



# Diction Analysis through Grammar Study – “The Witch” Foundation Lesson

## Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking				
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate
<b>Close Reading</b>		<b>Grammar</b>		<b>Composition</b>
<b>Literary Elements</b> Diction connotation denotation vocabulary Mood Theme	<b>Parts of Speech</b> <b>Phrases</b> Infinitive Prepositional <b>Analysis of a Text</b> Meaning and Effect related to parts of speech and phrases	<b>Structural Elements</b> Body use of commentary use of evidence		

## Materials and Resources

- Close Reading Lesson: “Uncovering Layers of Meaning”
- Close Reading Lesson: “Peeling Back the Layers – The Witch”
- Close Reading Lesson: “Multiple Choice – The Witch”

## Lesson Introduction

Combining close reading with grammar study can be an ideal opportunity to familiarize students with the basic parts of speech and types of phrases. Each part of speech functions in a different way to convey meaning to the reader. Isolating the words and phrases that function in similar ways in a text can provide clues to tone and theme.

Before students do this kind of activity on their own, it is wise to review with them the definitions of the terms above. The teacher may wish to combine this lesson with the close reading foundation lesson on imagery, detail, and point of view, “Uncovering Layers of Meaning.” Students can work with these concepts using any richly layered poem or prose selection that is age-appropriate.

## Diction

First, the students should fill out the Parts of Speech Chart as a group, with volunteers finding the important nouns, verbs, adjectives (including prepositional phrases used as adjectives) and adverbs (including prepositional phrases used as adverbs). A sample chart has been filled out, using Jack Prelutsky’s poem “The Witch” as an example. The poem and the sample chart follow. The teacher may wish to review this sample with his or her students before they try the activity with a teacher or student-selected text from the appropriate grade level.

### The Witch

She comes by night, in fearsome flight,  
In garments black as pitch,  
The queen of doom upon her broom,  
The wild and wicked witch,

A cackling crone with brittle bones  
And desiccated limbs,  
Two evil eyes with warts and sties  
And bags about the rims,

A dangling nose, ten twisted toes  
And folds of shriveled skin,  
Cracked and chipped and crackled lips  
That frame a toothless grin.

She hurtles by, she sweeps the sky  
And hurls a piercing screech.  
As she swoops past, a spell is cast  
On all her curses reach.

Take care to hide when the wild witch rides  
To shriek her evil spell.  
What she may do with a word or two  
Is much too grim to tell.

by Jack Prelutsky

Prelutsky, Jack. "The Witch" in *Classic Poems to Read Aloud*, ed. James Berry. New York: Larousse Kingfisher Chambers, Inc., 1997.



### Student Chart For Grammatical Analysis of a Poem (Whole-Group Activity)

	Verbs	Adverbs/ Adv. Prep. phrases	Nouns	Adjectives/ Adj. Prep. phrases
<b>Stanza one</b>	comes	by night	flight	fearsome
		in fearsome flight	garments	black as pitch
		in garments black	queen	of doom
		as pitch	witch	wild
		upon her broom		wicked
<b>Stanza two</b>	none		crone	cackling, with brittle bones
			bones	brittle
			limbs	desiccated
			eyes	two evil
				with warts and sties
			bags	about the rims
<b>Stanza three</b>	frame		nose	dangling
			toes	ten twisted
			folds	of shriveled skin
			lips	cracked
				chipped
			grin	toothless
<b>Stanza four</b>	hurtles	by		
	sweeps		sky	
	hurls		screech	piercing
	swoops	past		
	cast		spell	
	reach	on all	curse	
<b>Stanza five</b>	take		care	
	rides		witch	wild
	shriek		spell	evil
	may do	with a word or two		
	is	too		grim

Next, they should split up into four groups, with the first group looking at nouns, the second at adjectives, the third at verbs, and the fourth at adverbs. The groups will be looking for the connotations (emotions and associations) of each word, and also at the structure of the poem in terms of the kinds of words used in each stanza.

The following kinds of commentary may result from group examination of the parts of speech.

### Verbs

The verbs in the first three stanzas are sparse and almost without emotional content, while they pile up furiously in the last two stanzas. “Hurtles” is a verb that gives the feeling of reckless speed. The witch “sweeps” the sky with her broom, brushing everything and everyone out of her way. Then she “hurls” a shriek. The word “hurls” might describe what a major league pitcher does to a baseball or what an angry wife does with a frying pan – the action has the feeling of violence. The witch “swoops” past with a powerful rush, like a big black bird swooping down on her prey. Next come three verbs, “cast,” “reach,” and “take,” all of which have to do with capturing something. The last lines, with the verb phrase, “may do” and the infinitive “to tell,” hint of ominous possibilities. All in all, the rapidly accumulating, violent, ominous verbs in the last two stanzas hint at increasing danger to the reader as the witch draws closer.

### Adverbs

The adverb group will have the least to do, but they can look carefully at the fact that the witch comes “by night” “upon her broom.” Things that come in the night are usually scary and dark, and if she’s flying on a broom, chances are there’s something magical and odd about her. She casts her curses “on all” – no one can escape – and she does it all with only “a word or two,” so she must possess very powerful, dangerous words. The reader feels a chill at the thought of this flying, batlike, nocturnal creature who curses everyone in her path. The adverb “too” emphasizes how terribly “grim” are the results of those curses.

