**Word Choice**

Writing is a series of choices. As you work on a paper, you have to choose the words you will use to express your ideas and decide how you will arrange those words into sentences and paragraphs. As you revise your draft, you make more choices. This handout will explain some common issues related to word choice and give you strategies for choosing the best words as you revise your drafts.

**“Awkward”, “Vague”, or “Unclear”**

I use terms like this to draw your attention to sentences I had trouble understanding and were not written clearly.

Sometimes a sentence is hard to follow because there is a grammatical problem with it or because of the syntax (the way the words and phrases are put together).

* *Example:* “Having finished with studying, the pizza was quickly eaten.”
  + The problem here is that readers will naturally assume that 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 imply that the pizza was studying.
* Revision: “Having finished with studying, the students quickly ate the pizza.”

Sometimes, though, problems with clarity are a matter of 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.
  + The problem here is that the second part of the sentence is confusing and it is unclear who “he” and “him” are.
* *Revision:* My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though Jake doesn’t like Trey very much.

**Wordiness**

Sometimes the problem isn’t choosing exactly the right word to express an idea—it’s being “wordy,” or using words that your reader may regard as “extra”. Take a look at the following list for some examples. On the left are some phrases that use four or more words where fewer will do; 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 |
| At that point in time | Then |
| In the process of | While |
| Regardless of the fact that | Although |
| Due to the fact that | Because |

Keep an eye out for wordy constructions in your writing and see if you can replace them with more concise words or phrases.

**Repetition Versus Redundancy**

Repetition can be a good thing. Sometimes we have to use key terms several times within a paper. 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 can give 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. In this case, you are swimming aimlessly around the same points because you have not decided what your argument really is or because you are truly fatigued and clarity escapes you. Use the strategies and questions on the back to help yourself.

**Strategies for Successful Word Choice**

1. Be careful when using words you are unfamiliar with. Look at how they are used in context and check their dictionary definitions.
2. Be careful when using the thesaurus. Each word listed as a synonym for the word you’re looking up may have its own unique connotations or shades of meaning. Use a dictionary to be sure the synonym you are considering really fits what you are trying to say.
3. Try the slash/option technique, which is like brainstorming as you write. When you get stuck, 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.
4. Look for repetition. When you find it, decide if it is “good” repetition (using key terms that are crucial and helpful to meaning) or “bad” repetition (redundancy or laziness in reusing words).
5. Read your paper out loud and at… a… slow… pace.. When read out loud, your written words should make sense to both you and other listeners. If a sentence seems confusing, rewrite it to make the meaning clear.
6. Have someone not familiar with the issue read the paper and point out words or sentences he/she finds confusing. Do not brush off this reader’s confusion by assuming he or she simply doesn’t know enough about the topic. Instead, rewrite the sentences so that your “outsider” reader can follow along at all times.

**Questions to Ask Yourself**

1. Am I sure what each word I use really means? Am I positive, or should I look it up?
2. Have I found the best word or just settled for the most obvious, or the easiest, one?
3. 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?)
4. Is this what I really mean?
5. Will readers understand this?
6. Does this sound good?