

ware of how texts often capitalize on the multiple meanings of words—subtle, suggested meanings as well as obvious ones. Consider these two simple sentences:

Benjamin Franklin was a perfect example of a statesman.  
Benjamin Franklin was a perfect example of a politician.

Even during his time, Franklin probably would have been pleased if someone said the first sentence about him, but likely not so happy with the second. *Statesman* suggests responsibility, intelligence, and high-mindedness; *politician* these days implies something less noble, more self-serving or even unprincipled. The differences in meaning in these two sentences illustrate what scholars of language refer to as denotation and connotation:

- **Denotation** refers to a literal meaning of a word.
- **Connotation** refers to an association, an effect, that the word provokes.

Both sentences above use words that might have the same *denotative* meaning—elected official—but carry quite different *connotations*.

**Formal versus Informal Words** The diction of a text might be compared to the way somebody dresses to go to a dance. If you're going to an informal party at a club, you dress down—jeans, comfortable shirt, flats. But for a formal dance like a prom, you dress up for the occasion—long skirt, high heels, tuxedo. The formality of a text's word choice is like dress; it gives some sense of the occasion—a comfortable casual "conversation" between the writer and readers, or a more formal presentation, with the writer "speaking" to the readers. Writers vary the formality of texts in a number of ways in their choice of words, sentences, and punctuation.

**Contractions and Pronouns** Two visible signals of formality are contractions and pronoun use. Contractions like "haven't" and "isn't" generally sound less formal than "have not" and "is not." First-person pronouns, with which the writer refers to himself (*I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, and ours*), sound less formal than words or phrases like "one" or "a person" or "he or she," which allow the writer to talk about a topic without personalizing it. Consider the following two sentences:

I'm using my brain by playing on a team.  
A person develops multiple intelligences by participating in sports.

The first would be perfectly appropriate in a relatively informal essay, while the latter would be right at home in a more formal paper. Notice the other words that change to accommodate a more or less formal diction. "Brain" is a looser, more casual way to say "multiple intelligences." "Team" is a shorthand way to say "participating in sports."

**Latinate versus Anglo-Saxon Words** Historically, English is a mongrel language, a mix of many others. The ancestor of the English we speak and write today is Old English, a Germanic language. The variety of that language spoken in the

British Isles from around the fourth century to the eleventh century C.E. has been labeled Anglo-Saxon English because the two tribes who spoke it were the Angles and the Saxons. Around 1100 C.E., the language began to change. In 1066, England was invaded, and the English king was overthrown by a French king, William of Normandy. The Norman invasion opened Anglo-Saxon English to influence from the romance languages of French, Spanish, and Italian, called *romance* after the Latin language of Rome. Throughout the succeeding centuries, English acquired more and more words and phrases that had their origins in Latin. Because the people who brought this Latinate influence into the language tended to be the powerful nobility, the use of what is called **Latinate diction** has come to be associated with more formal writing, while the use of what is called **Anglo-Saxon diction** has come to be linked with more informal writing.

Here are some pairs of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon synonyms that show the difference in formality:

Formal versus Informal Diction		
Formal Latinate term	Informal Anglo-Saxon term	Meaning
facilitate	help	to make easier
manufacture	make	to make
interrogate	ask	to question
maximize	grow	to make larger
minimize	shrink	to make smaller

FIGURE 4.4

**Slang and Jargon** Slang and jargon generally get a bad rap. Just look at how the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines the two terms. Slang is either "language peculiar to a particular group" or "an informal, nonstandard vocabulary composed of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech." Jargon is "confused, unintelligible language"; "a hybrid language or dialect simplified in vocabulary and grammar and used for communication between people of different speech"; "the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group"; or "obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words."

Yikes! Given these definitions, who would ever use slang or jargon in a composition? The answer: lots of writers, depending on how informally they want to interact with their readers and how well they know their audience's background and interests. In a paper for a government class about how political figures try to reassure voters in a time of economic stress, a writer might use a sentence like this:

The senator's speech was designed to calm voters' apprehensions about rising interest rates.

