CHAPTER 25

EXPLORE ONLINE >

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WORD CHOICE, WORD ORDER

Margaret Atwood

Adrienne Rich

E. E. Cummings

Gwendolyn Brooks

Duffy-Marie Arnoult/Getty Images

BOB HOLMAN (1948–)

Beautiful (2002)

January 3, 2002

Dear Bob,

You are not allowed to use
the word "beautiful" in a poem
this year.

Signed,
The Rest of the World
Except for You

NOT FOR SALE

Words identify and name, characterize and distinguish, compare and contrast. Words describe, limit, and embellish; words locate and measure. Even though words may be elusive and uncertain and changeable, a single word—such as Holman's "beautiful"—can also be meaningful. In poetry, as in love and in politics, words matter.

Beyond the quantitative—how many words, how many letters and syllables—is a much more important consideration: the *quality* of words. Which words are chosen, and why? Why are certain words placed next to others? What does a word suggest in a particular context? How are the words arranged? What exactly constitutes the "right word"?

Word Choice

In poetry, even more than in fiction or drama, words are the focus—sometimes even the true subject—of a work. For this reason, the choice of one word over another can be crucial. Because poems are brief, they must compress many ideas into just a few lines; poets know how much weight each individual word carries, so they choose with great care, trying to select words that imply more than they state.

In general, poets (like prose writers) select words because they communicate their ideas. However, poets may also choose words for their sound. For instance, a word may echo another word's sound, and such repetition may place emphasis on both words; a word may rhyme with another word and therefore be needed to preserve the poem's rhyme scheme; or a word may have a certain combination of stressed and unstressed syllables needed to maintain the poem's metrical pattern. Occasionally, a poet may even choose a word because of how it looks on the page.

At the same time, poets may choose words for their degree of concreteness or abstraction, specificity or generality. A **concrete** word refers to an item that is a perceivable, tangible entity—for example, a kiss or a flag. An **abstract** word refers to an intangible idea, condition, or quality, something that cannot be perceived by the senses—love or patriotism, for instance. **Specific** words refer to particular items; **general** words refer to entire classes or groups of items. The following sequence illustrates the movement from general to specific.

> Poem → closed form poem → sonnet → seventeenth-century sonnet → Elizabethan sonnet → sonnet by Shakespeare → "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"

Sometimes a poet wants a precise word, one that is both specific and concrete. At other times, a poet might prefer general or abstract language, which may allow for more subtlety—or even for intentional ambiguity.

Finally, a word may be chosen for its **connotation**—what it suggests. Every word has one or more **denotations**—what it signifies without emotional associations, judgments, or opinions. The word *family*, for example, denotes "a group of related things or people." Connotation is a more complex matter; after all, a single word may have many different associations. In general terms, a word may have a connotation that is positive, neutral, or negative. Thus, *family* may have a positive connotation when it describes a group of loving relatives, a neutral connotation when it describes a biological category, and an ironically negative connotation when it describes an organized

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crime family. Beyond this distinction, *family*, like any other word, may have a variety of emotional and social associations, suggesting loyalty, warmth, home, security, or duty. In fact, many words have somewhat different meanings in different contexts. When poets choose words, then, they must consider what a particular word may suggest to readers as well as what it denotes.

In the poem that follows, the poet chooses words for their sounds and for their relationships to other words as well as for their connotations.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer (1865)

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, 5
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

This poem might be paraphrased as follows: "When I grew restless listening to an astronomy lecture, I went outside, where I found I learned more just by looking at the stars than I had learned inside." However, the paraphrase is obviously neither as rich nor as complex as the poem. Through careful use of diction, Whitman establishes a dichotomy that supports the poem's central theme about the relative merits of two ways of learning.

The poem can be divided into two groups of four lines each. The first four lines, unified by the repetition of "When," introduce the astronomer and his tools: "proofs," "figures," and "charts and diagrams" to be added, divided, or measured. In this section of the poem, the speaker is passive: he sits and listens ("I heard"; "I was shown"; "I sitting heard"). The repetition of "When" reinforces the dry monotony of the lecture. In the next four lines, the choice of words signals the change in the speaker's actions and reactions. The confined lecture hall is replaced by "the mystical moist night-air," and the dry lecture and the applause give way to "perfect silence"; instead of sitting passively, the speaker becomes active (he rises, glides, wanders); instead of listening, he looks. The mood of the first half of the poem is restrained: the language is concrete and physical, and the speaker is passively receiving information from a "learn'd" authority. The rest of the poem, celebrating intuitive knowledge and feelings, is more abstract, freer. Throughout the poem, the lecture hall is set in sharp contrast to the natural world outside its walls.

After considering the poem as a whole, readers should not find it hard to understand why the poet selected certain words. Whitman's use of "lectured" in line 4 rather

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than a more neutral word like "spoke" is appropriate both because it suggests formality and distance and because it echoes "lecture-room" in the same line. The word "sick" in line 5 is striking because it connotes physical as well as emotional distress, more effectively conveying the extent of the speaker's discomfort than "bored" or "restless" would. "Rising" and "gliding" (line 6) are used rather than "standing" and "walking out" both because of the way their stressed vowel sounds echo each other (and echo "time to time" in the next line) and because of their connotation of dreaminess, which is consistent with "wander'd" (line 6) and "mystical" (line 7). The word "moist" (line 7) is chosen not only because its consonant sounds echo the *m* and *st* sounds in "mystical," but also because it establishes a contrast with the dry, airless lecture hall. Finally, line 8's "perfect silence" is a better choice than a reasonable substitute like "complete silence" or "total silence," either of which would suggest the degree of the silence but not its quality.

