

Lesson 6.6

Choosing the Right Words

Telling an interesting story is difficult. To make a situation as exciting as possible, you have to include vivid descriptions and fascinating details. However, language that is too flowery or complicated might distract your audience from the **main idea**. Balancing these two extremes is essential for becoming a good storyteller.

In writing, you have to find a similar balance between keeping your readers interested and expressing your ideas clearly. Read through the following examples:

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Preparing a culinary entrée such as elbow pasta noodles and melted cheddar cheese, of the boxed variation, can be an enjoyable and tranquil undertaking if one is cognizant of the most vital procedures. First, fill a pot with an abundance of temperate water and gently situate it on the cooking apparatus, or stove, the dial of which should be directed to a temperature of great warmth. The liquid will presently begin to bubble and yield steam, at which juncture the foodstuffs, or elbow noodles, should be incorporated. When they are tender and delectable, sprinkle in the cheese mixture and blend judiciously.

To make macaroni and cheese from a box, put water in a pot. Turn on the stove to high heat and place the pot on top. Soon, the water will boil; when it does, add the noodles. When they are fully cooked, stir in the cheese.

- ▶ In the first example, the author uses descriptive, vivid language. However, the paragraph is so complicated, it's almost impossible to follow the author's train of thought. The second example has the opposite problem. While the information is straightforward, the paragraph itself is bland and boring.

Thinking about your audience and purpose will help you determine how descriptive you should be. Word choice is also an important part of drafting and revising.

In this lesson, you will learn how to effectively communicate meaning with the following word choices:

Clear Words

Concise Words

Vivid Words

Clear Words

Strong writing is clear and easy to understand. Don't be tempted to use complicated language just because it sounds "smarter." While academic and professional documents may be **formal**, they should not be confusing.

Think about the following sentences:

- ▶ This stratagem will advocate tandem techniques to diminish building perpetuation expenditures.
- ▶ This proposal will suggest two ways to reduce building maintenance costs.
- ▶ While both of these examples have the same basic meaning, the second sentence is much clearer than the first.

Helpful Hint

Be careful when using **synonyms** to make your writing more interesting or academic. Some of these words have slightly different definitions that will change the meaning of a sentence.

One specific type of unclear language is **jargon**, or overly technical terms. Here's an example:

The nomenclature of the *Acer rubrum* is derived from the visual perceptual property of the principal lateral appendages of its stems during the temperate season of autumn.

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Can you tell what this sentence says? It's explaining that red maples get their name from their leaves, which turn red in the fall. However, figuring this out is difficult because of scientific jargon like *Acer rubrum* and *principal lateral appendages*.

Generally, you should avoid jargon unless you are specifically writing for a technical **audience**. If you need to use unfamiliar terms, always include clear definitions.



Concise Words

Concise word choice eliminates unnecessary language from your writing. Consider the following paragraph:

I wanted to see if you would be willing to meet with me for just a couple minutes tomorrow in the afternoon at 2:15 or sometime around then. I would really appreciate being able to hear what you think about the progress I've made with the first draft of the paper that I've been writing. Due to the fact that I am having some trouble with organizing my paragraphs, I am hoping that you can help me. It would be great if I could come to your office after class tomorrow afternoon, but I can also meet at another time if it would work better for you.

This paragraph is wordy. The author circles around the meaning of each sentence, often using four or five words instead of one. Not only are these phrases difficult to read, they are also confusing.

A much more concise version of the paragraph might look like this:

Are you available for a brief meeting around 2:15 tomorrow afternoon? I would like to hear your feedback on my first draft of Essay #3. I am having trouble organizing my paragraphs and would appreciate your help. If another time would be better, please let me know.

- ▶ The basic meaning of both versions is the same; however, the revised version is easier to read.

Keep in mind that a concise sentence is not always short. You don't want to confuse your readers by eliminating important information from your writing. Instead, you should focus on using words that state exactly what you want to say.

Writing Environment: Professional

Effective word choice is critical in any context, and it can play an especially meaningful role when it comes to a job application. Are you using effective, meaningful power verbs in your résumé? These should be strong yet concise. Try to incorporate some of the following power verbs:

- administered
- authored
- built
- coached
- coordinated
- delegated
- designed
- developed
- directed
- executed
- expedited
- facilitated
- formulated
- founded
- initiated
- investigated
- launched
- operated
- orchestrated
- overhauled
- pioneered
- produced
- programmed
- resolved
- revitalized
- scheduled
- spearheaded
- supervised
- systematized

Wordy	Concise
the researchers who work at Columbia University	researchers at Columbia University
owing to the fact that	because
the type of material used for fuel purposes	used for fuel
Andrew Jackson was a man who served	Andrew Jackson served
a story that is strange	a strange story
situations that could be considered exceptions	exceptions
worked as a manager	managed

Helpful Hint

One way to make your writing more concise is to use active voice whenever possible. In **active voice**, the **subject** of a sentence is *doing* the action instead of *receiving* the action. Compare these examples:

This hotel had been highly recommended by my brother.

My brother highly recommended this hotel.

Vivid Words

The final aspect of word choice is using vivid language. When you are sharing information with your audience, you want your words to be interesting and precise.

Think about the following image. How would you describe it?



vivid words will make your descriptions more effective

While the contents of this image could be described with the words *bear* or *animal*, using *polar bear* helps your audience picture your words better.

Nouns and Action Verbs

To make your writing more vivid, use specific **nouns** and **action verbs**.

Vague	Vivid
girl	partner-in-crime
stuff	clutter
pet	iguana
show	<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>

Vague	Vivid
walking	striding
sat	slumped
found	discovered
going	traveling

Adjectives and Adverbs

Another way to write vividly is to use unique **adjectives** and **adverbs**. Words like *nice* and *good* are often overused. Finding a more original descriptive word will keep your writing fresh and interesting.

Vague	Vivid
nice	thoughtful
very	extremely
dark	pitch black
cold	frigid
really	undoubtedly

Use adjectives and adverbs carefully. Usually, a strong noun or **verb** alone is better than a weak noun or verb with an adjective or adverb.

After the game, Andrew ~~slowly walked~~ home.

After the game, Andrew **trudged** home.

Helpful Hint

Good writers will spend time finding the right word. As you write, take note of any words that you feel can be stronger or more vivid and revise them later.

Any type of writing can benefit from vivid language. While you may not use imaginative language in a research paper or resume, you should still choose words that are descriptive and accurate.

Vague	Vivid
a group of experts	researchers at Harvard Medical School
a source	<i>Forbes</i> magazine
quickly went	sprinted
said	accused
those affected by the flood	citizens of Lebanon Valley
people	psychologists

As a group, come up with a list of vivid words to replace the vague words below.

group of people

teachers

happy

hungry

fast

boring

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Lesson Wrap-up

Key Terms

Action Verb: a verb that indicates a physical or mental action

Active Voice: when a sentence is written so that the subject is performing an action

Adjective: a word that describes a noun or pronoun

Adverb: a word that describes a verb, an adjective, or another adverb

Audience: the people who read your writing

Formality: the way a text conforms to certain standards

Jargon: overly technical language

Main Idea: the statement or argument that a text communicates about its topic

Noun: a word that represents a person, place, thing, event, or idea

Phrase: a word group that adds to the meaning of a sentence but does not express a complete thought and usually lacks a subject and verb

Subject: the person, place, thing, event, or idea a sentence is about

Synonym: a word that has the same meaning as another word

Verb: a word that represents an action, relationship, or state of being