

Effective Word Choice

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the importance of word choice, and how it contributes to the overall effectiveness of your essay. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Word Choice and Style
2. Variety and Avoiding Redundancy
3. Connotation and Denotation

1. Word Choice and Style

Perhaps the biggest factor in determining a writer's style is her word choice. Whenever writers make the decision whether to use long words or short words, obscure words or common words, poetic words or simple words, these choices embody the style of an essay or other piece of writing, and they have a powerful effect on the reader's experience.

Word choice is particularly relevant when words have **synonyms**, which are words that have the same meaning as, or very similar meanings to, other words.

IN CONTEXT

The words "run" and "jog" may share a definition or two, and in some cases, they could be used interchangeably. In other cases, though, switching between them would completely change the meaning of the sentence. For example, you wouldn't want to say that someone was jogging away from a bear.

Take another set of synonyms: the words "party" and "reception." They both have similar meanings and could be used interchangeably in some cases, but they have completely different associated meanings, or connotations, which we will discuss later in this lesson.

As a final example, "use" and "utilize" have the same meaning, but people will read them differently and think differently about a text or writer that uses one rather than the other.

To further understand the relationship between word choice and style, consider the following paragraph:

If you desire a new furry companion, adopting a domestic animal from an adoption facility is a wonderful option. In addition to dogs and cats, many adoption facilities have rabbits, hamsters, and guinea pigs as well. If you have any inquiries about specific animals, facility employees are there to assist you. Adopting from a facility allows you to locate the perfect domestic animal for you and provide it a joyous home.

Notice how this paragraph makes use of some big, complex words. It is a bit dense and formal. However, this next version says much the same thing, but in a different way:

If you want a new furry friend, adopting a pet from an animal shelter is a great choice. Along with dogs and cats, many animal shelters also have rabbits, hamsters, and guinea pigs. If you have any questions about certain pets, shelter employees are there to help you. Adopting from a shelter lets you find the right pet for you and give it a happy home.

What do you think? Both paragraphs are making the same argument and introducing their topic in much the same way, but other than that, they don't have much in common, do they? Swapping a few words for their synonyms - which is essentially what causes the difference between the two paragraphs - can have a huge impact on the reader's experience with a text. As a writer, you need to consider what style you want to display and what words you will use to show it.



TERM TO KNOW

Synonym

A word that has the same meaning as, or a very similar meaning to, another word.

2. Variety and Avoiding Redundancy

When talking extensively about the same subject, it's easy to use the same words over and over again. This is also true for writing, but even more so, because readers tend to be more aware of repetitive words than listeners.

Therefore, even though it's common - and at times unavoidable - for writers to use the same word repeatedly during drafting, writers should strive to vary the terms they use, since it's distracting for readers to see the same word again and again.

One way to do this is to make use of a thesaurus to find synonyms, and a dictionary to make sure the synonyms share the right meaning, though it's important not to go overboard.

Keep in mind that it's also possible to vary words so much that it becomes distracting for readers in a different way, which is just as bad, if not worse, than being repetitive. Sometimes, keeping things simple is best.



BIG IDEA

When choosing synonyms, writers need to make sure to choose words that are similar enough in meaning and feeling to the original word. That is, the words need to match in terms of both connotation and denotation, which you will now learn about in more depth.

3. Connotation and Denotation

So, what are **connotation** and **denotation**? They are the two kinds of meaning that a word can have. 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

As an example of the differences between denotation and connotation, consider the word "organic." This word has many denotative meanings, which vary from genre to genre. For instance, in food circles, "organic" is a label that means no chemical fertilizers or pesticides were used. On the other hand, in chemistry, it means anything that's carbon-based. The connotations of "organic" are quite different— due to advertising, most people think of positive, healthy, or expensive things when they hear or see the word. In contrast, consider the word "artificial." The denotative meaning for this is an imitation or simulation. Yet again, because of advertising and other communications, there tends to be a different cultural connotation for this word— in this case, it's more negative.

Even simpler words like "snake" have different denotative and connotative meanings. Though "snake" simply denotes a kind of animal, there are all kinds of connotations for it: danger, deceit, etc. "Shade" is another term like this. It means shelter from sunlight, but most of us have a positive connotation with the word "shade," even though it can also be used to mean a kind of insult. Now, consider what happens if we make the noun into an adjective. The word "shady" brings about a completely different set of connotative meanings, doesn't it?

It's important for writers to be aware of both the denotative and connotative meanings of the words that they use, not just to avoid embarrassing mistakes, but because this knowledge allows writers to make interesting word choices. It's a kind of freedom to have an active and varied vocabulary, and all writers should be encouraged to strive for it and pay attention to the uses that other writers make of words. That's the only way to learn!



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 that there is a strong relationship between **word choice and style**. The words you choose will heavily influence the style of your writing and the impression that you give to readers. When it comes to word choice, it's also important to consider **variety**. By using a wider variety of carefully chosen words, you will **avoid redundancy** and keep your readers interested in what you have to say.

Finally, you learned that there is a big difference between the **connotation and denotation** of words. While connotation refers to a word's implied, cultural, or emotional meaning, denotation is the more literal definition of a word. It's important to know the difference between these two meanings so that you don't accidentally send your readers the wrong message.

Best of luck in your learning!



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.

Synonym

A word that has the same meaning as, or a very similar meaning to, another word.