FURTHER READING: Word Choice

RHINA ESPAILLAT (1932–)

Bilingual/Bilingue (1998)

My father liked them separate, one there,
one here (allá y aquí), as if aware

that words might cut in two his daughter's heart
(el corazón) and lock the alien part

to what he was—his memory, his name 5
(su nombre)—with a key he could not claim.

"English outside this door, Spanish inside,"
he said, "y basta."[1] But who can divide

the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from
any child? I knew how to be dumb 10

and stubborn (testaruda); late, in bed,
I hoarded secret syllables I read

until my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run
where his stumbled. And still the heart was one.

I like to think he knew that, even when, 15
proud (orgulloso) of his daughter's pen,

he stood outside mis versos,[2] half in fear
of words he loved but wanted not to hear.

---

[1] *"y basta.":* and enough.
[2] *mis versos:* my poems.

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Reading and Reacting

1. Why do you think the poet includes parenthetical Spanish translations in this poem? Are they necessary? Why do you think the Spanish words “y basta” (line 8) and “mis versos” (line 17) are not translated as the others are?
2. Some of the words in this poem might be seen as having more than one connotation. Consider, for example, “alien” (line 4), “word” (line 9), “dumb” (line 10), and “syllables” (line 12). What meanings could each of these words have? Which meaning do you think the poet intended them to have?
3. What is the relationship between “the word” and “the world” in this poem?
4. **Journal Entry** What is the father’s fear? Do you think this fear is justified? Why do you think he doesn’t want to hear his daughter’s words?

Related Works: “Two Questions” (p. 167), “The Secret Lion” (p. 183), “Two Kinds” (p. 636), “Baca Grande” (p. 724), “My Father in the Navy: A Childhood Memory” (p. 891)

MARTIN ESPADA (1957–)

The Saint Vincent de Paul Food Pantry Stomp (1990)

Madison, Wisconsin, 1980

Waiting for the carton of food
given with Christian suspicion
even to agency-certified charity cases
like me,
thin and brittle 5
as uncooked linguini,
anticipating the factory-damaged cans
of tomato soup, beets, three-bean salad
in a welfare cornucopia,
I spotted a squashed dollar bill 10
on the floor, and with
a Saint Vincent de Paul food pantry stomp
pinned it under my sneaker,
tied my laces meticulously,
and stuffed the bill in my sock 15
like a smuggler of diamonds,
all beneath the plaster statue wingspan
of Saint Vinnie,
who was unaware
of the dance 20
named in his honor

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by a maraca shaker
in the salsa band
of the unemployed.

Reading and Reacting

1. What is a stomp? What exactly is the "St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry stomp"?
2. Explain Espada's choice of the italicized words in the following expressions: "*Christian* suspicion" (2); "*agency-certified* charity cases" (3); "welfare *cornucopia*" (9); "plaster statue *wingspan*" (17). Do these words convey irony? Do they have negative connotations? What do these expressions tell you about the speaker's attitude toward his benefactors?
3. What words and figures of speech does the speaker use to describe himself? What do they reveal about his life?
4. **Journal Entry** What comment does this poem make about charities that distribute food to the needy? About the recipients of such charity?
5. **Critical Perspective** In a review of Martín Espada's work in *Booklist*, Ray Olson argues that Espada, while advocating for the subjects of his poetry, is aware that pity in itself does not make for a successful poem:

> From the beginning, Espada has been compassionate but scrupulous to avoid arousing pity, for pity might blur the perception of injustice crucial to the poetry of advocacy he determined to practice. As he progressed, he took on the struggles of Mexicans, Chileans Peruvians, and other Latin Americans against postcolonial tyranny at home and prejudice in the U.S., to which multitudes of them fled. He makes his leftist orientation apparent, but in his poetry he is far less an ideologue than a lyrical champion of the oppressed and dispossessed.

Based on your reading of "The Saint Vincent de Paul Food Pantry Stomp," do you think Espada is a "champion of the oppressed and dispossessed"? Why, or Why not?

Related Works: "I Stand Here Ironing" (p. 296), "My Father as a Guitar" (p. 774), "Why I Went to College" (p. 838)

AP Photo/Chuck Knoblock

ADRIENNE RICH (1929–2012)

Living in Sin (1955)

She had thought the studio would keep itself,
no dust upon the furniture of love.
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat 5
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging.

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Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps 10
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—
envoy from some black village in the mouldings . . .
Meanwhile, he, with a yawn, 15
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found 20
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.
By evening she was back in love again,
though not so wholly but throughout the night
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming 25
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

1950s milkman making delivery
Philip Gendreau/© Bettmann/Corbis

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Reading and Reacting

1. How might the poem's impact change if each of these words were deleted: "Persian" (line 5), "picturesque" (line 6), "sepulchral" (line 11), "minor" (line 19), "sometimes" (line 25)?
2. What words in the poem have strongly negative connotations? What do these words suggest about the relationship the poem describes? How does the image of the "relentless milkman" (line 26) sum up this relationship?
3. This poem, about a woman in love, uses very few words conventionally associated with love poems. Instead, many of its words denote the everyday routine of housekeeping. Give examples of such words. Why do you think they are used?
4. **Journal Entry** What connotations does the title have? What other phrases have similar denotative meanings? How do their connotations differ? Why do you think Rich chose the title "Living in Sin"?
5. **Critical Perspective** In "Her Cargo: Adrienne Rich and the Common Language," a 1979 essay examining the poet's work over almost thirty years, Alicia Ostriker offers the following analysis of Rich's early poems, including "Living in Sin":

   > They seem about to state explicitly . . . a connection between feminine subordination in male-dominated middle-class relationships, and emotionally lethal inarticulateness for both sexes. But the poetry . . . is minor because it is polite. It illustrates symptoms but does not probe sources. There is no disputing the ideas of the predecessors, and Adrienne Rich at this point is a cautious good poet in the sense of being a good girl, a quality noted with approval by her reviewers.

