

# Editing for Word Choice

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial focuses on how writers edit their work to optimize their word choices. Writers must consider how their choices (including the use of slang, cliches, and euphemisms) impact sentence clarity and audience comprehension. The relationship between word choice and intended meaning is also examined.

This tutorial considers editing for word choice in five parts:

1. Editing for Word Choice
2. Editing for Audience
3. Editing for Clarity
4. Editing for Slang, Informality, Cliches, and Euphemisms
5. Editing for Meaning

## 1. Editing for Word Choice

Editing is a process of improving the sentences, word choices, and style of a written work. Word choice can have a strong effect on the tone and style of a written work, as well as how the audience receives and responds to it.

When editing for word choice, writers should begin by looking for words that are used repeatedly. It's common for writers to use repetitive language when drafting, but repetition can distract readers and can make a work less interesting. Writers should remove unnecessary repetition *before* editing is complete.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Elimination of repetition does not include "the," "a," "he," "she," "we," and other small but important words. Larger, more noticeable words, especially those related to the subject, should not be repeated excessively.

When re-reading a draft, it's a good idea to mark repeated words and replace some of them with alternatives. This is especially worthwhile when repeated words appear close together in the draft.

## 2. Editing for Audience

When writers edit their work for word choice, they must consider the intended audience. They should identify the audience, and ask themselves whether they have made word choices that will appeal to it *and* support the goals of the work.

Writers must also consider how emotionally charged their word choices are and whether the level of formality is appropriate. They also must anticipate the reading level of the audience.

➡ **EXAMPLE** A college student in an advanced education course was assigned to write a speech to be given to high school freshman about entering college. It would not be a good idea for the student to use words and phrases that many in the audience may not understand (e.g., initiative, curriculum, extenuating circumstances, etc.). Simpler synonyms of those words and phrases (e.g., program, coursework, emergency situation, etc.) would be more effective. If the same student was writing a proposal for a new college course, he or she should not include informal language that the Supervisory Committee is unlikely to appreciate (e.g., a statement indicating that the proposed class would be better than all of the stupid classes currently offered).

When editing for audience, problems are often not related to the words themselves, but to how they are used. Consider the tone you use to address a particular audience. You must always make word choices that take audience understanding and expectations into account.

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## 3. Editing for Clarity

Beginning writers sometimes use words that are vague or overly complex. They also allow jargon to slip into their writing. This can happen when beginning writers assume that these words will sound more academic, formal, and mature to readers. Although it's good to make use of your vocabulary when writing, it's usually best to avoid words that may be unfamiliar to the audience or unnecessary for the context.

One of the goals of any writing project is to establish and maintain a clear, natural voice. The best writers eliminate vagueness and uncertainty from their work by improving their word choices as they draft. They avoid excessive formality, which can inhibit meaning instead of conveying it.

Although it is usually best to replace words that seem overly formal with terms that are simpler or more accurate, sometimes formal terms and jargon *are* the best word choices. This can be true when they have a special meaning or appeal for a particular audience, or simply because they do the best job of conveying the intended meaning.



With respect to word choice, less is usually more.

Read the following paragraph. Can it be improved by better word choices and/or removal of unnecessary words?

Many people consider the president's apparent inability to render a timely decision regarding the upcoming deadline for funding privatized medicine allowances a grievous error, or mayhaps an intentional slight in the direction of the multitude of taxpayers who would be impacted.

This writer made some odd and unnecessary word choices. Following is an edited version of the paragraph. Can you spot the changes?

Many people consider the president's apparent inability to decide whether or not to fund privatized medicine allowances a mistake, or perhaps an intentional slight to the people whose current standards of living would be impacted.

Here are the changes that were made:

- The unnecessarily complex phrasing of the first sentence was simplified.
- "Mayhaps" is an archaic term that is inappropriate for the paragraph; it was changed to "perhaps."
- The phrase "in the direction of the multitude of taxpayers" was shortened to "to the people."
- Simply saying these people would be impacted was too vague. The additional detail provides context for the argument.

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## 4. Editing for Slang, Informality, Cliches, and Euphemisms

Beginning writers sometimes use words and phrases that are inappropriate for academic writing. Slang, including online "shorthands" (e.g., "LOL" for "laugh out loud"), are almost always inappropriate. Slang is language that does not conform to standard English usage.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Don't refer to someone as "emo" in an essay, even if that's the quickest way to describe that person. Similarly, don't refer to a car as a "ride," or to a police officer as a "cop," or to anything but liquid extracted from fruit as "juice." Don't write that someone who behaved erratically was "nuts" — not because your audience wouldn't understand what you've written, but because academic writing uses formal language to communicate with a scholarly audience.

Some instructors (and some assignments) disapprove or disallow the use of contractions (e.g., "won't" or "can't") and the use of the personal pronoun "I" because they are informal. Writers can and do establish a unique, natural voice and style, even when limited to formal terminology.

Sometimes academic writers have stylistic reasons for using slang and other informal language. However, they must be able to defend this usage if/when it is challenged (e.g., by an instructor or other academic reader). All writers working in a scholarly context should remove slang and informal words and phrases from their work, and replace them with terms that meet the standards and expectations of written English (and, when applicable, the requirements of an assignment).

Suppose that a student turned in an essay that began with the following paragraph. Would it benefit from careful editing?

So I was thinking about how you said we should write something to our chief of police and see what the cops in our town are doing to protect us from terrorism, but I decided I don't want to do that. I mean, what's the point in asking something like that, when whatever they're planning they wouldn't

want to tell me anyway, right? So instead I'm writing about their budget, since 1) it's available online, and 2) it's more interesting anyway.

This paragraph introduces the writer's position regarding the subject. However, it does so in a way that is not appropriate for an academic audience. Read the following version, which makes the same argument, but does so in a way that is more appropriate for academic readers.

Though the assignment was to petition the chief of police and ask what measures the local police are taking to protect our town from terrorism, this essay will instead explore a related, and more relevant subject: that of the police department's annual budget. What it reveals about the department's priorities is indicative of their preparations for terrorism and much more.

Editing of the paragraph left the student's position mostly unchanged, but the tone, attitude, and style of the introduction have improved significantly.

## 5. Editing for Meaning

It is important for writers, especially beginning writers or writers who are working in an unfamiliar genre, to carefully check their drafts to ensure that they have used words that they mean to use, and have avoided misspelling and homonym errors. Regarding the latter, homonym errors have become more common as mistyped words that are spelled correctly are skipped by spell-checking programs (e.g., a spell-checking program will not tell you when you've typed "your" instead of "you're").

Writers must be aware of the *connotations* of their words (in addition to the *denotations*), especially when substituting a new word to increase the variety of their word choices.



### HINT

Connotation is the associated meaning of a word; denotation is the technical or dictionary definition of a word. Writers should understand both meanings to control the impact of their words.



### SUMMARY

This tutorial examined editing for word choice. When editing, it is important to consider the audience's requirements and preferences. Editing for clarity, and the need to avoid words that are unfamiliar, unnecessary and/or inappropriate (e.g., slang, informal language, clichés and euphemisms) were also discussed. Editing for meaning, and the need to be aware of the connotations and denotations of words were examined.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall