Choosing Effective Words

The English language is full of words, and no two words have the exact same meaning. To write effectively, writers must consider the weight that each word carries and the subtle differences between synonyms. This allows the writer to communicate more effectively while making the writing more exciting.

Exploring Shades of Meaning

Synonyms often differ in their shades of meaning. While two words can have the same definition, each might present a negative, positive, or neutral implication.

The following bolded words are listed as synonyms in *Webster's Thesaurus*. However, they carry different shades of meaning to accommodate different circumstances.

- Neutral: As I spoke to the man, I realized he was a **modest** person.
- Positive: The actor remained **humble**, despite his sudden fame.
- Negative: None of us felt safe fighting alongside such a **meek** warrior.

These subtleties are important when writing about emotion as well, for the intensity of words can make a paper more or less credible and, therefore, more or less effective. Writers can adjust the intensity of their words by choosing between synonyms. This is particularly important when trying to illustrate emotion.

- Low intensity: I was **startled** when I noticed the snake in the front yard.
- Moderate intensity: My dog stood at my side, **shaken** at the sight of the creature.
- High intensity: My mother stood **petrified** as the snake slithered across her shoe.

Also, the writer must be conscious of the weight of adjectives before using them. This weight is often felt by the audience.

- Mild: She may claim innocence, but there is a **considerable** amount of evidence against her.
- Moderate: The **significant** evidence stacked against her gave the defense good reason to worry.
- Heavy: She had no chance after the prosecutor presented an **endless** amount of evidence.

Notes on Using a Thesaurus

A thesaurus offers synonyms of words. Although some dictionaries provide explanations of usage among synonyms, a thesaurus provides only a list of synonyms. Therefore, the writer must beware of the shades of meaning between the synonyms before using them. This is why a thesaurus is best used with a dictionary. Take, for example, the word *hard* in a sentence that describes something difficult: "The task was hard." The following are synonyms taken from the thesaurus entry for *hard*.

- × The task was **firm**. (No definition of *firm* implies difficulty.)
- × The task was **consolidated**. (Again, no definition of *consolidated* shows difficulty.)
- ✓ The task was **arduous**. (This makes sense. The definition of *arduous* is "hard to accomplish or achieve," and this definition perfectly matches our description of the task at hand.)

Warning The thesaurus included in word processing programs often suggests synonyms without regarding their connotations. Using these suggestions without understanding the definition of the word can result in improper word usage. If you do not know the word that the program suggests, be especially sure to look up its definition and any usage notes in the dictionary.

Diction

In order to control the shades of meaning when writing a paper, effective writers pay close attention to their choice and use of words, or **diction**. By attending to diction, writers can control what message they communicate through their writing and how the audience will receive that message. In order to use good diction, one must be aware of the **denotation** and **connotation** of a word.

Denotation: the exact, literal meaning of a word.
- The definition of a word is provided by a dictionary.
- The denotation must match what the author means to say. This becomes a concern when choosing among homonyms or words with various prefixes and suffixes.
    - × "The king **rained** for fifty years."
    - ✓ "The king **reigned** for fifty years."
    (**note: These are the types of words that Spell Check usually misses*.)
- Many words have definitions that have evolved over time. Pay attention to *usage labels*, often in italics next to a definition, which mark slang, archaic or obsolete words, disparaging words, or words with a standard usage. These might also help explain a word's connotation. For example, according to *Webster's* Dictionary, the definition of the word *stamp* that means "to extinguish or destroy by or as if by stamping with the foot" is usually used with the word *out*, as in "**Stamp out** that burning match."
- Sometimes a definition can be better understood through its *etymology*, or the history of the word and its usage. For example, the word *detritus* is "loose material . . . that results directly from disintegration." If you look at its etymology, you will find that the word comes from the Latin *detritus*, the past participle of the verb *deterere*, which means "to deteriorate."

Connotation: the associations or emotions that a word carries.
- These associations can be different for different audiences. For example, spending a weekend being "lazy" might sound more or less appealing to different people.
- In some dictionaries, a word is used in a phrase or sentence to reveal its connotation. For instance, the word *plaintive* means "expressive of suffering or woe." The dictionary illustrates how this word is used in context by providing the phrase "a **plaintive** sigh."
- The connotation may also be revealed by researching the word's etymology. For example, the word *meticulous* means "marked by extreme or excessive care in the consideration or treatment of details." The word comes from the Latin *meticulosus*, an irregular form of *metus*, which means "fear." Therefore, we can understand that calling someone *meticulous* suggests that person is careful as if he or she were frightened.

Final Note

Choosing "bigger" words can mean choosing more effective words. However, when you replace a word in a paper, it can also change the message you are trying to communicate, affect your audience, or alter the presented facts. Do not be afraid to branch out, but be sure to choose a word that accurately reflects your meaning and understand why it is a good replacement. This will enhance your writing and increase your vocabulary for future use.