   Does your reading of "Living in Sin" support Ostriker's characterization of the poem as "polite" and "cautious"? Do you think Rich is "being a good girl"?

Related Works: "Hills Like White Elephants" (p. 129), "Love and Other Catastrophies: A Mix Tape" (p. 138), "The Storm" (p. 270), "What lips my lips have kissed" (p. 906)

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E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

in Just-[1] (1923)

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman
whistles far and wee 5

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

[1] *in Just-:* This poem is also known as "Chansons Innocentes I."

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when the world is puddle-wonderful 10
the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee

and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and 15
it's
spring
and
the
goat-footed 20

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

Reading and Reacting

1. In this poem, Cummings coins a number of words that he uses to modify other words. Identify these coinages. What other, more conventional, words could be used in their place? What does Cummings accomplish by using the coined words instead?
2. What do you think Cummings means by "far and wee" in lines 5, 13, and 22–24? Why do you think he arranges these three words in a different way on the page each time he uses them?
3. **Journal Entry** Evaluate this poem. Do you like it? Is it memorable? moving? Or is it just clever?
4. **Critical Perspective** In "Latter-Day Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language" (1955), Robert E. Maurer suggests that Cummings often coined new words in the same way that children do: for example, "by adding the normal *-er* or *-est (beautifuler, chiefest)*, or stepping up the power of a word such as *last,* which is already superlative, and saying *lastest,*" creating words such as *givingest* and *whirlingest*. In addition to "combining two or more words to form a single new one . . . to give an effect of wholeness, of one quality" (for example, *yellowgreen*), "in the simplest of his word coinages, he merely creates a new word by analogy as a child would without adding any shade of meaning other than that inherent in the prefix or suffix he utilizes, as in the words *unstrength* and *untimid*. . . . " Many early reviewers, Maurer notes, criticized such coinages because they "convey a thrill but not a precise impression," a criticism also leveled at Cummings's poetry more broadly.

   Consider the coinages in "in Just-." Do you agree that many do not add "shades of meaning" or provide a "precise impression"? Or, do you find that the coinages contribute to the poem in a meaningful way?

Related Works: "The Secret Lion" (p. 183), "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (p. 736), "Constantly Risking Absurdity" (p. 763), "Jabberwocky" (p. 816), "the sky was candy" (p. 846), *Words, Words, Words* (p. 1674)

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THOMAS LUX (1946–)

Pedestrian (1983)

Tottering and elastic, middle name of Groan,
ramfeezled after a hard night
at the corpse-polishing plant, slope- . . .
shouldered, a half loaf
of bread, even his hair tired, famished, 5
fingering the diminished beans
in his pocket—you meet him.
On a thousand street corners you meet him,
emerging from the subway, emerging
from your own chest—this sight's shrill, 10
metallic vapors pass into you.
His fear is of being broken,
of becoming too dexterous in stripping
the last few shoelaces of meat
from a chicken's carcass, of being moved by nothing 15
short of the Fall of Rome, of being stooped
in the cranium over some loss he's forgotten
the anniversary of. . . . You meet him,
know his defeat, though proper
and inevitable, is not yours, although yours also 20
is proper and inevitable: so many defeats
queer and insignificant (as illustration:
the first time you lay awake all night
waiting for dawn—and were disappointed), so many
no-hope exhaustions hidden, 25
their gaze dully glazed inward.—And yet we all
fix our binoculars on the horizon's hazy fear-heaps
and cruise toward them, fat sails
forward. . . . You meet him on the corners,
in bus stations, on the blind avenues 30
leading neither in
nor out of hell, you meet him
and with him you walk.

Reading and Reacting

1. What two meanings does the poem's one-word title have? Which meaning do you think Lux intended? Why?
2. Evaluate Lux's choice of the following words: "tottering and elastic" (1); "shrill, / metallic vapors" (10-11); "shoelaces" (14); "cranium" (17); "fear-heaps" (27). Do you find these choices logical? startling? thought provoking? distracting? Explain.

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3. What does Lux accomplish by repeating the words, "you meet him" in lines 7, 8, 18, 29, and 32? Who is "you"? Who is "him"?
4. Is "ramfeezled" (2) a word? What does it mean? What other word could Lux have used here?
5. **Journal Entry** Reread the parenthetical "illustration" in lines 22-24. What does this example illustrate? How does it shed light on the poem's meaning?
6. **Critical Perspective** In an interview with J. M. Spalding for the *Cortland Review*. Thomas Lux discussed the progression in his work from Surrealism to Realism and from self-involvement to openness:

> I kind of drifted away from Surrealism and the arbitrariness of that. I got more interested in subjects, identifiable subjects other than my own angst or ennui or things like that. I got better and better, I believe, at the craft. I paid more and more attention to the craft. Making poems rhythmical and musical and believable as human speech and as distilled and tight as possible is very important to me. I started looking outside of myself a lot more for subjects.

