

Word Choice

Word choice is the skillful use of language to create meaning. Careful writers seldom settle for the first word that comes to mind. They constantly search for the “just right” word or phrase that will help a reader get the point. They create word pictures in the reader’s mind. Good word choice is precise. Consider the word “big.” You may think this word conveys a definite meaning. But does it? Just think of the many different meanings you could create if you wrote *massive*, *enormous*, *considerable*, *numerous*, *momentous*, *prominent*, *conspicuous*, or *self-important*. Notice that these words do NOT all have the same meaning. Yet each of them could mean **big**. Mark Twain once said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word was the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

1 Just beginning

- ☐ I can just picture my reader saying, “What did you mean by this?”
- ☐ These words are too general and vague to paint pictures: “Something neat happened.” “It was great.” “She was special.” “We had fun.” “We liked to do things and stuff.”
- ☐ Some of my words are mistaken--oops, I mean, misused.
- ☐ I use the same words over and over; it’s just those same words, over and over. They’re words, but they’re the same. And I use them over and over until my paper is over.

3 On my way - - ready for serious revision

- ☐ These words get the general message across. But I don’t see many “quotable moments.”
- ☐ My reader will figure out what I mean, but I’m not stretching here.
- ☐ I’m settling for basic meaning. It’s clear. But it could use imagination, flair, pizzazz.
- ☐ Did I write to impress? Well, I may have engaged in the practice of jargonistic over-inflated expressionism for the purpose of creating an impression. Did it facilitate your engagement--or generate decline in your attention quotient?
- ☐ Instead of settling for “The sun set,” I could have said “The sun sagged into the outstretched arms of the trees.”
- ☐ Tired clichés are like little anchors in my paper: “Bright and early,” “Quick as a flash.” A few original phrases—“Freeze drying is a sort of mummification of the 90s”—breathe life into the text.

5 That’s it! Fresh, original, precise. Every word counts.

- ☐ I searched. I stretched. I found just the right words and phrases to make my meaning clear.
- ☐ Look at my energetic verbs: *leaped*, *raged*, *tumbled*, *flailed*, *quaked*, *moped*, *launched*, *pitched*, *shrieked*, *wheedled*, *nudged*.
- ☐ Some words or phrases will linger in your memory...”The pond was alive with frogs.” “I went headfirst into murky, shadowy waters.” “Not everything about chocolate marshmallows is sweet.”
- ☐ The words I’ve chosen will help my reader picture what I’m talking about, and understand my message.
- ☐ Not a word is misused. Every word carries its weight.
- ☐ I’ve considered my reader, and used words that will be appealing, informative, and understandable. You might even learn a new word or two reading this.
- ☐ No clichés, no redundancy--except for effect. I rejected jargon in favor of language that speaks to readers.

“Don’t say dog. Say cocker spaniel. Don’t say house. Say cottage. Or vicarage. Or split-level. Or shack. Avoid general statements filled with lackluster parts of speech. Be concrete wherever you can. It’s not a fighter plane; it’s an F16.... A mist that ‘curls’ around a boat is more intriguing than one that simply ‘covers’ it.... A piano that sits in the middle of the room ‘glowing from a rubdown of cactus oil’ is a piano I won’t soon forget.” -- David L. Carroll, *A Manual of Writer's Tricks*