

Choosing Precise Wording

You can increase the clarity of your writing by using concrete, specific words rather than abstract, general ones.

KEY POINTS

- When possible, replace vague generalizations with more specific and concise wording. This clarifies for your reader the topic of your paper and the conceptual plane of your ensuing argument.
- You can increase the clarity, and therefore the usability, of your writing by using concrete, specific words rather than abstract, general ones.
- Your objective when choosing words is not to avoid abstract general words altogether, but rather to avoid using them when your readers will want more specific ones.
- By using the special terms of your field accurately, you show your fellow specialists that you are adept in it. Alternatively, you should avoid using technical terms your readers won't understand.
- If you must use them, explain unfamiliar terms by giving a synonym, a description, an analogy or a definition.
- Be especially sensitive to the connotation and register of words. Connotation is the extended or suggested meaning of a word has beyond its literal meaning. Register identifies a word's association with certain situations or contexts.

TERMS

- abstract
An abstract is a brief summary of a research article, thesis, review, conference proceeding, or any in-depth analysis of a particular subject or discipline, and is often used to help the reader quickly ascertain the paper's purpose.
- register
A style of a language used in a particular context
- connotation
A meaning of a word or phrase that is suggested or implied, as opposed to a denotation, or literal meaning. A characteristic of words or phrases, or of the contexts that words and phrases are used in.

EXAMPLES

- Here is an example of a draft of a sentence: "The short story is about working. " Here is an example of the revised sentence: "The short story is about the physical toll that accompanies mining work. "
- Here is an example of the revised sentence: "The short story is about the physical toll that accompanies mining work. "

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Through precise word selection, you can increase the clarity of your argument by enabling your readers to grasp your intended meaning quickly and accurately. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that your word choices affect a reader's attitudes toward your presentation and your subject matter. Therefore, you also need to choose words that will increase your writing's persuasiveness.

General vs. Specific Words

Almost anything can be described either in relatively abstract, general words or in relatively concrete, specific ones. You can increase the clarity of your writing by choosing the latter route. Concrete words help your readers understand precisely what you mean as you present your argument. For example:

- General: Her employer produces consumer goods.

- Specific: Her employer manufactures cell phones.

Of course, abstract and general terms do have other important purposes. In scientific, technical and other specialized fields, for instance, writers often need to make general points, describe general circumstances or provide general guidance for action. Your objective when choosing words is not to avoid abstract, general words altogether, but rather to avoid using them when you could be more specific.

Word Accuracy

Regardless of the types of words you use, you must use all words accurately. Usage errors can distract readers from your argument. How can you ensure that words are used accurately? Unfortunately, there is no easy way, but there are some solutions. You can revisit a text that uses the word and observe how the word is used in that instance. Additionally, you can consult a dictionary whenever you are uncertain. Be especially careful when using words that are not yet part of your usual vocabulary.

Connotation and Register

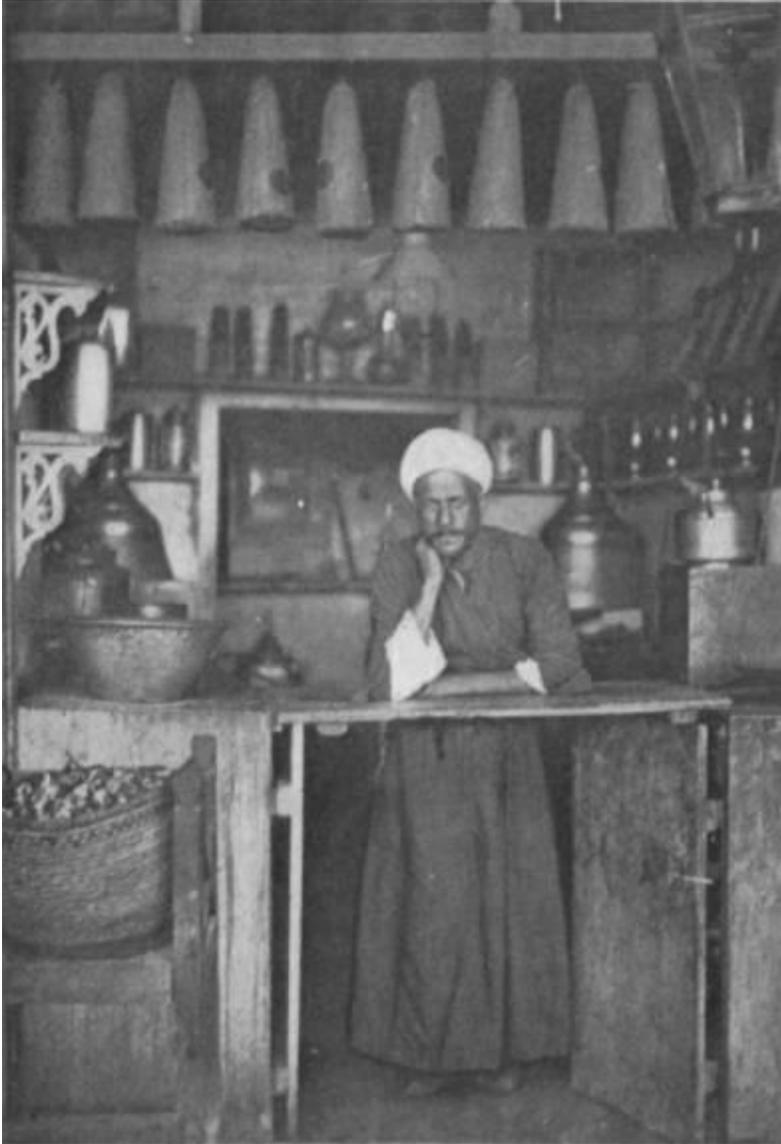
In addition to the literal or dictionary meanings of a word, writers must also consider the associations that readers might make to the word, such as its connotation and register.