In what sense is "Pedestrian" realistic? Does the poem go beyond the speaker's own "angst or ennui"? If so, how? Do you think the poem is "believable as human speech"?

Related Works: "Deportation at Breakfast" (p. 208), "Miss Brill" (p. 241), The World Is Too Much with Us" (p. 695), "Acquainted with the Night" (p. 994), "Not Waving but Drowning" (p. 1032), *Tape* (p. 1094)

KAY RYAN (1945–)

Blandeur (2000)

If it please God,
let less happen.
Even out Earth's
rondure, flatten
Eiger,[1] blanden 5
the Grand Canyon.
Make valleys
slightly higher,
widen fissures
to arable land, 10
remand your
terrible glaciers
and silence
their calving,
halving or doubling 15
all geographical features

[1] *Eiger:* A mountain in the Swiss Alps.

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toward the mean.
Unlean against our hearts.
Withdraw your grandeur
from these parts. 20

Reading and Reacting

1. Is "blandeur" a real word, or is it a word the poet has invented? What about "rondure" (line 4), "blanden" (line 5), and "unlean" (line 18)? Define each of these words in the context of the poem.
2. Identify the words in this poem that denote measurements or degree. Why are they used? What do they add to the poem?
3. What connotations do the words "remand" (line 11), "calving" (line 14), and "mean" (line 17) have? What do you think the poet means each word to suggest?
4. **Journal Entry** Whom is the speaker addressing? What is she asking for? Why do you think she makes this request?
5. **Critical Perspective:** Poet and critic Dana Gioia argues that Kay Ryan's poetry, while it may be playful, is not as simple as it initially appears:

   > Ryan's work may not seem difficult, but it is. She challenges the reader in unusual ways. She is not obscure but sly, dense, elliptical, and suggestive. She plays with her readers–not maliciously or gratuitously but to rouse them from conventional response and expectation.

   How might "Blandeur" rouse readers from their "conventional response and expectation"? For example, is there anything unexpected about the speaker's attitude or about the poem's use of language?

Related Works: "The Eclipse" (p. 141), "The World Is Too Much with Us" (p. 695), "Ozymandias" (p. 700), "Monet's *Waterlillies*" (p. PS4) *Nine Ten* (p. 1119)

Levels of Diction

The diction of a poem may be formal or informal or fall anywhere in between, depending on the identity of the speaker and on the speaker's attitude toward the reader and toward his or her subject. At one extreme, very formal poems can seem lofty and dignified, far removed in style and vocabulary from everyday speech. At the other extreme, highly informal poems can be full of jargon, regionalisms, and slang. Many poems, of course, use language that falls somewhere between formal and informal diction.

Formal diction is characterized by a learned vocabulary and grammatically correct forms. In general, formal diction does not include colloquialisms, such as contractions and shortened word forms (*phone* for *telephone*). As the following poem illustrates, a speaker who uses formal diction can sound aloof and impersonal.

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AP Photo/Dave Thomson

MARGARET ATWOOD (1939–)

The City Planners (1966)

Cruising these residential Sunday
streets in dry August sunlight:
what offends us is
the sanities:
the houses in pedantic rows, the planted 5
sanitary trees, assert
levelness of surface like a rebuke
to the dent in our car door.
No shouting here, or
shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt 10
than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

But though the driveways neatly
sidestep hysteria
by being even, the roofs all display 15
the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky,
certain things:
the smell of spilled oil a faint

sickness lingering in the garages,
a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise, 20
a plastic hose poised in a vicious

coil; even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows
give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster 25

when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

That is where the City Planners
with the insane faces of political conspirators 30
are scattered over unsurveyed
territories, concealed from each other,
each in his own private blizzard;

guessing directions, they sketch
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders 35
on a wall in the white vanishing air

tracing the panic of suburb
order in a bland madness of snows.

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1950s suburban housing development
Masterfile (Royalty-Free Div.)

Atwood's speaker is clearly concerned about the poem's central issue, but rather than use *I*, the poem uses the first-person plural (*us*) to convey some degree of emotional detachment. Although phrases such as "sickness lingering in the garages" and "insane faces of political conspirators" clearly communicate the speaker's disapproval, formal words—"pedantic," "rebuke," "display," "poised," "obliquely," "conspirators," "transitory"—help her to maintain her distance. Both the speaker herself and her attack on the misguided city planners gain credibility through her balanced, measured tone and through her use of language that is as formal and "professional" as theirs.

Informal diction is the language closest to everyday conversation. It includes **colloquialisms**—contractions, shortened word forms, and the like—and may also include slang, regional expressions, and even nonstandard words.

In the poem that follows, the speaker uses informal diction to highlight the contrast between James Baca, a law student speaking to the graduating class of his old high school, and the graduating seniors.

JIM SAGEL (1947–1998)

Baca Grande[1] (1982)

Una vaca se topó con un ratón y le dice:
"Tú—¿tan chiquito y con bigote?" Y le responde el ratón:
"Y tú tan grandota—¿y sin brassiere?"[2]

It was nearly a miracle
James Baca remembered anyone at all

[1]*Baca Grande: Baca* is both a phonetic spelling of the Spanish word *vaca* (cow) and the last name of one of the poem's characters. *Grande* means "large."

[2]*Una . . . brassiere?:* A cow ran into a rat and said: "You—so small and with a moustache?" The rat responded: "And you—so big and without a bra?"

