The Role of Language

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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

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.

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.

📄 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 to, 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 only 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.

📋 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.

Finally, 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.

Best of luck in your learning!

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Connotation

The implied or associative meaning of a word.

Denotation

The literal or dictionary definition of a word.