

# Word Choice, Experimentation, and Style

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of word choice, and how it intersects both style and experimentation. We will discuss the concept of variety in writing and the different kinds of meaning words can have: connotation and denotation.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

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

## 1. Word Choice and Style

Perhaps the biggest factor in determining a writer's style is his or 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 the 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 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 someone was jogging away from the police.

Consider 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 the lesson.

The words "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.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Synonyms

Words that have the same or very similar meanings to other words.

Consider the following paragraphs. They say essentially the same thing, but as you read them, you should notice a fairly significant difference nonetheless:

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 perhaps even an intentional slight in the direction of the multitude of taxpayers who had been waiting with baited breath to discover whether their current standards of living would be maintained. I, for my part, concur with the latter.

Notice how this paragraph makes use of some complex, big words. It's a bit dense, but most readers should still be able to understand the ideas and points being raised. However, consider this next version, which says much the same thing, though in a different way:

Some have said that the fact that Obama hasn't decided if he wants to keep funding single-payer medicine allowance is a mistake. Others think he's insulting the people who depend on it. I, for my part, think the second group is right.

What do you think? Both paragraphs were making the same argument and introducing their topic in much the same way, but other than that, they didn't have much in common, did they? As you can see, swapping a few words for one of their synonyms -- which is essentially the difference between the two paragraphs -- can have a huge impact on the reader's experience with a text. The only questions are, what style do you want to display and what words will you use to show it?

## 2. Word Choice and Experimentation

Though composition teachers might frown on it at times, even within the confines of academic writing, writers have room to experiment. The greater part of creativity is allowing your own personal style to show through in the text. Like a jazz musician putting his or her own creative spin on an already existing song, so, too, can writers. Even beginning writers can put their own creative spin on an already-existing genre of writing. Style is the one realm where writers should feel particularly free to experiment; only by experimenting with different styles and tones, voices and stances, can new writers discover not only what they have to say, but how they're capable of saying it.



#### HINT

That being said, writers should be mindful of the expectations of their audience and the requirements of their assignments, even when experimenting.

Experimentation, by its very nature, is a riskier path to tread than more conventional approaches to writing. Even so, experimenting with style is always an option, in part because writers can cut, revise, and adjust their work as they go along through the writing process.

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## 3. 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 during drafting, writers should strive to vary the terms they use, since it's so 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, which is just as bad, if not worse, than being repetitive.



### 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, they need to match in terms of both connotation and denotation.

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## 4. Connotation and Denotation

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

**Denotation** means 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.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Connotation

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

#### Denotation

The literal meaning of a word; the dictionary definition.

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 dynamic and interesting word choices. It's a kind of freedom to have an active and nuanced vocabulary, and all writers and would-be writers should be encouraged to strive for it and to pay attention to the uses that other writers make of words. That's the only way to learn.

### 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 example, 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 as, in part, due to advertising, most people think of positive, healthy, or expensive things when they hear or see the word organic.



#### HINT

Remember, not everyone shares the same connotations.

In contrast, consider the word "artificial." The denotative meaning for this is an imitation or simulation, among other entries. Yet again, in part, 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 kind of connotations for it: danger, deceit, etc.

Shade is another term. It means shelter from sunlight, but most of us have a positive connotation with the word shade, even though it can also mean a kind of ghost. Now, consider what happens if we make the noun into an adjective. The word "shady" brings about a completely different set of connotative meaning, doesn't it?



#### SUMMARY

Today we learned how style is affected by a writer's word choices. We learned about ways that experimenting with style can help writers when it's done carefully. Lastly, we learned how to vary our word usage to avoid redundancy, and the differences between the denotative and connotative meanings of words.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Connotation**

A suggestive meaning of a word, based on implication, cultural association, or emotional association with a word.

##### **Denotation**

The literal meaning of a word, the dictionary definition.

##### **Synonyms**

Words that have the same or very similar meanings to other words.

