

17.3 Choosing Precise Wording

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand connotations of words and choose words with connotations that work best for your purposes.
2. Incorporate specific and concrete words as well as figurative language into your writing.
3. Recognize and avoid clichés and improperly used words.

By using precise wording, you can most accurately relay your thoughts. Some strategies that can help you put your thoughts into words include focusing on denotations and connotations, balancing specific and concrete words with occasionally figurative language, and being on guard against clichés and misused words.

Focusing on Both Denotations and Connotations

Consider that the words “laid-back” and “lackadaisical” both mean “unhurried and slow-moving.” If someone said you were a “laid-back” student, you would likely be just fine with that comment, but if someone said you were a “lackadaisical” student, you might not like the connotation. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs all have both denotations and connotations. The denotation is the definition of a word. The connotation is the emotional sense of a word. For example, look at these three words:

- excited
- agitated
- flustered

The three words all mean to be stirred emotionally. In fact, you might see one of the words as a definition of another one of them. And you would definitely see the three words in a common list in a thesaurus. So the denotations for the three words are about the same. But the connotations are quite different. The word “excited” often has a positive, fun underlying meaning; “agitated” carries a sense of being upset; and “flustered” suggests a person is somewhat out of control. When you are choosing a word to use, you should first think of a word based on its denotation. Then you should consider if the connotation fits your intent. For more on using a dictionary or thesaurus to enhance and add precision to your word choices, see [Section 17.4 "Using the Dictionary and Thesaurus Effectively"](#).

Choosing Specific and Concrete Words

You will always give clearer information if you write with specific words rather than general words.

Look at the following example and think about how you could reword it using specific terms. Then check out the following revision to see one possible option.

Examples

Original: The **animals** got out and ruined the **garden produce**.

Revision: The *horses* got out and ruined the *tomatoes and cucumbers*.

Another way to make your writing clearer and more interesting is to use concrete words rather than abstract words. Abstract words do not have physical properties. But concrete words evoke senses of taste, smell, hearing, sight, and touch. For example, you could say, “My shoe feels odd.” This statement does not give a sense of why your shoe feels odd since odd is an abstract word that doesn’t suggest any physical characteristics. Or you could say, “My shoe feels wet.” This statement gives you a sense of how your shoe feels to the touch. It also gives a sense of how your shoe might look as well as how it might smell. Look at the following example and think about how you could reword it using concrete words. Then check out the following revision to see one possible option.

Examples

Original: The horses **got** out and **ruined** the tomatoes and cucumbers.

Revision: The horses *stampeded* out and *squished and squirted* the tomatoes and cucumbers.

Study this table for some additional examples of words that provide clarity to writing.

General Words	Specific Words
children	Tess and Abby

animals	dogs
food	cheeseburger and a salad

Abstract Words	Concrete Words
noise	clanging and squealing
success	a job I like and enough money to live comfortably
civility	treating others with respect

Enhancing Writing with Figurative Language

Figurative language is a general term that includes writing tools such as **alliteration**, **analogies**, **hyperbole**, **idioms**, **metaphors**, **onomatopoeia**, **personification**, and **similes**. By using figurative language, you can make your writing both more interesting and easier to understand.

Figurative Language

Alliteration: Repetition of single letters or sets of letters.

Effect: Gives a poetic, flowing sound to words.

Example: Dana danced down the drive daintily.

Analogy: The comparison of familiar and unfamiliar ideas or items by showing a feature they have in common.

Effect: Makes an unfamiliar idea or item easier to understand.

Example: Writing a book is *like raising a toddler*. It takes all your time and attention, but you'll enjoy every minute of it!

Hyperbole: A greatly exaggerated point.

Effect: Emphasizes the point.

Example: I must have written *a thousand pages* this weekend.

Idiom: A group of words that carries a meaning other than the actual meanings of the words.

Effect: A colorful way to send a message.

Example: I think this assignment will be *a piece of cake*.

Metaphor: An overall comparison of two ideas or items by stating that one is the other.

Effect: Adds the connotations of one compared idea to the other compared idea.

Example: This shirt *is a rag*.

Onomatopoeia: A single word that sounds like the idea it is describing.

Effect: A colorful way to describe an idea while adding a sense of sound.

Example: The jazz band was known for its *wailing* horns and *clattering* drums.

Personification: Attributing human characteristics to nonhuman things.

