



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 3

Your Personal Diction Deck

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
CONTENT
Words

PURPOSE

To explore Words as an aspect of Content and the basic building blocks of any poem, and all prose as well.

BACKGROUND

Think of words as physical materials you can handle and manipulate to create a piece of art. They are important in themselves.

~ John Drury in *Creating Poetry*

When the artist Edgar Degas complained to his friend, poet Stéphane Mallarmé, about the difficulty he was having turning the ideas in his head into poems on a page, Mallarmé replied, "My dear Degas, poems are not made out of ideas. They're made out of words."

Words are raw materials, each with its own sound, meaning, style, and tone. In literary terms, the individual words in a piece of writing comprise its diction. Our job as writers—and a lovely job it is—is to love words, to use them deliberately and well. The more words we know, the more varied—and more precise—our diction.

I think of language as a cupboard we keep in our heads, a cupboard we can open at any time to pull out whatever words we need. Unlike Mother Hubbard's cupboard, ours are never bare. But, like any cupboard, the more we put on its shelves, the more will be there when we reach in to fill our hunger, so it behooves us to collect and store useful words so they're ready when we need them.

Poet Jane Hirschfield illustrated the value of storing up words when she spoke on "Poetry and Life" at Chautauqua Institution one summer. There was absolute glee in her voice as she introduced her poem "All Evening When I Started to Say It" by telling her audience she believed she was the first person ever to use the words *badger colostrum* in a poem. She loved, she gathered, she saved. And when she needed *badger colostrum*, it was there in her cupboard for the taking.

There are so many wonderfully delicious words! Botanist Carolus Linnaeus made a huge contribution to science, and to language, when he published the first taxonomy of living things in 1758—4,400 listings, classified in Latin by genus and species. Today, there are more than one and a half million. And while I'm fond of systems of classification, I'm even fonder of the delightful sounds of the common names—Queen Anne's lace, Jack-in-the-pulpit, firefly, and, for that matter, badger. What words are you fond of? Which sound delightful to you?

Your job as a poet is to become a connoisseur of words. Today's tool will get you started, and there are suggestions for further use. Keep playing with it—and keep adding words to your cupboard. Watch your writing become, over time, in some mysterious, organic way, a bit wilder, more interesting.

WHAT TO DO

Create your personal Diction Deck of cards to use as building blocks and expand your poetic diction. This tool is modified from an exercise by poet and teacher Linnea Johnson in the book *The Practice of Poetry*. You'll need 100 3 x 5 index cards, a pen, and a sheet of paper (if you wish to create your list of words on paper first). NOTE: We'll be using the Diction Deck again in the next few tools.

1. Write down words you love for their sound and their meaning, either on a sheet of paper first or directly onto index cards. (One of mine, for example, is *lullaby*). Use no adverbs. Use no plurals.

All words must:

- be **significant** to you
- be **specific** (not *flower* but *dahlia*, not *bird* but *lark*)
- **sound good** to your ear

2. Sort the words into these categories as you go:

- 14 words for each of the five senses (14 x 5 = 70 words). The words must mean or suggest: 1. sight, 2. hearing, 3. smell, 4. taste, 5. touch
For instance, *frozen* might suggest taste to you, or *lark* hearing, or *cattail* touch.
- 14 words that suggest motion to you. They do not necessarily have to be verbs. *Baby* could be a motion word, for instance (or a sound word). So could *comet*, *tide*, *roadster*...
- 6 abstractions (like *love* or *freedom* or *truth*). One way to think about abstractions is that they don't have a smell, taste, sound, etc.
- 10 anything else (names of people/places, days of the week/months of the year, and so forth — any word you love the meaning and sound of which does not fit into the other categories).
- Now, read your deck aloud to have a "birthday party for your mouth" a la Marilyn Krysl's marvelous poem on the deliciousness of words, "[Saying Things](#)."

3. Here are some ways to use your personal Diction Deck. Choose one or more of them to create or revise a poem:

- Pull out 3-5 random cards; weave them into a poem you're working on.
- Spread your deck out. Choose a number of cards to create a skeleton of a poem. Write the experience, the memory, or whatever else the combination of cards suggests.
- Pull a random word from the pack and write, teasing out all you can from its meanings and sounds.
- Lay twelve cards out face up in four rows of three. Rearrange the cards until a particular juxtaposition of words sparks an idea for you. Craft your idea into a poem using these words.

REFLECTION

How did you see your own creative process work in this exercise? How was it different as you focused on individual words rather than on putting them together?

What did you notice about yourself and your own personal literary diction as you read the words you chose aloud? Did you think of words you'd like to add or change? Go for it!

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Keep collecting words, in a notebook, on index cards, or anywhere else that's convenient.

Keep growing your expertise as a word connoisseur—or a sommelier! Study the nuances of words. Sniff their aroma straight from the bottle, swirl them around in your glass to note their color and bouquet, sip slowly, rolling them over your tongue. Field guides are great sources for words: gneiss, mica, quartz; rose bay, May apple, lady slipper. Other people's poems, stories, and even jokes are, too. Latinate, multi-syllabic words are delicious, but so are thick, earthy Anglo-Saxon ones. Be adventurous. Read through your list often, keep adding to it, and swap out or add new words to your personal Diction Deck. Watch your writing become, over time, in some mysterious, organic way, a bit wilder, more interesting.

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