In an informal essay—or a personal piece, such as a commentary for a local newspaper—the writer might cast the same idea like this:

The senator basically put it to the voters in these terms: Chill!

The same formal/informal depending-on-your-audience continuum prevails in analyses of the use of jargon. Suppose a writer was producing an account of how users of a new computer program were expected to operate. If the audience consisted of people familiar with computer terminology, the author might write:

All beta testers know that they should clean up their orphans and then cold boot the machine.

On the other hand, for an audience not familiar with the world of computers, the following sentence would be more appropriate:

All people who have agreed to test the new program know that they are expected to delete their unused file before they turn off the computer and turn it on again immediately.

Both slang and jargon seem like dangerous territory for a writer because both use language that might obscure a writer's message rather than clarify and simplify it. Savvy writers ought to be aware of the simpler, more direct, more common words they could use. But, as with all questions involving style, a writer's decision about whether to use slang or jargon depends on the situation in which he or she is writing. As always, the question is this: "Given this subject matter, this purpose, this audience, and this type of writing, is slang or jargon effective?" Sometimes the answer is yes. The use of slang or jargon can signal to readers that the writer is a member of their group, in solidarity with them, and that the author has done his or her homework about a particularly complicated topic that is important to the community.

## Syntax

A third place to look for evidence to support claims about the main idea, purpose, tone, credibility, and effect of a text is **syntax**: the formation and structure of sentences in the text. Four specific features of syntax help you analyze sentences: length, type, structure, and voice and mode of verbs.

**Sentence Length** At the most basic level, an analyst can simply look at how long (or short) the sentences in a text are, how the writer varies (or doesn't vary) sentence length, and how sentence length affects reading. In general, long sentences give the writer a chance to develop a complicated thought for readers, but readers can get lost in the middle of them and lose the train of thought. In general, short sentences can be quite effective at the end of, or in the midst of, a series of long sentences. A well-placed short sentence can pull the reader up short and say, in essence, "Here's the point. Pay attention." A text with a variety of sentence lengths is usually more engaging than a text in which all the sentences are roughly the same length.

Look at the varied sentence length in this group of sentences in the first paragraph of Isaacson's chapter:

But wait a minute. There's something more going on here. Peel back a layer and we can see him as a 65-year-old wry observer, sitting in an English country house, writing this scene, pretending it's part of a letter to his son, an illegitimate son who has become a Royal Governor with aristocratic pretensions and needs to be reminded of his humble roots.

**Types of Sentences** A slightly more challenging (and even more interesting) feature of syntax is sentence type. Traditional grammar describes four types. Notice how each of these four sentence types has a primary function.

- A **simple sentence** has one independent clause. Essentially, it expresses one idea:

Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the nation.

- A **compound sentence** has two independent clauses, each of which can stand as a separate sentence. A compound sentence presents at least two ideas and suggests they are equal in importance:

Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the nation, and Andrew Johnson assisted him.

- A **complex sentence** has one independent clause and at least one subordinate clause—a group of words with a subject and a verb that cannot stand by itself as a sentence. A complex sentence suggests that the idea in its independent (main) clause is more important than the idea in its subordinate clause (or clauses) and that the subordinate clause qualifies the main clause. In the following example, the independent clause is in boldface type:

When the leaders of the Confederacy insisted that the rights of the states were more important than the maintenance of the union, **Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the nation.**

- A **compound-complex sentence** has two independent clauses and at least one subordinate clause. A compound-complex sentence combines the functions of the compound and the complex. In the following example, the two independent (main) clauses are in boldface type:

When the leaders of the Confederacy insisted that the rights of the states were more important than the maintenance of the union, **Abraham Lincoln struggled to save the nation, and Andrew Johnson assisted him.**

