

## **Word Choice**

After reading this article, you should be able to revise your papers for word-level clarity, eliminate wordiness and avoid clichés, find the words that best express your ideas, and choose words that suit an academic audience.

### **Why Word Choice Matters**

As you revise a draft, ask yourself, “Is this really what I mean?” or “Will readers understand this?” Finding words that capture your meaning and convey that to your readers is challenging. When your professor writes things like “awkward,” “vague,” or “wordy” on your draft, they want you to work on word choice. This handout gives you strategies for choosing the best words as you revise.

It can take more time to “save” words from your original sentence than to write a brand new sentence to convey the same idea. Don’t be too attached to what you’ve already written; if you’re willing to start a sentence fresh, you may be able to choose words with greater clarity (For more tips, check out our handouts on reorganizing drafts and revising drafts).

### **“Awkward,” “Vague,” and “Unclear” Word Choices**

Imagine you write a paper that makes perfect sense to you, but it comes back with “awkward” scribbled in the margins. Most instructors use terms like this to draw your attention to confusing sentences so you can rewrite those ideas more clearly.

Difficulties with word choice aren't the only cause of awkwardness, vagueness, or other problems with clarity. Sometimes a sentence is hard to follow because there's a grammatical problem or because of the syntax (the way the words and phrases are put together).

- **Example:** “Having finished with studying, the pizza was quickly eaten.” This sentence isn't hard to understand because everybody knows what studying, pizza, and eating are.
  - **The problem is that readers will assume that the first bit of the sentence** “(Having finished with studying)” **goes with the next noun that follows it** (which in this case is the pizza!). It doesn't make a lot of sense to say that the pizza was studying.
  - **I was trying to express something like this:** “Having finished with studying, the students quickly ate the pizza.” If you have a sentence that has been marked “awkard,” “vague,” or “unclear,” try to think about it from a reader's point of view. See if you can tell where it changes direction or leaves out important information.

Sometimes, though, problems with clarity *are* a matter of word choice. See if you recognize any of these issues:

- **Misused words.** The word doesn't actually mean what the writer thinks it does.
  - **Example:** Cree Indians were a *monotonous* culture until French and British settlers arrived.
  - **Revision:** Cree Indians were a homogenous culture.
- **Words with unwanted connotations or meanings.**

- **Example:** I sprayed the ants in their private places.
  - **Revision:** I sprayed the ants in their hiding places.
- **Using a pronoun when readers can't tell whom/what it refers to.**
  - **Example:** My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though he didn't like him very much.
  - **Revision:** My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though Jake doesn't like Trey very much.
- **Jargon or technical terms** can make readers work unnecessarily hard. If these terms are important in your field, that's fine. Try not to throw them in just to "sound smart."
  - **Example:** The dialectical interface between neo-Platonists and anti-disestablishment Catholics offers an algorithm for deontological thought.
  - **Revision:** The dialogue between neo-Platonists and certain Catholic thinkers is a model for deontological thought.
- **Loaded language.** Sometimes we know what we mean by a certain word, but we don't spell that out for readers. It's easy to rely heavily on a word, repeating it often, without clarifying what you mean.
  - **Example:** Society teaches young girls that beauty is their most important quality. In order to prevent eating disorders and other health problems, we must change society.
  - **Revision:** Contemporary American popular media, like magazines and movies, teach young girls that beauty is their most important quality. In order to prevent eating disorders and other health problems, we must change the images and role models girls are offered.

## Wordiness

Sometimes the problem is being “wordy,” using phrases that your reader may regard as “extra” or inefficient. On the following list are some examples. On the left are some phrases that use three, four, or more words than is necessary; on the right are some shorter substitutes:

I came to the realization that	I realized that
She is of the opinion that	She thinks that
Concerning the matter of	About
During the course of	During
In the event that	If
In the process of	During, while
Regardless of the fact that	Although
Due to the fact that	Because
In all cases	Always
At that point in time	Then
Prior to	Before

See if you can replace wordiness with more concise words or phrases.

