

## Word Choice

### What this handout is about

This handout can help you 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.

### Introduction

Writing is a series of choices. As you work on a paper, you choose your topic, your approach, your sources, and your thesis; when it's time to write, 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. You might ask yourself, "Is this really what I mean?" or "Will readers understand this?" or "Does this sound good?" Finding words that capture your meaning and convey that meaning to your readers is challenging. When your instructors write things like "awkward," "vague," or "wordy" on your draft, they are letting you know that they want you to work on word choice. 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.

As you read further into the handout, keep in mind that it can sometimes take more time to "save" words from your original sentence than to write a brand new sentence to convey the same meaning or idea. Don't be too attached to what you've already written; if you are willing to start a sentence fresh, you may be able to choose words with greater clarity.

For tips on making more substantial revisions, take a look at our handouts on reorganizing drafts and revising drafts.

### "Awkward," "vague," and "unclear" word choice

So: you write a paper that makes perfect sense to you, but it comes back with "awkward" scribbled throughout the margins. Why, you wonder, are instructors so fond of terms like "awkward"? Most instructors use terms like this to draw your attention to sentences they had trouble understanding and to encourage you to rewrite those sentences 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 is a grammatical problem with it or because of the syntax (the way the words and phrases are put together). Here's an example: "Having finished with studying, the pizza was quickly eaten." This sentence isn't hard to understand because of the words I chose—everybody knows what studying, pizza, and eating are. 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. What I was actually trying to express was something more like this: "Having finished with studying, the students quickly ate the pizza." If you have a sentence that has been marked "awkward," "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 that** make readers work unnecessarily hard. Maybe you need to use some of these words because they are important terms in your field, but don't 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 as writers know what we mean by a certain word, but we haven't ever spelled that out for readers. We rely too heavily on that word, perhaps repeating it often, without clarifying what we are talking about.  
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 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" or inefficient. Take a look at the following list for some examples. On the left are some phrases that use three, 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
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

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

## Clichés

In academic writing, it's a good idea to limit your use of clichés. Clichés are catchy little phrases so frequently used that they have become trite, corny, or annoying. They are problematic because their overuse has diminished their impact and because they require several words where just one would do.

The main way to avoid clichés is first to recognize them and then to create shorter, fresher equivalents. Ask yourself if there is one word that means the same thing as the cliché. If there isn't, can you use two or three words to state the idea your own way? Below you will see five common clichés, with some alternatives to their right. As a challenge, see how many alternatives you can create for the final two examples.

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
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Try these yourself:

Play it by ear	____?____
Let the cat out of the bag	____?____

## Writing for an academic audience

When you choose words to express your ideas, you have to think not only about what makes sense and sounds best to you, but what will make sense and sound best to your readers. Thinking about your audience and their expectations will help you make decisions about word choice.

Some writers think that academic audiences expect them to “sound smart” by using big or technical words. But the most important goal of academic writing is not to sound smart—it is to communicate an argument or information clearly and convincingly. It is true that academic writing has a certain style of its own and that you, as a student, are beginning to learn to read and write in that style. You may find yourself using words and grammatical constructions that you didn’t use in your high school writing. The danger is that if you consciously set out to “sound smart” and use words or structures that are very unfamiliar to you, you may produce sentences that your readers can’t understand.

When writing for your professors, think simplicity. Using simple words does not indicate simple thoughts. In an academic argument paper, what makes the thesis and argument sophisticated are the connections presented in simple, clear language.

Keep in mind, though, that simple and clear doesn’t necessarily mean casual. Most instructors will not be pleased if your paper looks like an instant message or an email to a friend. It’s usually best to avoid slang and colloquialisms. Take a look at this example and ask yourself how a professor would probably respond to it if it were the 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

When writing academic papers, it is often helpful to find key terms and use them within your paper as well as in your thesis. This section comments on the crucial difference between repetition and redundancy of terms and works through an example of using key terms in a thesis statement.

### Repetition vs. redundancy

These two phenomena are not necessarily the same. Repetition can be a good thing. Sometimes we have to use our 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 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. Refer to the “Strategies” section below for ideas on revising for redundancy.

### Building clear thesis statements

Writing clear sentences is important throughout your writing. For the purposes of this handout, let’s focus on the thesis statement—one of the most important sentences in academic argument papers. You can apply these ideas to other sentences in your papers.

A common problem with writing good thesis statements is finding the words that best capture both the important elements and the significance of the essay’s argument. It is 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.

However, taking the time to find the right words offers writers a significant edge. Concise and appropriate terms will help both the writer and the reader keep track of what the essay will show and how it will show it. Graders, in particular, like to see clearly stated thesis statements. (For more on thesis statements in general, please refer to our handout.)

**Example:** You’ve been assigned to write an essay that contrasts the river and shore scenes in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. You work on it for several days, producing 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"—like "interesting"—is both overused and vague; it suggests that the author has an opinion but gives very little indication about the framework of that opinion. 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" give your reader a better idea where the paper is headed. On the other hand, she 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 stronger thesis because it offers a sophisticated argument and the key terms used to make this argument are 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.

By itself, a key term is merely a topic—an element of the argument but not the argument itself. The argument, then, becomes clear to the reader through the way in which you combine key terms.

## 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. **Don't try to impress your reader or sound unduly authoritative.** For example, which sentence is clearer to you: "a" or "b"?
  - a. Under the present conditions of our society, marriage practices generally demonstrate a high degree of homogeneity.
  - b. In our culture, people tend to marry others who are like themselves. (Longman, p. 452)
4. **Before you revise for accurate and strong adjectives, make sure you are first using accurate and 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.)
5. **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.
6. **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).
7. **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?) Whenever we write a sentence we make choices. Some are less obvious than others, so that it can often feel like we've written the sentence the only way we know how. 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. By literally spelling out some possibilities for yourself, you will be able to make better decisions.
8. **Read your paper out loud and at... a... slow... pace.** You can do this alone or with a friend, roommate, TA, etc. 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.
9. **Instead of reading the paper itself, put it down and just talk through your argument as concisely as you can.** If your listener quickly and easily comprehends your essay's main point and significance, you should then make sure that your written words are as clear as your oral presentation was. If, on the other hand, your listener keeps asking for clarification, you will need to work on finding the right terms for your essay. If you do this in exchange with a friend or classmate, rest assured that whether you are the talker or the listener, your articulation skills will develop.
10. **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.
11. **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 I use really means? Am I positive, or should I look it up?
- Have I found the best word or just settled for the most obvious, or the 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 using only these 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, the texts, my notes, the dictionary, or the 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?)

## Works consulted/additional resources

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

The American Heritage Book of English Usage: A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English (Boston: Houghton, 1996).

Anson, Chris M. and Robert A. Schwegler. The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers, 2nd ed. (New York: Addison, 2001).

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Tarshis, Barry. How to be Your Own Best Editor: The Toolkit for Everyone Who Writes (New York: Three Rivers P, 1998).

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