Effect: Adds depth such as humor, drama, or interest.

Example: The *spatula told me* that the grill was just a little too hot today.

Simile: Using the word “like” or “as” to indicate that one item or idea resembles another.

Effect: A colorful way to explain an item or idea.

Example: Hanging out with you is *like eating watermelon* on a summer day.

Using Clichés Sparingly

Clichés are phrases that were once original and interesting creations but that became so often used that they have ceased to be interesting and are now viewed as overworked. If you have a tendency to use a cliché or see one while you are proofreading, replace it with plain language instead.

Example

I'm loose as a goose today.

Replace cliché: I'm very relaxed today.

Table 17.2 A Few Common Clichés

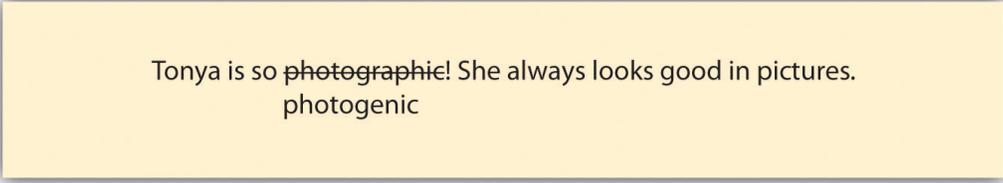
as fresh as a daisy	as slow as molasses	as white as snow
beat around the bush	being led down the primrose path	big as life
bottomless pit	busy as a bee	can't see the forest for the trees
chip off the old block	dead of winter	dirt cheap
don't upset the apple cart	down to earth	flat as a pancake
for everything there is a season	from feast to famine	go with the flow
gone to pot	green with envy	growing like a weed
heaven on earth	here's mud in your eye	in a nutshell
in the doghouse	just a drop in the bucket	knock on wood
light as a feather	like a duck out of water	made in the shade
muddy the water	naked as a jaybird	nutty as a fruitcake
old as dirt	our neck of the woods	plain as the nose on your face
raking in the dough	sick as a dog	stick in the mud
stubborn as a mule	sweet as apple pie	thorn in my side
two peas in a pod	under the weather	walks on water
water under the bridge	when pigs fly	

Guarding against Misusing Words

If you are uncertain about the meaning of a word, look the word up before you use it. Also, if your spellchecker identifies a misspelled word, don't automatically accept the suggested replacement word. Make an informed decision about each word you use.

Look at the [Figure 17.1](#).

Figure 17.1



Tonya is so ~~photographic~~! She always looks good in pictures.
photogenic

Equipment and memories can be photographic, but to look good in pictures is to be photogenic. To catch an error of this nature, you clearly have to realize the word in question is a problem. The truth is, your best chance at knowing how a wide range of words should be used is to read widely and frequently and to pay attention to words as you read.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Words have both denotations and connotations, and you need to focus on both of these meanings when you choose your words.
- Specific words, such as “fork” or “spoon” instead of “silverware,” and concrete words, such as a “piercing siren” instead of a “loud sound,” create more interesting writing.
- Figurative language, including alliteration, analogies, hyperbole, idioms metaphors, onomatopoeia, personification, and similes, helps make text more interesting and meaningful.
- Both clichés and improperly used words detract from your writing. Reword clichés using straightforward language. Eliminate improperly used words by researching words about which you are not sure.

EXERCISES

1. Fill in the blank in this sentence with a word that carries a connotation suggesting Kelly was still full of energy after her twenty laps:

Kelly ____ out of the pool at the end of her twenty laps.

2. Identify the general word used in this sentence and replace it with a specific word:

I put my clothes somewhere and can't find them.

3. Identify the abstract word used in this sentence and replace it with a concrete word:

I smelled something strong when I opened the refrigerator door.

4. Identify the cliché used in the following sentence and rewrite the sentence using straightforward language:

We should be up and running by ten o'clock tomorrow morning.

5. Identify the misused word in the following sentence and replace it with a correct word:

I'd rather walk then have to wait an hour for the bus.

6. Write a sentence using one of the types of figurative language presented in Section 17.3.3 "Enhancing Writing with Figurative Language".

7. Over the course of a week, record any instances of clichés or trite, overused expressions you hear in conversations with friends, coworkers, or family; in music, magazines, or newspapers; on television, film, or the Internet; or in your own language. Share your list with members of your group or the class as a whole.