey other kinds of meaning. For example, when Shakespeare wanted to show Hamlet's confusion and jumbled thinking, he used a mixed metaphor to create a sense of the character's upset:

> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?

The metaphor reasonably goes from "slings and arrows" to "take arms." This makes sense because both are images of battle and war. The language becomes odd when Hamlet seems to want to go to war against the ocean. The metaphor becomes mixed. Most readers sense the jump, and feel that something is wrong. Such readers are right, because Hamlet *is* odd. He is upset, confused, and distraught. Of course it is Hamlet who uses such a mixed metaphor, and the mixed metaphor mirrors his mental state. Thus, the evaluation of figurative language is a complicated process.

Figurative language takes many shapes. Among the terms for these different types of language are metonymy, personification, hyperbole, oxymoron, puns, spoonerisms, and dozens of others. Each term describes a highly specific type of language. Some are technical, but others give names to larger writing strategies. Among the most important of these larger terms are "irony" and "sarcasm." Good readers can recognize each of these, and they are important to understanding a document.

Irony

The most common example of irony is the statement, "Thank god I'm an atheist." The statement's *literal meaning* and its *implied meaning* contradict each other. It becomes ironic at the moment the reader recognizes the contradiction and looks for ideas that connect the terms. This kind of irony is called "verbal irony." The other major form of irony is dramatic irony. It is part of many plays, novels, television shows, and films. In dramatic irony, the reader often knows things that the characters do not. As the story goes on, the reader's knowledge gives everything an additional meaning. It creates meanings that rely on an audience recognizing contradictions that are not directly stated.

Here is another famous example of irony: a reporter quoted a military officer who said, "We had to destroy that town to save it." The officer was not being ironic, but the recognition of the contradiction by the reporter and his newspaper readers made it ironic for them. The ideas of destruction and saving are contradictions. The irony depends on a recognition that something does not match up. A statement becomes ironic when the contradiction is recognized. The recognition depends on the *reader* having a broad understanding of the topic that puts the statement in a different context.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm reveals the writer's distaste, judgment, anger, or rejection of something. For example, a teacher who writes on a college student's paper, "This is a perfect example of seventh-grade writing"is being sarcastic. Similarly, saying, "I just love your filthy, ragged, smelly socks" is sarcastic. These statements hide nothing; the paper is bad, and the socks are disgusting, and both speaker and listener get the point. The contradiction is obvious, and it is personal to the writer. There is no unstated context into which the reader has to place the statement.

INEFFICIENT LANGUAGE

Some types of language are sloppy and vague; they tend to hide issues rather than explain them. If the writer intends to inform readers, euphemism, wordiness, and clichés usually do not work. They just do not do what is usually needed. On the other hand, confusion is sometimes useful. It can conceal your role in a badly designed project that required your participation. It can keep minor issues in the background. In short, these tools become "good" or "bad" depending on the purpose they serve. In either case, they rely on being inefficient.

Biased Language

Using racial slurs and ethnic insults makes no sense. Writers who think critically almost automatically turn away from such language. They know it reveals a vicious kind of ignorance that serves no purpose. Vicious language does not improve critical thinking. It cuts the connections to other thinkers and damages the map of a subject. Being against this kind of biased language has become a stronger part of our culture. It reflects improved critical thinking and an improved sense of justice.

On the other hand, some kinds of biased language still pose a problem. Some writers still say something is "so gay," or they use insulting terms for Arabs and Muslims. Somehow, this sort of bias has not been as widely recognized and rejected. Such slurs are as vile and disgusting as any other racial, religious, or ethnic slur. Good thinkers and good writers do not use such language. Recognizing that such slurs are bigoted is a relatively straightforward step. Changing the habit of saying such things can take a bit longer, but the improved language is almost inevitable.

There are other kinds of bias that creep into our thinking via word choices. One of the most subtle of these is gender bias. For hundreds of years, writers commonly used "he" to refer to people in general. Readers continually find sentences such as "A doctor must be careful when

he treats broken legs." Such language is biased. It uses "he" to mean "she or he." It is not accurate. Many doctors are women, and the supposed efficiency of using "he" carries a high price. The high price is that it sets faulty expectations. In this case, the expectation is that doctors are male. This produces other effects; we do not see women physicians as "real doctors." We trust the judgment of a male non-expert more than a female expert. In short, language creates a reality that is not accurate. When some people whine about "politically correct" language, they are mistaken. The concern with biased language is a concern with accuracy. Often, such whining is simply a cover story for complaints about losing the hidden privileges that were concealed in the biased language. Use careful, accurate language that serves critical thinking.