## Clichés

Try to avoid using clichés, which are catchy little phrases that have become trite, corny, or annoying. Their overuse has diminished their impact and they can require several words where just one would do.

If you recognize a cliché, try to create a shorter, fresher equivalent instead. Ask yourself if there is one word that means the same thing as the cliché. If there isn't, how briefly can you state your idea? Below are five common clichés on the left column with some alternatives to their right. See how many alternatives you can create for the final two examples.

<b>Instead of using...</b>	<b>Try:</b>
Agree to disagree	Disagree
Dead as a doornail	Dead
Last but not least	Last
Pushing the envelope	Approaching the limit
Up in the air	Unknown/undecided
Play it by ear	(write your own response)
Let the cat out of the bag	(create your own description)

### **Writing for an Academic Audience**

When you express your ideas, try to think about what will make sense and sound best to your readers. Thinking about your audience's expectations to help you make decisions about word choice.

Some writers try to “sound smart” by using big or technical words, but **the most important goal of academic writing is to communicate an argument or information clearly and convincingly**. When you're learning to read and write in an academic style, you may find yourself using words and/or grammatical constructions that you haven't before. If you

consciously set out to “sound smart” and use words that are very unfamiliar to you, you may produce sentences that are hard to understand.

Aim for simplicity. Simple words do not necessarily indicate simple thoughts. In an academic argument paper, sophisticated arguments are presented in clear, concise language.

- **Keep in mind that simple/clear doesn’t mean casual.** Most instructors won’t be pleased if your paper looks like text to a friend. Try to avoid slang and colloquialisms.
  - **Example:** ask yourself how a professor would probably respond to this thesis statement of a paper: “*Moulin Rouge* really bit because the singing sucked and the costume colors were nasty, KWIM?”

### **Selecting and Using Key Terms**

Try to use key terms within your paper and thesis. By itself, a key term is merely a topic—an element of an argument but not the argument itself. This section explains the difference between *repetition* and *redundancy* and provides an example of using key terms in a thesis statement.

#### **Repetition vs. Redundancy**

These two terms are not necessarily the same. Repetition can be a good thing. You may have to use key terms several times within a paper, especially in topic sentences. Sometimes there is simply no substitute for the key terms, and selecting a weaker term as a synonym can do more harm than good. Repeating key terms emphasizes important points and signals to the reader

that the argument is still being supported. This kind of repetition gives your paper cohesion and is done by conscious choice.

In contrast, if you find yourself frustrated, tiredly repeating the same nouns, verbs, or adjectives, or making the same point over and over, you are probably being redundant. Refer to the “Strategies” section below for ideas on revising for redundancy.

### **Building Clear Thesis Statements**

Let’s focus on the thesis statement, one of the most essential sentences in argumentative papers (You can apply these ideas to other sentences in your papers, too). Good thesis statements should capture the important elements and the significance of the essay’s argument. It’s not always easy to condense several paragraphs or several pages into concise key terms that, when combined in one sentence, can effectively describe the argument.

Taking the time to find the right words offers writers a significant edge. Concise terms help the writer and the reader keep track of what the essay will prove (Check out our handout on thesis statements.)

- **Example:** You’ve been assigned to write an essay that contrasts the river and shore scenes in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. After working on it for several days, you come up with three versions of your thesis:
  - **Version 1:** *There are many important river and shore scenes in *Huckleberry Finn*.*
  - **Version 2:** *The contrasting river and shore scenes in *Huckleberry Finn* suggest a return to nature.*

- **Version 3:** *Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*

Let's consider the word choice issues in these statements. In Version 1, the word "important" is overused and vague; it suggests that the author has an opinion but doesn't mention what that is. As a result, your reader knows only that you're going to talk about river and shore scenes, but not what you're going to say. Version 2 is an improvement: the words "return to nature" indicate where the paper is headed, yet the reader still does not know how this return to nature is crucial to your understanding of the novel.

