

The Role of Language

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how the language used in a text is influenced by the purpose and audience of the writing. You will continue to strengthen your communication skill by examining the role of language. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Connection between Language, Purpose, and Audience

1a. Word Choice

1b. Connotation and Denotation

1c. Level of Formality and Sentence Structure

1. Connection between Language, Purpose, and Audience

As you learned in previous lessons, you produce a piece of text for a reason. Writing always has a purpose or goal and an audience. Those two factors will then strongly influence the kind of language you choose in your writing.

You generally want to make language choices that help your audience to understand your text, as well as to help you meet your goal for that text.

Thus, you'll want to pay attention to a few facets of your language, such as:

- Your vocabulary level
- Meanings of the words you choose
- Degree of formality
- Complexity or simplicity of your sentence structures



Communication: Apply Your Skill

Imagine that Joaquin is in charge of customer relations for a large retail store. He communicates changes to the store that will affect customers, such as mask policies put into place due to COVID-19, new items the store is carrying, and changes in store hours. Considering the store serves a variety of demographics, what should he consider regarding the language and style of his communications?

1a. Word Choice

To navigate those challenges in your writing, start by thinking about the words you choose and the ways you choose them. Word choice refers simply to which words you select in your writing.

Thinking about words and choosing them carefully is one of the hallmarks of a good writer and can help your writing be more effective and successful. Words do a lot of work for your readers, so be careful to select the best words to help your readers understand you and have the kind of responses that you are aiming for.

There are many different ways to say something and thus many different vocabularies that can be chosen for any situation. You want to think about what your audience is going to be able to understand best.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In the previous scenario featuring Joaquin, he will want to use words that are common and around a sixth-grade reading level. Many of the store's customers may speak English as a second language, or have a reading or verbal disability.

Many words and phrases might reveal unintentional (or intentional) bias by the author. Consider a large group of demonstrators – they may be described as “protestors” or “rioters” depending on how much the author sympathizes with the group’s purpose. A changing urban area might be described as “revitalization” or “gentrification,” depending on if the author sees it as a good thing or a bad thing. When selecting such words, be aware not only of how these words convey your feelings but how they might undermine your purpose if they turn the audience against you.

1b. Connotation and Denotation

Although the two terms sound the same, there is a difference between **denotation** and **connotation**. Even when you select words that mean the right thing, you want to also think about what they imply.

Denotation is the literal meaning of a word, or what the dictionary says about it. Connotation, on the other hand, is the associative meaning of the word, or what that word commonly implies or suggests.

You might choose a word that has the correct denotative meaning but creates connotations that don’t match your style or purpose—something that makes your audience think what you don’t want them to think.

Some words have strong emotional connotations, which can be both a pitfall and an opportunity.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The word “fanatical” means zealous or even obsessive. Yet how many times have you heard someone describe themselves as fanatical about a popular band or sports team? The denotation is

negative, but the connotation has softened over time. But, as with any word, be careful how you use it, since it can still be interpreted negatively even if you don't intend it to.



BIG IDEA

A word's connotation and its denotation might come to have very different meanings. This may require you to be very careful about your word choice. There are also words that have similar denotative meanings but connote very different things. Knowing how to use both denotation and connotation can lead to rich and interesting sentences with evocative combinations of words.



TRY IT

The table below shows words and phrases that have the same denotation but with different connotations: one positive, one neutral, and one negative.

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Interested in people	Inquisitive	Nosy
Friendly	Outgoing	Comes on too strong
Unique	Different	Weird
	Assertive	Bossy
Discriminating		Picky
Shrewd	Planful	

Can you complete the table by thinking of words that fit the empty cells?



You might have used “Decisive,” in the first blank, “Particular” in the second, and “Cunning,” in the third, but there are plenty of other possibilities.



TERMS TO KNOW

Denotation

The literal or dictionary definition of a word.

Connotation

The implied or associative meaning of a word.

1c. Level of Formality and Sentence Structure

Now, think about how to put words together. How do you signal different degrees of formality in your writing?

The level of formality you pick, the rules you follow, and how strictly you adhere to those rules, will be based on a few different things:

- Audience needs
- Purpose of the text
- Subject matter

Each of these factors will influence how formal or informal you need to be. If you're writing for a personal audience, you can be informal, whereas if you're writing for an academic or professional audience, you'll likely need to be more formal.

In the case of the latter, you'll want to avoid using "I" and "you" in your writing. You'll pick a more sophisticated vocabulary, temper the emotion of the text, and likely will not include yourself directly in the content.

In the former, you can be much more personally focused and emotional. You can use a casual vocabulary, including slang and contractions, and you can break many rules of grammar for stylistic effect. If you really want, you can use emoticons and exuberant exclamation points to be more friendly and approachable.

As you write and assess your purpose and audience, then, it's wise to look not just at each individual word, but also at the way those words are put together in sentences. In formal writing, longer, more complex sentences are common and even necessary. In contrast, informal writing often features shorter and simpler sentences.



HINT

Writing that is very engaging and enjoyable to read almost always includes a variety of sentence lengths and structures, but the particular ratio of long to short and complex to simple that you use will depend on the audience and purpose.

By considering your audience and purpose of the communication, and adjusting your writing accordingly, your message will be better understood and more meaningful. This is a quality of individuals who have strong communication skills.



WATCH

Having a plan in place is the first step to getting where you want to go in your life and career. In this Sophia Story, discover how President Bill Clinton's speechwriter, John Pollack, uses planning to understand his audience and goal, so he can improve his writing and enact political change.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there is a strong **connection between language, purpose, and audience** in any text. Thus, there are some aspects of language that you as a writer should always consider in relation to your audience and the purpose.

Depending on your audience, the **word choice** in your writing will determine how well your message is understood or received. Likewise, it's important to know the distinction between the **connotation and denotation** of words. While the denotation is the dictionary definition of a word, the connotation is the

commonly implied meaning or association of the word.

The **level of formality and sentence structure** you choose will also depend on your purpose and audience. Some writing may require a more academic style with complexly structured sentences, while other pieces may be more conversational with simple sentences. Finally, you discovered how the practice of adjusting your writing according to purpose and audience will make you a more effective communicator, and thus, a strong asset as an employee.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Connotation

The implied or associative meaning of a word.

Denotation

The literal or dictionary definition of a word.