Euphemism

A euphemism substitutes a safe, cautious word for one that might offend or upset the reader. The difference between "He died" and "He has gone to a better place" illustrates how euphemisms tidy up unpleasant information. Quentin Crisp, a famous writer, once noted, "Cliches are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne." Euphemisms are as common as the human taste for dishonesty. Other euphemisms include "pre-owned" for "used"; "downsizing" for "laying off workers"; and "negative cash flow" for "losing money." The possibilities are nearly endless. In some cases, euphemism is simply an act of courtesy, but most often it is an act of cowardice. Other important sources of inefficient language include:

Wordiness

Wordiness is a symptom of the need for another draft. Often, it can be repaired by avoiding passive voice, eliminating "to be" verbs, choosing accurate terms, or avoiding discussions of the writer's own processes. Some beginning writers set a goal for their rough drafts: reducing the number of words by 50%. Read Francesca Lia Block. Read early Hemingway. Imitate them.

Cliché

A *cliché* is an overused phrase whose exhaustion prevents it from having any value except for revealing the writer's lack of precise thinking. Clichés are expressions that are so overused that they no long carry meaning. "Raining cats and dogs," "neat as a pin," "happy as a clam," fail to

clarify rain, neatness, or happiness. Good writers may consider them a type of humorous prank, but they undermine the credibility of any serious document.

Using First Person

Using first person (I, me, we, us) is not necessarily wrong, but there was a time when almost all professional and academic audiences rejected it. Now, *some* professors and employers reject any first person. However, many writing instructors now make an important distinction:

1. *First person is not appropriate* for the parts of documents that map out existing knowledge. The writer attempts to be objective in these parts of the paper. The writer's judgments, insights, and assessments are not important in these parts of the documents.
2. *First person can be appropriate* in the parts of the paper where the writer makes the most important assessments, judgements, and claims. In these parts of the paper, the writer's presence is more important, and it can be reflected in the use of first person. Many types of writing accept first person at the point where the author's new insight appears. You need to be sure that your audience accepts such usage.

The choice of using first, second, or third person depends on a clear understanding of your aim, audience, and voice.

Second Person

The use of second person is wrong when it is used in a context where it offends the audience, produces confusion, or emphasizes the reader rather than the writer or subject matter.

contexts: academic papers, formal reports, and writing with an informative aim do not use second person. The tradition of emphasizing the subject through the use of third person is strong. There is nothing to be gained by violating it. Inexperienced writers should avoid substituting "one" for "you" in the hope of solving the problem of second person. Using "one" in place of "you" creates wordy documents that do not solve the problem of second person.

clarity: A writer notes, "I have a dog who is always begging at the dinner table. But if I give him table scraps, he won't leave you alone; he just keeps pestering you." The reader will be confused by the "you" in this sentence. The sentence literally means that if the *writer* gives table scraps, then the dog will pester the *reader*. Perhaps the writer does

mean that the dog will pester the reader, but it seems more likely that the "you" means "anyone who gives the dog scraps." Often, the use of "you" asks the reader to take control of the meaning. The document becomes vague and vulnerable to misunderstanding through the use of second person.

emphasis: In this book, the editors and writers asked themselves about how to make the book "speak" to students. Everyone involved understood that second person does not belong in most writing. On the other hand, there were parts of the book that needed to speak directly to each reader. The real question was where to use this more direct "you" and where to sound more formal. The final decision was to use "you" in the first parts of the book (including the chapter you are reading) and in the assignments at the end of chapters 8-16 that each of you will use to write your papers. Everyone agreed that "you" was appropriate and helpful. Everyone also agreed that some chapters would start with a brief story that illustrated important issues. In these stories, second person would also be appropriate. However, in the remainder of the book, there was really no place for second person, and it is not used. Thus, the use of second person is always a tactic, and it should be accepted or rejected on the basis of the audience's needs.

SUMMARY

Writers have to read themselves as they write. This double position enables them to hear how they sound to others. It provides immediate feedback, and lets them adjust the work as it goes forward. Good writers recognize their options, weigh the effect of each, and then select the language that speaks to the audience's expectations. They "listen forward" to the choices they can make. But also they "read back" for the consistent strategies that create the document's persona. They continually sift their choices -- both what is kept and what is discarded -- to orchestrate a credible voice. It is almost as if they are both reader and writer, on-the-road buddies headed toward the place where a specific audience waits for their words.

Looking Ahead

The first seven chapters of this book focus on the skills that make a writer's words clear, persuasive, and useful. In the next eight chapters, these skills will enable you to use tactics such as narration, description, comparison, and the other "modes" to make an argument. The modes are aspects of a larger process called critical thinking, and you will use these modes to construct arguments that have a claim and a clear purpose.