

vare 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.

ven 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.