Finally, you come up with Version 3, which is a strong thesis because it offers a sophisticated argument and uses key terms to make this argument clear. At least three key terms or concepts are evident: the contrast between river and shore scenes, a return to nature, and American democratic ideals.

### **Strategies for Successful Word Choice**

- Be careful when using unfamiliar words. See how they are used in context and check their dictionary definitions.
- Be careful when using the thesaurus. Each word that's listed as a synonym for the word you're looking up may have its own unique connotations or meanings. Use a dictionary to be sure the synonym you're considering really fits what you're trying to say.



- Don't try to impress your reader or sound overly authoritative. For example, which of the following sentences is clearer?
  - *Under the present conditions of our society, marriage practices generally demonstrate a high degree of homogeneity.*
  - *In our culture, people tend to marry others who are like themselves.* (Longman, p. 452)
- **Before you revise for accurate, strong adjectives, use accurate, strong nouns and verbs.** For example, if you were revising the sentence “This is a good book that tells about the Civil War,” think about whether “book” and “tells” are as strong as they could be before you worry about “good.” (A stronger sentence might read “The novel describes the experiences of a Confederate soldier during the Civil War.” “Novel” tells us what kind of book it is, and “describes” tells us more about how the book communicates information.)
- **Try the slash/option technique.** Write out two or more choices for a questionable word or a confusing sentence, e.g., “questionable/inaccurate/vague/inappropriate.” Pick the word that best indicates your meaning or combine different terms to say what you mean.
- **Look for repetition.** When you find it, decide if it's “good” repetition (using key terms that are crucial and helpful to meaning) or “bad” repetition (redundancy or laziness in reusing words).
- **Write your thesis in five different ways.** Make five different versions of your thesis sentence. Compose five sentences that express your argument. Try to come up with four alternatives to the thesis sentence you've already written. Find five possible ways to

communicate your argument in one sentence to your reader. (We've just used this technique—which of the last five sentences do you prefer?)

- By writing out five different versions of your thesis, you can begin to see your range of choices. The final version may be a combination of phrasings and words from all five versions, or the one version that says it best.
- **Read your paper out loud and at... a... slow... pace.** You can do this alone or with a friend, roommate, TA, Writing Center consultant, etc. Your written words should make sense to both you and other listeners. If a sentence seems confusing, rewrite it to make the meaning clear.
- **Put down your paper and talk through your argument as concisely as you can.** If your listener easily understands your essay's main point, make sure that your written words are just as clear. If your listener asks for clarification, work on finding the right terms. Try doing this with a friend or classmate; whether you are the talker or the listener, your articulation skills will develop.
- **Have someone not familiar with the issue read the paper and point out words or sentences s/he finds confusing.** Don't assume your reader doesn't know enough about the topic. Rewrite your sentences so that your reader can follow along at all times.
- **Check out the Writing Center's handouts on style, passive voice, and proofreading for more tips.**

### Questions to Ask Yourself

- **Am I sure what each word really means?** Should I look it up?
- **Have I found the best word or settled for the most obvious/easiest one?**

- **Am I trying too hard to impress my reader?**
- **What's the easiest way to write this sentence?** (Sometimes it helps to answer this question by trying it out loud. How would you say it to someone?)
- **What are the key terms of my argument?**
- **Can I outline out my argument by using only key terms?** What others do I need? Which do I not need?
- **Have I created my own terms, or have I simply borrowed what looked like key ones from the assignment?** If I've borrowed the terms, can I find better ones in my own vocabulary, texts, notes, dictionary, or thesaurus to make myself clearer?
- **Are my key terms too specific?** (Do they cover the entire range of my argument?) Can I think of specific examples from my sources that fall under the key term?
- **Are my key terms too vague?** (Do they cover more than the range of my argument?)

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.