

17.2 Using Appropriate Language

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Be aware that some words are commonly confused with each other.
2. Recognize and use appropriate words, taking care to avoid jargon or slang.
3. Write in a straightforward manner and with the appropriate level of formality.

As a writer, you do not want inappropriate word choice to get in the way of your message. For this reason, you need to strive to use language that is accurate and appropriate for the writing situation. Learn for yourself which words you tend to confuse with each other. Omit **jargon** (technical words and phrases common to a specific profession or discipline) and **slang** (invented words and phrases specific to a certain group of people), unless your audience and purpose call for such language. Avoid using outdated words and phrases, such as “dial the number.” Be straightforward in your writing rather than using **euphemisms** (a gentler, but sometimes inaccurate, way of saying something). Be clear about the level of formality needed for each different piece of writing and adhere to that level.

Focusing on Easily Confused Words

Words in homophone sets are often mistaken for each other. (See [Chapter 19 "Mechanics", Section 19.1.3 "Homophones"](#) for more about homophones.) [Table 17.1 "Commonly Confused Words"](#) presents some examples of commonly confused words other than homophones. You will notice that some of the words in the table have similar sounds that lead to their confusion. Other words in the table are confused due to similar meanings. Keep your personal list handy as you discover pairings of words that give you trouble.

Table 17.1 Commonly Confused Words

affect	effect	good	well
all ready	already	lay	lie
allusion	illusion	leave	let
among	between	ordinance	ordnance
are	our	precede	proceed
award	reward	quiet	quite

breath	breathe	quote	quotation
can	may	sit	set
conscience	conscious	statue	statute
desert	dessert	that	which
emigrate	immigrate	through	thorough
especially	specially	who	whom
explicit	implicit		

Writing without Jargon or Slang

Jargon and slang both have their places. Using jargon is fine as long as you can safely assume your readers also know the jargon. For example, if you are a lawyer, and you are writing to others in the legal profession, using legal jargon is perfectly fine. On the other hand, if you are writing for people outside the legal profession, using legal jargon would most likely be confusing, and you should avoid it. Of course, lawyers must use legal jargon in papers they prepare for customers. However, those papers are designed to navigate within the legal system.

You are, of course, free to use slang within your personal life, but unless you happen to be writing a sociolinguistic study of slang itself, it really has no place in academic writing. Even if you are writing somewhat casual responses in an online discussion for a class, you should avoid using slang or other forms of abbreviated communication common to IM (instant messaging) and texting.

Choosing to Be Straightforward

Some writers choose to control meaning with flowery or pretentious language, euphemisms, and **double-talk**. All these choices obscure direct communication and therefore have no place in academic writing. Study the following three examples that clarify each of these misdirection techniques.

Technique	Example	Misdirection Involved	Straightforward Alternative
Flowery or pretentious language	Your delightful invitation arrived completely out of the blue, and I would absolutely love to attend such a significant and important event, but we already have a commitment.	The speaker seems to be trying very hard to relay serious regrets for having to refuse an invitation. But the overkill makes it sound insincere.	We are really sorry, but we have a prior commitment. I hope you have a great event.
		The speaker wants to talk	

Euphemisms	My father is follicly challenged.	about his or her father's lack of hair without having to use the word "bald."	My father is bald.
Double-talk	I was unavoidably detained from arriving to the evening meeting on time because I became preoccupied with one of my colleagues after the close of the work day.	The speaker was busy with a colleague after work and is trying to explain being tardy for an evening meeting.	I'm sorry to be late to the meeting. Work ran later than usual.

Presenting an Appropriate Level of Formality

Look at the following three sentences. They all three carry roughly the same meaning. Which one is the best way to write the sentence?

1. The doctor said, "A full eight hours of work is going to be too much for this patient to handle for at least the next two weeks."
2. The doctor said I couldn't work full days for the next two weeks.
3. my md said 8 hrs of wrk R 2M2H for the next 2 wks.

If you said, "It depends," you are right! Each version is appropriate in certain situations. Every writing situation requires you to make a judgment regarding the level of formality you want to use. Base your decision on a combination of the subject matter, the audience, and your purpose for writing. For example, if you are sending a text message to a friend about going bowling, the formality shown in example three is fine. If, on the other hand, you are sending a text message to that same friend about the death of a mutual friend, you would logically move up the formality of your tone at least to the level of example two.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Some words are confused because they sound alike, look alike, or both. Others are confused based on similar meanings.
- Confine use of jargon to situations where your audience recognizes it.
- Use slang and unofficial words only in your informal, personal writing.
- Write in a straightforward way without using euphemisms or flowery language to disguise what you are saying.
- Make sure you examine the subject matter, audience, and purpose to determine whether a piece of writing should be informal, somewhat casual, or formal.

EXERCISES

1. Choose five of the commonly confused words from Table 17.1 "Commonly Confused Words" that are sometimes problems for you. Write a definition for each word and use each word in a sentence.
2. Start a computer file of words that are a problem for you. For each word, write a definition and a sentence. Add to the file whenever you come across another word that is confusing for you. Use the file for a quick reference when you are writing.
3. List five examples of jargon from a field of your choice. Then list two situations in which you could use the jargon and two situations in which you should not use the jargon.
4. Work with a small group. Make a list of at least fifty slang words or phrases. For each word or phrase, indicate where, as a college student, you could properly use the slang. Share your final project with the class.
5. Work with a partner. Write five sentences that include euphemisms or flowery language. Then trade papers and rewrite your partner's sentences using straightforward language.
6. Make a list of five situations where you should use very formal writing and five situations where more casual or even very informal writing would be acceptable.