Sentences are also characterized by type as "loose" or "periodic": A **loose sentence** is one that puts all its basic elements—subject, verb, and any complement—right at the beginning, and then adds any modifying elements:

A **periodic sentence** is one that delays completing its idea by putting its additional, modifying details in one of two positions, either before the basic sentence elements or in the middle of them:

Alone in his study, lost in somber thoughts about his beloved country, dejected but not broken in spirit, **Abraham Lincoln wept.**

**Abraham Lincoln**, alone in his study, lost in somber thoughts about his beloved country, dejected but not broken in spirit, **wept.**

Loose and periodic are not exclusive categories. A sentence can be more loose than periodic, but still have some periodic “feel” to it:

Abraham Lincoln considered the Union an inviolable, almost eternally inspired, concept.

Similarly, a sentence can be more periodic than loose, but still have some “loose” feel to it:

Abraham Lincoln, a self-taught philosopher, a political scientist even before there was such a field, considered the Union an inviolable, almost eternally inspired, concept.

When analysts look at sentences on the loose-periodic continuum, they notice how a writer either “fronts” essential information and then elaborates or delays essential information until as late as possible in the sentence.

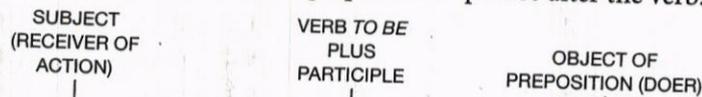
Would you say this sentence in Isaacson’s chapter is on the “loose” or the “periodic” end of the spectrum?

Instinctively more comfortable with democracy than some of his fellow founders, and devoid of the snobbery that later critics would feel toward his shopkeeping values, he had faith in the wisdom of the common man and felt that a new nation would draw its strength from what he called ‘the middling people.’

**Verbs: Voice and Mode** In English, the two most common categories of *voice* for verbs are active and passive. In a sentence that uses the **active voice**, the doer of the action is the subject, and the receiver of the action is the direct object:



In a sentence that uses the **passive voice**, the receiver of the action is the subject, the verb contains some form of *to be* as a helper and a participle, and the doer of the action is the object of a preposition in the prepositional phrase after the verb:



Guidebooks about effective writing often tell writers to “write in the active voice” and “avoid the passive voice.” There are some good reasons to follow this advice. The passive voice requires more words than the active, and excessive use of the passive can cause a reader to feel the text is wordy. Also, the passive voice is *potentially* irresponsible because the writer can avoid mentioning the *doer*. *The effort to save the Union was directed* is a complete sentence, but it leaves out the actor, and that may be important if the actor might be culpable. The caution about passive voice however, is limited. A writer sometimes uses the passive voice purposefully to emphasize the action done, rather than the doer of the action. Consider this brilliant first paragraph of Lincoln’s second inaugural address:

At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself, and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

Throughout the address, Lincoln keeps himself, as well as the armies of the North and the South, out of the “doer” position in sentence: *little that is new could be presented; no prediction in regard to it is ventured*. Let’s concentrate on the action at hand, ending the long war, he seems to be saying. Let’s not concentrate on who might be at fault.

A second good reason a writer uses the passive is to shift the doer of the action to the end of the sentence, where it will usually be most remembered. The sentence, *The effort to save the Union was directed by Lincoln*, emphasizes, rather than downplays, who is responsible.

### Imagery and Allusions

When you read a particularly vivid text, its main idea, purpose, tone, credibility, and emotional impact are often heightened by the images it evokes and the allusions it makes. **Images** are generally sensory experiences: words, phrases, or clauses that lead you to visualize a scene, hear a sound, experience a feeling of touch, taste, or smell. Each of the five senses work to create images:

- **Visual (sight) image:** *Tante Lou, in her black overcoat and black rimless hat, and Miss Emma, in her brown coat with the rabbit fur around the collar and sleeves and her floppy brown felt hat, followed me out to the car and stood back until I had opened the door for them.*