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from the old hometown gang
having been two years at Yale
    no less 5
and halfway through law school
at the University of California at Irvine
They hardly recognized him either
in his three-piece grey business suit
and surfer-swirl haircut 10
with just the menacing hint
of a tightly trimmed Zapata moustache
    for cultural balance
and relevance

He had come to deliver the keynote address 15
to the graduating class of 80
at his old alma mater
and show off his well-trained lips
which laboriously parted
    each Kennedyish "R" 20
and drilled the first person pronoun
through the microphone
like an oil bit
with the slick, elegantly honed phrases
that slid so smoothly 25
off his meticulously bleached
    tongue
He talked Big Bucks
with astronautish fervor and if he
    the former bootstrapless James A. Baca 30
could dazzle the ass
off the universe
then even you
    yes you

Joey Martinez toying with your yellow 35
    tassle
and staring dumbly into space
could emulate Mr. Baca someday
    possibly
well 40
there was of course
such a thing
as being an outrageously successful
gas station attendant too
    let us never forget 45
it doesn't really matter what you do

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so long as you excel
  James said
never believing a word
of it 50
for he had already risen
    as high as they go

Wasn't nobody else
from this deprived environment
who'd ever jumped 55
    straight out of college
into the Governor's office
and maybe one day
he'd sit in that big chair
  himself 60
and when he did
he'd forget this damned town
and all the petty little people
in it
once and for all 65

That much he promised himself

"Baca Grande" uses numerous colloquialisms, including contractions; conversational placeholders, such as "no less" and "well"; shortened word forms, such as "gas"; slang terms, such as "Big Bucks"; whimsical coinages ("Kennedyish," "astronautish," "bootstrapless"); nonstandard grammatical constructions, such as "Wasn't nobody else"; and even profanity. The level of language is perfectly appropriate for the poem's speaker, one of the students Baca addresses—suspicious, streetwise, and unimpressed by Baca's "three-piece grey business suit" and "surfer-swirl haircut." In fact, the informal diction is a key element in the poem, expressing the gap between the slick James Baca, with "his well-trained lips / which laboriously parted / each Kennedyish 'R'" and members of his audience, with their unpretentious, forthright speech—and also the gap between Baca as he is today and the student he once was. In this sense, "Baca Grande" is as much a linguistic commentary as a social one.

FURTHER READING: Levels of Diction

ADRIENNE SU (1967–)

The English Canon[1] (2000)

It's not that the first speakers left out women
Unless they were goddesses, harlots, or impossible loves
Seen from afar, often while bathing,

[1] *English Canon:* Those works in English traditionally thought worthy of study.

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And it's not that the only parts my grandfathers
could have played
Were as extras in Xanadu[2] 5
Nor that it gives no instructions for shopping or cooking.

The trouble is, I've spent my life
Getting over the lyrics
That taught me to brush my hair till it's gleaming,

Stay slim, dress tastefully, and not speak of sex, 10
Death, violence, or the desire for any of them,
And to let men do the talking and warring

And bringing of the news. I know a girl's got to protest
These days, but she also has to make money
And do her share of journalism and combat, 15

And she has to know from the gut whom to trust,
Because what do her teachers know, living in books,
And what does she know, starting from scratch?

Reading and Reacting

1. What criticisms does the speaker have of the traditional English literary canon?
2. List the words and expressions that identify this poem's diction as informal. Given the poem's subject and theme, do you think this informal language (and the speaker's use of contractions) is a strength or a weakness?
3. What does the speaker mean when she says, "The trouble is, I've spent my life / Getting over the lyrics" (7–8)?
4. **Journal Entry** Reread the poem's last two lines. What does the speaker know that her teachers do not know? What do her teachers know that she does not know?
5. **Critical Perspective** In her essay "Teaching Literature: Canon, Controversy, and the Literary Anthology," Barbara Mujica discusses the way in which literary anthologies (like this one) tend naturally to create lists of works, known as **canons**, that are considered to be of especially high quality:

> "Anthology". . . is from the Greek word for "collection of flowers," a term implying selection. The very format of an anthology prompts canon formation . . . Anthologies convey the notion of evolution (the succession of literary movements) and hierarchy (the recognition of masterpieces). They create and reform canons, establish literary reputations, and help institutionalize the national culture, which they reflect.

[2] *Xanadu:* The summer capital of the emperor Kublai Kahn; also the setting for the poem "Kubla Khan" (p. 976) by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

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How would you characterize the attitude of the speaker in "The English Canon" to the process that Mujica describes? What is your own attitude toward the idea of canons in literature? Do you think some works can be said to be indisputably better than others?

Related Works: "Gryphon" (p. 245), "Women" (p. 852), "Aristotle" (p. 871), "Sea Grapes" (p. 879), "Theme for English B" (p. 928), "Barbie Doll" (p. 1023)

MARK HALLIDAY (1949–)

The Value of Education (2000)

I go now to the library. When I sit in the library
I am not illegally dumping bags of kitchen garbage
in the dumpster behind Clippinger Laboratory,
and a very pissed-off worker at Facilities Management
is not picking through my garbage and finding 5
several yogurt-stained and tomato-sauce-stained envelopes
with my name and address on them.
When I sit in the library,
I might doze off a little,
and what I read might not penetrate my head 10
which is mostly porridge in a bowl of bone.
However, when I sit there trying to read
I am not, you see, somewhere else being a hapless ass.
I am not leaning on the refrigerator
in the apartment of a young female colleague 15
chatting with oily pep
because I imagine she may suddenly decide to
do sex with me while her boyfriend is on a trip.
Instead I am in the library! Sitting still!
No one in town is approaching my chair 20
with a summons, or a bill, or a huge fist.
This is good. You may say,
"But this is merely a negative definition of
the value of education." Maybe so,
but would you be able to say that 25
if you hadn't been to the library?