### Nouns

Many of the nouns concern the body parts of the witch – the poem mentions her bones, limbs, eyes, the bags under the eyes, her nose, skin, toes, and lips. Even with no adjectives to embellish them, the nouns themselves make the witch seem skeletal and old. The witch is referred to as a “queen” and a “crone,” a word connoting beauty, elegance, and nobility juxtaposed with one giving the impression of an old wise-woman, withered up and full of scary possibilities. Is there something contradictory about the witch, a possibility of both beauty and ugliness? After all, she wears “garments” (a rather elegant word for clothing) rather than “rags.” The witch doesn’t smile, she “grin[s],” a mischievous word, but a word that could be associated with the wide, toothless grin of the jack-o-lantern, as well. She gives a “screech” like that of an owl or a bird of prey. Her passing is described as a “flight” – again, like that of a bird of prey. The nouns give a somewhat eerie feeling to the reader of a being of great power with more to her than meets the eye.



## Adjectives

The adjectives in the piece are perhaps the most telling of all. The witch’s flight is “fearsome,” her garments “black as pitch” (pitch is a sticky, black, tarlike substance). She is the queen “of doom” and is both “wild” and “wicked.” She “cackles” like an old hen (another bird image) and her bones are “brittle” and “desiccated,” characteristics of old, dry, fragile bones like those of a skeleton. Her nose is “twisted” and her toes “dangling”; maybe these physical characteristics convey the idea that she is deformed and twisted both on the outside and on the inside. Her eyes are “evil” and have nasty growths on them – “warts and sties,” suggestive of disease. Her lips are “cracked and chipped” and her grin “toothless.” Her skin is “shriveled” like that of a mummy. She’s a dried-up old scarecrow of a woman, and she’s scary mostly because her body has the characteristics of old age – a condition that frightens the young. Her shriek is “piercing” like a knife, perhaps suggesting the pain that the fear of old age and death brings to all. It’s all much “too grim” even to tell.

In the next part of the analysis, students should try to connect the commentary they have created about the different parts of speech to the mood of the poem, as modeled below.

## Mood

The mood of the poem is delightfully scary, in the same way that Halloween goblins and eerie illuminated coffins on the porch and ghostly graveyards haunting front yards are delightfully scary. Human beings get over their fear sometimes by seeking out spooky, but safe, situations (like horror movies and books). The poem is that kind of fun, frightening experience that gives the reader a shiver, but also a smile.

## Tone

The poem has an ominous, warning tone that bids the reader “beware.” However, all the scary details about the witch are almost overkill – they convey a feeling of lighthearted exaggeration, of a ghost story told around the campfire, a scary tale told at midnight at a slumber party. No real harm done – and yet, there’s the suggestion of something darker here, something that creeps into the archetypal fiber of our suggestive subconscious. Really, aren’t we all afraid of the dark – of things that fly in the night – of age – of the wisdom of old women who know too much – of death itself?

## Theme

(literal, personal, moral, universal)

It is important that students always address theme when they analyze a text, and they should be looking for at least three levels of meaning. One meaning is literal – this is the story of a scary witch that a person is describing and warning the reader about. Another level is personal. Students should reflect about times when they were frightened of someone old or of death or of flying black things or of the dark. They may want to write about fear itself or about the idea that it’s hard to describe exactly what we fear about the dark and the supernatural. The moral level of meaning has to do with the way people relate to one another in good or bad ways.

The witch in the poem may reflect those who terrorize or threaten others and who frighten them in order to have power over them. Then, there is always the universal meaning. What does the speaker's description of the witch tell us about all people – their fears, their superstitions, their secret belief in magic? A thousand different truths can arise from an examination of the poem, and each would be a unique insight about the way life is, the way human beings act and are. That's the beauty of discussing theme in a group setting – we learn from each other's ways of seeing and can view the text like a prism, a crystal reflecting many possible meanings.

Again, here are the steps of the activity that follows:

1. Background information and review of parts of speech, types of phrases, diction, connotation, denotation, tone, and theme.
2. Students fill out Parts of Speech Chart as a whole-group activity.
3. Students break into four groups (one for each part of speech to be examined) and fill out Student Commentary on Diction sheet with their groups.
4. Students exchange information through oral reporting or jigsaw structure (a member of each group visits each of the other groups and reports on his or her group's findings. Students in the original group take notes – repeat until all information has been shared).
5. Students in the four groups may remain together or form different groups to discuss tone and theme, using the Student Commentary on Tone and Theme sheet.
6. Assessment can take place informally through teacher observation or formally through teacher evaluation of the various handouts.



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**Student Chart For Grammatical Analysis of a Poem (Whole-Group Activity)**

	Verbs	Adverbs/ Adv. Prep. phrases	Nouns	Adjectives/ Adj. Prep. phrases
<b>Stanza one</b>				
<b>Stanza two</b>				
<b>Stanza three</b>				
<b>Stanza four</b>				
<b>Stanza five</b>				

Grammar

### Student Commentary on Diction (Small-Group Activity)

Comment on the author's use of each part of speech, **concentrating on links to meaning**. Explore the associations and emotions associated in your mind with the words the author has chosen in each part of speech category.

**Verbs**

**Adverbs**

**Nouns**

**Adjectives**



## Student Commentary on Tone and Theme

After reading over the commentary of your group and all of the other groups, discuss the possible words that would identify the tone of the selection, as indicated by the diction used by the author.

### Tone

The tone(s) of the poem is/are \_\_\_\_\_

Commentary on the tone:

Try to put into words the insight about life the author is conveying to the reader through the text. Begin with a statement of the literal meaning of the text, then examine the personal layer (what meaning you got out of it personally in relation to your own life), the moral level (what it might teach us about our relationships with others and the world we live in), and the universal level (what it might show us about the way all things work together in the universe). Review the examples in the sample analysis if you get confused about the levels of meaning.

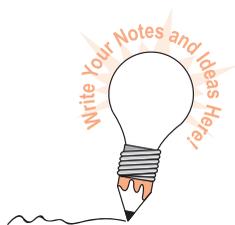
### Theme

Layer One (literal)

Layer Two (personal)

Layer Three (moral)

Layer Four (universal)



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Grammar