

Using the Dictionary and Thesaurus Effectively

Before concluding a written assignment, it is a good idea to use your word processor's spell-check feature.

KEY POINTS

- Spell-check features on word processors are helpful tools, but will not catch all mistakes.
- Thesauruses can help add variety to dry prose by helping you identify words with similar meanings.
- Always use a dictionary to confirm the meaning of any word about which you are unsure.
- Diction is important since it refers to the writer's or speaker's distinctive vocabulary choices and style, and impacts word choice and syntax.

TERMS

- thesaurus
A publication, usually in the form of a book, that provides synonyms (and sometimes antonyms) for the words of a given language.
- dictionary
A reference work with a list of words from one or more languages, normally ordered alphabetically and explaining each word's meaning and sometimes containing information on its etymology, usage, translations and other data.

EXAMPLES

- "When you barge in, you may find theirs a whole in there barge!" Spell-check will not always catch your spelling or usage mistake, as is the case in the their/there distinction above. Be sure to read over your own work, and when necessary, consult a dictionary to ensure words are being used properly. In addition, consult a thesaurus to add variety to your prose, for example replacing the second "barge" in the example with "boat."

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Before concluding any written assignment, it's a good idea to utilize your word processor's spell-check feature in order to identify any possibly overlooked spelling mistakes in your work. Although automated spell-checking is helpful, a real-live human can often catch errors that computer software will miss because people are more capable of understanding words in context. For example, spell-check software can't always tell whether "their," "there" or "they're" fits in a specific sentence, but aperson always can. Before concluding your written work, therefore, it is helpful to print it out and read it over, which will give you a new perspective on your writing.

Always use a dictionary to confirm the meaning of any word about which you are unsure. Although the built-in dictionary that comes with your word processor is a great time-saver, it falls far short of college-edition dictionaries, or the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). If spell-check suggests bizarre corrections for one of your words, it could be that you know a word it does not. When in doubt, always check a dictionary to be sure.

Vocabulary Choice and Style

Diction is important since it refers to the writer's or the speaker's distinctive vocabulary choices and style of expression in a poem or story. However, diction can also mean the art of speaking so that each word is clearly heard and understood to its fullest complexity and extremity, and concerns pronunciation and tone, rather than word choice and style. Diction also impacts word choice and syntax.

If it feels like you keep repeating a word throughout your writing, pull out a thesaurus for ideas on different, more creative choices. A thesaurus can add some color and depth to a piece that may otherwise seem repetitive

and mundane. However, make sure that the word you substitute has the intended meaning you wish to convey. Thesauruses provide words with similar meanings, not identical meanings. If you are unsure about the precise meaning of a replacement word, look up the new word in a dictionary.