Reading and Reacting

1. Who is the speaker? What does he reveal about himself? Whom might he be addressing?
2. How is the speaker's life outside the library different from the life he leads inside the library?
3. In lines 23–24, the speaker imagines a challenge to his comments. Do you think this challenge is valid? What do you think of the speaker's reply?
4. What phrases are repeated in this poem? Why?

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5. **Journal Entry** What argument is the speaker making for the benefits of the library (and for the value of education)? Is he joking, or is he serious?

Related Works: "Gryphon" (p. 245), "Teenage Wasteland" (p. 644), "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (p. 713), "Why I Went to College" (p. 838)

ANTHONY HECHT (1923–2004)

More Light! More Light![1] (1967)

for Heinrich Blucher and Hannah Arendt[2]

Composed in the Tower[3] before his execution
These moving verses, and being brought at that time
Painfully to the stake, submitted, declaring thus:
"I implore my God to witness that I have made no crime,"

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible, 5
The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite.[4]
His legs were blistered sticks on which the black sap
Bubbled and burst as he howled for the Kindly Light.

And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;
Permitted at least his pitiful dignity; 10
And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquillity.

We move now to outside a German wood.
Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down 15
And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar[5] beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.

---

[1]*More Light! More Light!:* words supposedly spoken on his deathbed by the German writer Johann Wolfgang van Goethe (1749–1832).

[2]*Heinrich Blücher and Hannah Arendt:* Arendt (1906–75) was a German-Jewish political theorist who coined the phrase "the banality of evil" to express the idea that ordinary people, not monsters, were responsible for the Holocaust and other evils; Blucher (1899–1970) was her husband.

[3]*The Tower:* The Tower of London, where important political prisoners were kept, often prior to their executions.

[4]*The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite:* Executioners could lessen the suffering of someone being burned at the stake by placing gunpowder in the pile of wood to cause an explosion, thereby hastening death.

[5]*Weimer:* Republic established in Germany in 1919, named for the city in which the country's first democratic constitution was signed.

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A Lüger settled back deeply in its glove.
He was ordered to change places with the Jews. 20

Much casual death had drained away their souls.
The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.
When only the head was exposed the order came
To dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye. 25
When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
The Lüger hovered lightly in its glove.
He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
Which grew to be years, and every day came mute 30
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

Reading and Reacting

1. This poem tells two stories: one about a sixteenth-century heretic burned at the stake in the Tower of London, the other about Nazis brutally executing three men. How are the two stories alike? How are they different? How does the poem signal the movement from one story to the other?
2. What words in this poem would you classify as formal? Why? Given the poem's subject matter, is this level of diction appropriate?
3. In addition to its use of formal words and its formal structure (eight 4-line stanzas), this poem also uses formal phrasing—for example, "declaring thus" (3) and "Nor was he forsaken of courage" (5). Give some other example of such phrasing.
4. Do you think the diction used to tell the second story is less formal that the diction in the first three stanzas? Do you think it should be? Explain.
5. **Journal Entry** What do you think the speaker means when he says, "Much casual death had drained away their souls" (21)? Whose souls is he referring to? What is the "casual death"?
6. **Critical Perspective:** In his essay "Socrates in Hell: Anthony Hecht, Humanism, and the Holocaust," poet and critic James Matthew Wilson discusses Hecht's approach to the terrible atrocities committed during World War II by the Nazis and by those who collaborated with them:

   > Always locating the human person within the history of suffering, Hecht's poems . . . affirm the spirit of humanism, of human reason, creativity, and culture in an age that frequently intimates (without being sure of what it means) that it has become "post-human."

   Does Wilson's generalization apply to "More Light! More Light!"? That is, does this poem affirm "human reason, creativity and culture"? Or, does it demonstrate the absence of those qualities?

Related Works: "All about Suicide" (p. 7), "Battle Royal" (p. 284), "Hope" (p. 702)

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MARY KARR (1965–)

A Blessing from My Sixteen Years' Son (2004)

I have this son who assembled inside me
during Hurricane Gloria. In a flash, he appeared,
in a heartbeat. Outside, pines toppled.

Phone lines snapped and hissed like cobras.
Inside, he was a raw pearl: microscopic, luminous. 5
Look at the muscled obelisk of him now

pawing through the icebox for more grapes.
Sixteen years and not a bone broken,
not a single stitch. By his age,

I was marked more ways, and small. 10
He's a slouching six foot three,
with implausible blue eyes, which settle

on the pages of Emerson's "Self-Reliance"
with profound belligerence.
A girl with a navel ring 15

could make his cell phone go brr,
or an Afro'd boy leaning on a mop at Taco Bell—
creatures strange as dragons or eels.

Balanced on a kitchen stool, each gives counsel
arcane as any oracle's. Bruce claims school 20
is harshing my mellow. Case longs to date

A tattooed girl because he wants a women
Willing to do stuff she'll regret
They've come to lead my son

into his broadening spiral. 25
Someday soon, the tether
will snap. I birthed my own mom

into oblivion. The night my son smashed
the car fender, then rode home
in the rain-streaked cop car, he asked, *Did you* 30

and Dad screw up so much?
He'd let me tuck him in,
my grandmother's wedding quilt

from 1912 drawn to his goateed chin. Don't
blame us, I said. You're your own 35
idiot now. At which he grinned.

