

Kenyon's Writers' Guide on

Word Choice

To make sure you express exactly what you mean when you write, prepare a speech, or craft a poster, it's important to choose the best words for conveying your meaning. Word choice affects **clarity** and the overall **tone** of written pieces, speeches, and presentations. To connect with your audience and/ or readers successfully, choosing the right words is key.

Some Strong Methods for Choosing Words:

1. Use words with a **clear definition**, or **denotation**. Words that are used often in the language in which you're writing, words that are not ambiguous, and words that have correlations across languages can be particularly helpful to lean on when you write. Some examples of clearly-defined English terms are below:

Examples of Some of the Most Frequently-Used English Words	• <i>Verbs</i>: forms of the verb “to be” (is, am, was, were, etc.); forms of the verb “to have” (have, had, has) • <i>Nouns</i>: people, place, ideas, location, person, concept • <i>Adjectives</i>: strong, wise, useful • <i>Adverbs</i>: quickly, angrily, intelligently • <i>Prepositions</i>: to, for, by, of
Unambiguous English Terms	• Words like <i>those</i> and <i>that</i> can be unclear unless you clarify them with a modifying noun: those shoes, that coat • Words that only have one meaning are also helpful: lucrative, stapler, barometer, monosemy (the definition itself) • Words that have more than one meaning (orange— color or fruit) or pronunciation (read vs. read) can be avoided to eliminate confusion
Cognates	• Cognates are words that sound/ look similar and have the same meanings. Sometimes, they've even spelled the same! A few examples include: ○ Spanish to English: radio and radio; clase and class; center and centro ○ Italian to English: abilità and ability; università and university; visibile and visible ○ French to English: débat and debate; raison and reason; illégal and illegal

2. Be aware of a word or phrase's **connotation**, which is similar to **denotation**, as **connotation** is also important when choosing words. Writers always need to consider the way readers will understand the words they are using.
 - a. **Connotation** is the *idea* or *feeling* that a word invokes in addition to its dictionary definition (**denotation**), so different words with the same defined meaning will cause the reader to have different reactions.
 - i. For example, if someone is inactive, they can either be described as lazy or relaxed. Both words have the same meaning, but to most audiences, “lazy” portrays the subject more negatively than “relaxed” does.

- Just as you have to consider how your audience might respond to a specific word, you should also consider what words and language your **audience** might be familiar with and which you'll need to clearly define. A few things you should consider are listed here:

Rule	Explanation	Detail
Make sure language is appropriate for the given assignment.	Find out beforehand whether the written piece should be more <i>formal</i> or <i>casual</i> . When writing for an academic audience, avoid casual language and (if told to) stick to the third person point of view. <i>In most cases, avoid slang, lingo, or jargon.</i>	If your professor assigns you a paper, ask if you can use I, me, and my. Their answer will clue you in to whether or not it is very formal. If no, the paper is likely more formal. If yes, the paper is likely a bit more personal, inviting your perspective.
Find out the background of your audience including age, major, familiarity with the work(s) about which you're writing, etc.	Knowing to whom you are addressing your paper will clue you in about what words you should choose.	If you're writing directly to your professor, for example, you're going to choose vastly different words than if you're writing to a friend.
Define any terms and introduce any works with which your audience may not be familiar.	Making sure your audience has the context to follow along with your paper is key to building connections with them and showing them you're aware of them.	If you are writing about a book only you have read, providing context about the characters, setting, major terms, authors, etc. will be key to help your readers understand.

Note: it is a good idea to ask your professor who the audience for the assignment is if he, she, or they have not specified.

Some Methods to Avoid as You Choose Words:

- When writing, try to avoid **repetition**. Repeating the same word or phrase over and over again can cause the writing to become stale and boring. Try to vary not only words, but sentence structure as well to keep the writing organic and interesting for the reader. If you suspect that a particular word is being overused, a simple word search can help decide whether or not changes need to be made.
- Sometimes, a professor will write "**awkward**" or "awk" on your paper and you might wonder what they mean by that. Generally, they're referring to the fact that the flow and word choice at that point make your points hard to comprehend. Read that part to yourself (out loud if possible) to best understand what they are pointing out.
- Finally, even though it's tempting, the **thesaurus function** often causes more problems than it solves. It can encourage you to overuse large or technical words just to "sound smart" without being completely confident in their meaning. Using words that are unfamiliar just because they seem "smarter" risks creating unnecessarily complicated sentences, which clouds meaning. Additionally, sometimes the thesaurus recommends a word that is not an accurate synonym and therefore, not an accurate replacement.

So, what do you do instead? We have a few suggestions below:

- A good rule of thumb is if you've used a word three times in a row, *change* at least the second use to provide variety and avoid a "word echo."
- To avoid awkward word choices, *read your paper out loud* or have someone read it out loud to you. You can listen for places where your meaning is unclear or your flow seems problematic and consider what you're really trying to articulate.
 - For example, when you select thesaurus for "abstract" one of the choices it gives you is "summary." However, if you're referring to a paper's abstract, a piece of abstract art, or an idea which is abstract, this synonym will not work and therefore, will be a poor word choice.

Your Situation	Our Suggestion
Thesaurus has recommended a word but you're not sure it's a good replacement.	Look up the word's definition. Read it and see if it defines clearly what you want to write.
You need a synonym but can't come up with one.	Look the original word up in the dictionary. Most dictionary entries offer specific synonyms (and antonyms) you can use.
You can't find another word to use.	Then stick with your original choice. It's much better to use a clear word than it is to try and impress an audience who might end up confused instead.

Additional Resources:

- [Dictionary.com](#) offers wonderful examples of how to use the defined word underneath their explanation. These examples give you a clear idea of whether or not you're using the word correctly. It's also associated with thesaurus.com so you can look up words in the thesaurus and then check their definitions under the "dictionary" tab.
- The [OWL at Purdue](#) has several wonderful options for looking at clear word choice and usage. A few of our favorites are linked below:
 - [Word choice and arrangement](#) for emphasis
 - [Eliminating words](#) for concise writing (we also have a concise writing handout!)
 - Suggestions for [appropriate language](#)
- The [Conscious Style Guide](#) provides suggestions for inclusive language which removes outdated, slangish, or harsh word choices. We also have an inclusive writing guide on our website under "resources."

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