

POETRY'S LANGUAGE

Poetry uses language in many different ways. By noticing the techniques poets use with language, it becomes easier to understand and talk about a poem. If you are a writer, consider using some of these language techniques to emphasize certain ideas, themes or images.

Imagery

Plain and simple, imagery is the word used to describe the types of images a poet uses throughout the poem. Images are references to a single mental creation; they are the verbal representation of a sense impression. However, there are many different types of imagery that can be used.

Visual Images (sight)

- Example: "The look-out man will see some lakes of milk-color light on the sea's night-purple"
"The Purse-Seine"
Robinson Jeffers

Tactile Images (touch)

- Example: "The only things moving are swirls of snow.
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron."
"Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter"
Robert Bly

Auditory Images (sounds)

- Example: "she quietly rolled
flour tortillas-
the 'papas'
cracking in the hot lard
would wake me"
"My Grandmother Would Rock Quietly and Hum"
Leonard Adamé

Gustatory Images (tastes)

- Example: "Take out a three-pound leg of lamb,
rub it with salt, pepper and cumin,
then push in two cloves
of garlic splinters"
"How to Eat Alone"
Daniel Halpern

Olfactory Images (smells)

- Example: "The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands"
"Preludes"
T. S. Eliot

Diction

Diction is the type of words poets choose to use in their poems. A poem that uses slang expressions can be just as powerful as a poem that uses a lot of big words. And feel free to mix up your diction in a poem. There is no reason why you have to use just one.

Formal Diction:

Words that appear a bit more elegant or extravagant. Often formal diction will contain words that are polysyllabic (many syllables).

Neutral Diction:

Words that appear ordinary and that you hear everyday. Contractions are often used in poetry that has neutral diction, as well as a simpler vocabulary.

Informal Diction:

Words and phrases that are slang expressions, or the colloquial – the language of relaxed activities and friendly conversations.

Rhyme

A poem does not have to rhyme. However, rhyme can be an important part of poetry, and there are many different types of rhyme.

Exact (perfect) rhymes:

Words that rhyme because both the concluding consonant and vowel sounds rhyme.

- Example: “Then be not coy, but use your *time*;
 And while ye may, go *marry*.
 For having lost but one your *prime*,
 You may for ever *tarry*”
 “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”
 Robert Herrick

Inexact (near) rhymes:

Words that rhyme because they have similar, not identical, sounds, like *bleak/break* and *loud/bird*.

- Example: “Between my finger and my *thumb*
 The squat pen rests; sung as a *gun*.”
 “Digging”
 Seamus Heaney

End rhymes:

Words at the ends of lines that rhyme, either exactly or inexactly.

- Example: “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding *band*
 Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s *hand*”
 “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”
 Adrienne Rich

Internal rhymes:

Words in the beginning or middle of a line that rhyme with each other, either exactly or inexactly.

- Example: “And I who gave Kate a blackened eye
Did to its vivid changing colours
Make up an *incredible* musical scale”
“Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom”
Irving Layton

Techniques and Devices

There are many other tools that poets use to achieve a certain sound or rhythm

Alliteration

The repetition of a consonant sound in the beginning of words that are found close together in a line.

- Example: “O wild West Wind, thou *breath* of Autumn’s *being*”
“Ode to the West Wind”
Percy Bysshe Shelley

Assonance

The repetition of similar vowel sounds in words that are close to each other in a line.

- Example: “...and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove”
“Living in Sin”
Adrienne Rich

Consonance

The repetition of identical consonant sounds but different vowel sounds found close together in a line

- Example: “And broils *root* out of the *work* of *masonry*”
“Not Marble Nor the Gilded Monuments”
William Shakespeare

Euphony

When the sounds of words in a line create an effect that is pleasing to the ear

- Example: “There is no silence upon the earth or under the earth like the
silence under the sea”
“Silences”
E.J. Pratt

Cacophony

The opposite of euphony, when the sounds of words in a line create a discordant or jarring effect when heard

- Example: “For growl and cough and snarl are the tokens of spendthrifts
Who know not the ultimate economy of rage”
“Silences”
E.J. Pratt

Onomatopoeia

Words that imitate a sound; a verbal echo of the action being described, such as *buzz*, *hum*, *slap*

- Example: "I hear
quiet clicks, cups of black
coffee, *click, click* like facts"
"Sonrisas"
Pat Mora

Figure of speech

An expression where certain words are arranged in a particular way to achieve a particular effect. The following are all different figures of speech commonly used in poetry:

Metaphor

A comparison device where two things are compared directly. Something will be described as though it is actually something else.

- Example: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough."
"In a Station of the Metro"
Ezra Pound

Simile

A comparison device where "like" or "as" is used as the clause.

- Example: "Eyes like the morning star,
Cheeks like a rose"
"The Colorado Trail"
Anonymous

Apostrophe

Words that are addressed to an absent or imaginary person, an object, or an abstract thought

- Example: "Love, O love, O careless love"
"Careless Love"
Anonymous

Denotation

The precise definition of a word, the "dictionary" meaning

Connotation

All the meanings, definitions or associations that a word suggests