Connotation is the extended or suggested meaning of a word beyond its literal meaning. For example, flatfoot and police detective are often thought to be synonyms, but they connote very different things: flatfoot suggests a plodding, perhaps not very bright cop, while police detective suggests a trained professional.

Verbs, too, have connotations. For instance, to suggest that someone has overlooked a key fact is not the same as to insinuate it. To devote your time to working on a client's project is not the same as to spend your time on it. The connotations of your words can shape your audience's perception of your argument. For example:

- Our sales team is constantly trying to locate new markets for our various product lines.
- Our sales team is constantly driving to locate new markets for our various product lines.

Register refers to a word's association with certain situations or contexts. In a restaurant ad, for example, we might expect to see the claim that it offers amazingly delicious food. However, we would not expect to see a research company boast in a proposal for a government contract that it is capable of conducting amazingly good studies. Here, the word "amazingly" is in the register of consumer advertising, but not in the register of research proposals.



[Our sales team is constantly trying to locate new markets for our various product lines.](#)

The title demonstrates the necessity of choosing words carefully when writing. As it stands, the sales team is only "constantly trying," and it is unclear whether they are successful or not. Being aware of the connotation and register of the words you choose in your writing will help increase your writing's clarity.

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KEY TERM GLOSSARY

argument

In philosophy and logic, an argument is an attempt to persuade someone of something by giving reasons or evidence for accepting a particular conclusion. An attempt to persuade someone of something, by giving reasons or evidence for accepting a particular conclusion.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Raising the Stakes of Your Argument](#)
- [Anticipating Objections](#)
- [Assembling Your Argument](#)

audience

A group of people within hearing; specifically a group of people listening to a performance, speech etc.; the crowd seeing a stage performance. The readership of a book or other written publication.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Anticipating Potential Objections](#)
- ["Who Cares?"](#)
- [Components of a Speech](#)

claim

A new statement of truth made about something, usually when the statement has yet to be verified.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Generating Further Questions](#)
- [Establishing Why Your Claims Matter](#)
- [Creating Paragraphs](#)

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.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Using the Dictionary and Thesaurus Effectively](#)
- [Mastering Commonly Misspelled Words](#)
- [Editing and Proofreading](#)

fact

Something concrete used as a basis for further interpretation.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Writing Concisely](#)
- [Marking Words with Italics](#)
- [Turning Your Working Hypothesis into a Claim](#)

purpose

A result that is desired; an intention. An object to be reached; a target; an aim; a goal.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [General Purpose](#)
- [Specific Purpose](#)
- [Reading Generously to Understand, Then Critically to Evaluate](#)

research

Research is original and planned investigation undertaken with the prospect of gaining new scientific or technical knowledge and understanding. Diligent inquiry or examination to seek or revise facts, principles, theories, applications, et cetera; laborious or continued search after truth. Diligent inquiry or examination to seek or revise facts, principles, theories, and applications. Diligent inquiry or examination to seek or revise facts, principles, theories, and applications; laborious or continued search after truth.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Reporting R&D Cost](#)
- [Using Sources to Support Your Argument](#)
- [Deciphering the Conversation](#)

subject

A human research subject is a living individual about whom a research investigator (whether a professional or a student) obtains data. In a clause: the word or word group (usually a noun phrase) that is dealt with. In active clauses with verbs denoting an action, the subject and the actor are usually the same. A particular area of study.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Subjects of Informative Speeches](#)
- [Making Subject and Verbs Agree](#)
- [Misleading the Subjects](#)

synonym

A word or phrase with a meaning that is the same as, or very similar to, another word or phrase.

Appears in this related concept:

- [Using Appropriate Language](#)

verb

A word that indicates an action, event, or state.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Naming Your Naysayers](#)
- [Choosing Appropriate Verb Tenses](#)
- [Making Sure Subjects and Verbs Agree](#)

vocabulary

The words of a language collectively.

Appears in these related concepts:

- [Avoiding Repetitiveness](#)
- [Using Signal Verbs that Fit the Action](#)
- [Class Discussions](#)

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