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 meticulous, 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.