

Editing for Word Choice

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about different methods of editing for word choice in an essay. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Editing for Word Repetition](#)
2. [Editing Word Choice for Audience](#)
3. [Editing Word Choice for Clarity](#)
4. [Editing for Slang and Informality](#)
5. [Editing Word Choice for Meaning](#)

1. Editing for Word Repetition

In the writing process, **copyediting** is the stage that involves 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 copyediting 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 too much repetition can distract readers and make a work less interesting. Writers should remove unnecessary repetition before copyediting is complete.

Note that 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.



TERM TO KNOW

Copyediting

The act of improving the sentence construction, word choice, and the overall style of an essay or other piece of writing.

2. Editing Word Choice for Audience

When writers edit their work for word choice, they must also consider the intended audience. They should identify this 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. This includes anticipating the reading level of the audience.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that 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, 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 “lame classes” currently offered).

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

3. Editing Word Choice 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?

The reasons for choosing a vegan lifestyle are multitudinous. Even if an individual chooses an offshoot of veganism, such as flexitarianism, the health and environmental benefits are still considerable. Indubitably, eating meat causes more harm than it does good. Henceforth, individuals should avoid eating meat and other animal products to protect their own health and the health of the environment.

This writer made some odd and unnecessary word choices. Following is an edited version of the paragraph, with the changes bolded:

*The reasons for choosing a vegan lifestyle are **continuously growing**. Even if an individual chooses an offshoot of veganism, such as **eating a mainly vegan diet**, the health and environmental benefits are still considerable. **Undoubtedly**, eating meat causes more harm than it does good. **From now on**, individuals should avoid eating meat and other animal products to protect their own health and the health of the environment.*

4. Editing for Slang and Informality

Beginning writers sometimes use words and phrases that are inappropriate for academic writing. Slang, including online “shorthand” (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 someone who behaved erratically as “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. Still, 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?

Every time you logon, you are representing yourself digitally. For that reason, it's important that you keep your feed free of questionable content. Otherwise, people might unfriend you, or you could lose followers. Or, even worse yet, trolls might start to comment inappropriate and hurtful things. It's just something to think about, IMO.

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 (with the changes in bold), which makes the same argument, in a way that is more appropriate for academic readers.

*Every time you **log in**, you are representing yourself digitally. For that reason, **it is** important that you keep your **profile** free of questionable content. Otherwise, people might **ignore** you, or you could lose **connections**. Or, even worse yet, **bullies** might start to comment inappropriate and hurtful things. **These are important considerations when using social media.***

5. Editing Word Choice 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 “principal” instead of “principle”).

Additionally, writers must consider the **connotations** and **denotations** of their words, especially when substituting a new word to increase the variety of their word choices. As you learned in a previous lesson, denotation is the literal meaning of a word—the dictionary definition, as it is sometimes called. Connotation, meanwhile, is the suggested meaning of a word, based on implication or the cultural or emotional associations attached to the word.

IN CONTEXT

Think about the word “cheap.” This word has a definite denotative meaning, which is simply to represent something that is inexpensive. The connotations of “cheap” are quite different—when talking about clothing quality, “cheap” indicates a lesser quality fabric. When talking about a person's spending habits, someone who is “cheap” doesn't like to spend much.

Other words like “sweet” also have different denotative and connotative meanings. Though “sweet” typically denotes something that tastes sugary, the connotation of the word often indicates something good or positive (e.g., “a sweet deal”). “Pour” is another term like this. Its denotative meaning is liquid flowing in a steady stream, but we often use the connotation of the word “pour” to discuss work pouring in, which indicates too much work is coming in at once.

As you can see, it's important for writers to be aware of both denotative and connotative meanings in order to control the impact of their words.



TERMS TO KNOW

Connotation

The suggested meaning of a word, based on implication, cultural association, or emotional association.

Denotation

The literal meaning or dictionary definition of a word.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the different ways in which you can address word choice during the editing process. **Editing for word repetition** involves removing or replacing words that you repeat too frequently. **Editing word choice for audience** involves considering your target audience and how they might respond to your tone and the words you use. **Editing word choice for clarity** involves removing overly complex words in order to make your point in a more concise way. **Editing for slang and informality** involves ensuring that your words are appropriate for an academic context. Finally, **editing word choice for meaning** involves choosing the right words to convey what you actually intend.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Connotation

The suggested meaning of a word, based on implication, cultural association, or emotional association.

Copyediting

The act of improving the sentence construction, word choice, and the overall style of an essay or other piece of writing.

Denotation

The literal meaning or dictionary definition of a word.