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The cop said the girl in the crimped Chevy
took it hard. He'd found my son
awkwardly holding her in the canted headlights,

where he'd draped his own coat 40
over her shaking shoulders. My *fault*,
he'd confessed right off.

Nice kid, said the cop.

Reading and Reacting

1. This poem uses both formal and informal diction. Identify three or four examples of formal and informal words and expressions. Why do you think Karr chose not to use a consistent level of diction throughout the poem?
2. What words and expressions does the speaker use to describe her son? What does her choice of words tell you about him? about her?
3. Define each of these words: *obelisk* (6); *oracle* (20); *tether* (26); *crimped* (37); *canted* (39). What connotations does each word have in the context in which it is used? Do any of these words seem unexpected or jarring?
4. What is the "blessing" referred to in the title?
5. **Journal Entry** What kind of relationship do you think the speaker has with her son? How can you tell?
6. **Critical Perspective** Though she is a poet, Mary Karr is also well-known as the author of several memoirs in which she relates the details of a difficult, sometimes impoverished childhood. She discussed her childhood in an interview with the *Paris Review*:

   > Childhood was terrifying for me. A kid has no control. You're three feet tall, flat broke, unemployed, and illiterate. Terror snaps you awake. You pay keen attention. People can just pick you up and move you and put you down. Our little cracker box of a house could give you the adrenaline rush of fear. . . .

   How do Karr's comments about her childhood affect your response to "Blessing from My Sixteen Years' Son"? Does the knowledge that the poet's childhood was difficult and full of anxiety affect how you view the speaker's relationship with her son?

Related Works: "I Stand Here Ironing" (p. 296), "Teenage Wasteland" (p. 644), "Hope" (p. 702), "What Shall I Give My Children?" (p. 734), "Mid-Term Break" (p. 1001)

Source: ©Bill Tague

GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

We Real Cool (1959)

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left School. We

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Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We 5
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

EXPLORE ONLINE >

To listen to an audio reading of "We Real Cool," visit your Literature CourseMate, accessed through www.cengagebrain.com.

Reading and Reacting

1. What elements of nonstandard English grammar appear in this poem? How does the use of such language affect your attitude toward the speaker?
2. Every word in this poem is a single syllable. Why?
3. Why do you think the poet begins with "We" only in the first line instead of isolating each complete sentence on its own line? How does this strategy change the poem's impact?
4. **Journal Entry** Write a prose version of this poem, adding words, phrases, and sentences to expand the poem into a paragraph.
5. **Critical Perspective** In *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, critic D. H. Malhem writes of "We Real Cool," "Despite presentation in the voice of the gang, this is a maternal poem, gently scolding yet deeply sorrowing for the hopelessness of the boys."

   Do you agree with Malhem that the speaker's attitude is "maternal"?

Players in a pool hall (1950s)
Mac Gramlich/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

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Related Works: "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (p. 505), "Greasy Lake" (p. 573), "Teenage Wasteland" (p. 644), "Ex-Basketball Player" (p. 769), *Tape* (p. 1094)

GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

What Shall I Give My Children? (1949)

What shall I give my children? who are poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk contour, 5
Crying that they are quasi, contraband
Because unfinished, graven by a hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
But I lack access to my proper stone. 10
And plenitude of plan shall not suffice
Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
To ratify my little halves who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

Reading and Reacting

1. Unlike "We Real Cool" (p. 732), also by Gwendolyn Brooks, this sonnet's diction is quite formal. Given the subject of each poem, do the poet's decisions about level of diction make sense to you?
2. Which words in this poem do you see as elevated—that is, not likely to be used in conversation?
3. Apart from individual words, what else strikes you as formal about this poem?
4. **Journal Entry** Consulting a dictionary if necessary, write down a synonym for each of the formal words you identified in question 2. Then, write out three or four lines of this poem in more conversational language.

Related Works: "We Real Cool" (p. 732)

Word Order

The order in which words are arranged in a poem is as important as the choice of words. Because English sentences nearly always have a subject-verb-object sequence, with

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adjectives preceding the nouns they modify, a departure from this order calls attention to itself. Thus, poets can use readers' expectations about word order to their advantage.

For example, poets often manipulate word order to place emphasis on a word. Sometimes they achieve this emphasis by using a very unconventional sequence; sometimes they simply place the word first or last in a line or place it in a stressed position in the line. Poets may also choose a particular word order to make two related—or startlingly unrelated—words fall in adjacent or parallel positions, calling attention to the similarity (or the difference) between them. In other cases, poets may manipulate syntax to preserve a poem's rhyme or meter or to highlight sound correspondences that might otherwise not be noticeable. Finally, irregular syntax may be used throughout a poem to reveal a speaker's mood—for example, to give a playful quality to a poem or to suggest a speaker's disoriented state.

In the poem that follows, word order frequently departs from conventional English syntax.

EDMUND SPENSER (1552–1599)

One day I wrote her name upon the strand (1595)

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,[1]
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide and made my pains his prey.
"Vain man," said she, "that doest in vain assay, 5
A mortal thing so to immortalize,
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eek[2] my name be wiped out likewise."
"Not so," quod[3] I, "let baser things devise,
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame: 10
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

To listen to an audio reading of "One day I wrote her name upon the strand," visit your Literature CourseMate, accessed through www.cengagebrain.com.

[1] *strand:* Beach.
[2] *eek:* Also, indeed.
[3] *quod:* Said.

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"One day I wrote her name upon the strand," a sonnet, has a fixed metrical pattern and rhyme scheme. To accommodate the sonnet's rhyme and meter, Spenser makes a number of adjustments in syntax. For example, to make sure certain rhyming words fall at the ends of lines, the poet sometimes moves words out of their conventional order, as the following three comparisons illustrate.

Conventional Word Order	**Inverted Sequence**
"'Vain man,' she said, 'that doest *assay in vain*.'"	"'Vain man,' said she, 'that doest *in vain assay*.'" ("Assay" appears at end of line 5, to rhyme with line 7's "decay.")
"My verse shall *eternize your rare virtues*."	"My verse *your virtues rare shall eternize*." ("Eternize" appears at end of line 11 to rhyme with line 9's "devise.")
"Where whenas death shall *subdue all the world*, / Our love shall live, and *later renew life*."	"Where whenas death shall *all the world subdue*, / Our love shall live, and *later life renew*." (Rhyming words "subdue" and "renew" are placed at ends of lines.)

To make sure the metrical pattern stresses certain words, the poet occasionally moves a word out of conventional order and places it in a stressed position. The following comparison illustrates this technique.

Conventional Word Order	**Inverted Sequence**
"But *the waves came* and washed it away."	"But *came the waves* and washed it away." (Stress in line 2 falls on "waves" rather than on "the.")

As the above comparisons show, Spenser's adjustments in syntax are motivated at least in part by a desire to preserve his sonnet's rhyme and meter.

The next poem does more than simply invert word order; it presents an intentionally disordered syntax.

E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

anyone lived in a pretty how town (1940)

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)

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spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men (both little and small) 5
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew 10
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still 15
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then) they
said their nevers they slept their dream 20

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess 25
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep 30
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came 35
sun moon stars rain

Cummings, like Spenser, sometimes manipulates syntax in response to the demands of rhyme and meter—for example, in line 10. But Cummings goes much further, using unconventional syntax as part of a scheme that includes other unusual elements of the poem, such as its unexpected departures from the musical metrical pattern (for example, in lines 3 and 8) and from the rhyme scheme (for example, in lines 3 and 4) and its use of various parts of speech in unfamiliar contexts. Together, these techniques give the poem a playful quality. The refreshing disorder of the syntax (for instance, in lines 1–2, 10, and 24) adds to the poem's whimsical effect.

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FURTHER READING: Word Order

A. E. HOUSMAN (1859–1936)

To an Athlete Dying Young (1896)

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come, 5
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay, 10
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
And silence sounds no worse than cheers 15
After earth has stopped the ears.

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honors out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man. 20

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laureled head 25
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

Reading and Reacting

1. Where does the poem's meter or rhyme scheme require the poet to depart from conventional syntax?
2. Edit the poem so its word order is more conventional. Do your changes improve the poem?
3. **Journal Entry** Who do you think the speaker is? What is his relationship to the athlete?

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Related Works: "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (p. 753), "Ex-Basketball Player" (p. 769), Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)" (p. 930)

✔ **CHECKLIST Writing about Word Choice and Word Order**

Word Choice

- ☐ Which words are of key importance in the poem? What is the denotative meaning of each of these key words?
- ☐ Which key words have neutral connotations? Which have negative connotations? Which have positive connotations? Beyond its literal meaning, what does each word suggest?
- ☐ Why is each word chosen instead of a synonym? (For example, is the word chosen for its sound? its connotation? its relationship to other words in the poem? its contribution to the poem's metrical pattern?)
- ☐ What other words could be effectively used in place of words now in the poem? How would substitutions change the poem's meaning?
- ☐ Are any words repeated? Why?

Levels of Diction

- ☐ How would you characterize the poem's level of diction? Why is this level of diction used? Is it appropriate?
- ☐ Does the poem mix different levels of diction? If so, why?

Word Order

- ☐ Is the poem's word order conventional, or are words arranged in unexpected order?
- ☐ What is the purpose of the unusual word order? (For example, does it preserve the poem's meter or rhyme scheme? Does it highlight particular sound correspondences? Does it place emphasis on a particular word or phrase? Does it reflect the speaker's mood?)
- ☐ How would the poem's impact change if conventional syntax were used?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS: Word Choice, Word Order

1. Reread the two poems in this chapter by E. E. Cummings—"in Just-" (p. 718) and "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (p. 736). If you like, you may also read one or two additional poems in this book by Cummings. Do you believe Cummings chose words primarily for their sound? for their appearance on the page? What other factors might have influenced his choices?
2. The tone of "We Real Cool" (p. 732) is flat and unemotional; the problem on which it focuses, however, is serious. Expand this concise poem into a few paragraphs that retain

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the poem's informal, colloquial tone but use more detailed, more emotional language to communicate the hopeless situation of the speaker and his friends. Include dialogue as well as narrative.

3. Reread "Living in Sin" (p. 716) and "The English Canon" (p. 726), and choose one or two other poems in this book whose speaker is a woman. Compare the speakers' levels of diction and choice of words. What does their language reveal about their lives?
4. Analyze the choice of words and the level of diction in several poems in this book that—like "Pedestrian" (p. 720), and " 'More Light! More Light!' " (p. 729)—express social or political criticism. Some other poems that might work well include Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" (p. 1015), and Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" (p. 1023).
5. Consider the words and expressions used by the speaker to describe her teenage son in "A Blessing from My Sixteen Years' Son" (p. 731). Choose several other works in this text that focus on teenagers, and compare the language used to characterize them with Karr's use of language in this poem.

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