

WORD CHOICE



Many students express the desire to “sound intelligent.” This is often mistaken to mean that we should use our thesaurus as much as possible and replace word choices with more complex, higher-level words at all times. However, the best way to make your writing sound intelligent is to use words **accurately** and **appropriately** for the context of your subject matter, academic level, and audience. Use the following principles to guide your vocabulary decisions.



Stylistic Principles

Consider Your Audience



Reading and writing are usually not solitary activities. Think of written communication as a process with multiple players; often, at the most basic level, there exists a **writer**, a **message** to be conveyed, and an **audience** of one or more readers. Your job as a writer is to ensure that you consider your audience’s needs when writing, including word choice and organization. Neglecting this aspect of your writing may mean that the message is lost or misinterpreted.

Here are some important questions to ask yourself about your audience that may direct the stylistic choices you make in your writing:

- 1 What is my audience’s **level of knowledge** about my subject?
- 2 Is my audience comprised of **experts** in the field?
- 3 Am I trying to **persuade** my audience of something, or am I merely conveying **factual information**?

Even in a specialized, professional work environment, the level of knowledge your audience may have about the technical aspects of your work or area of expertise will vary. For example, in an engineering firm, you may be writing documentation for managers, peers in your field, human resources staff, accountants, or co-op students. Among these different positions, the **depth of knowledge about your topic will vary**, and so you should consider the **terminology, formality, and degree of context** when writing.



Choose Words that You Understand



It is important that you **understand** the words that you choose. Selecting a word because it sounds “smarter” or “more academic” can result in using words **incorrectly**, which detracts from the **credibility** of your argument.

Not all dictionaries are created equal, and many online dictionaries are inadequate for the requirements of professional and academic writing. One good resource is *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary* (www.merriam-webster.com). This site includes **useful** and **accurate definitions** in addition to **illustrative quotations**, which allow you to better understand a word’s meaning and how to use it. The UW Library also provides access to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which includes not only **precise definitions** but also **extensive illustrations**.



Prefer Simple to Complex Words

Often, writers assume that complex words make their writing impressive, which leads them to avoid using simple words. You will need to judge what is appropriate given the **context** in which you are writing, but most readers appreciate **directness**, so **avoid using complex words** where a simpler, more direct word can be used.

Avoid Unnecessary Jargon and Technical Terms

Jargon refers to terminology that is unique to **specific professions** or **areas of study** and are not generally known outside of those groups. Technical vocabulary is both useful and important in academic and professional writing, but it should be used only when an ordinary word would be less precise.

Select Precise Words

The French novelist Gustav Flaubert once remarked, “All talent for writing consists, after all, of nothing more than choosing words. It’s precision that gives writing power.” This observation applies to all kinds of writing. **Vague words** shift the writer’s responsibility onto the **reader**, leaving him or her to figure out your meaning. **Precise words** communicate your meaning. Consider the following examples, both about Marie Curie’s contribution to science:

e.g., The thing that she did was really important in the field.

The above sentence is imprecise. Using words like *thing* and *important* do not help the reader to understand the context of what was accomplished or in what ways *the thing that she did* impacted the broader *field*.

e.g., Marie Curie’s research on radioactivity was innovative in its identification of previously unknown radioactive substances, including radium.


The above sentence is much clearer. The imprecise word *thing* has been replaced with the specific work that Curie accomplished, and the importance of her work has been directly identified.

Avoid Clichés

The word **cliché** is French for a stereotype block, used in printing to reproduce a single page many times. The word is applied to phrases that have lost their meaning through **overuse**:

e.g., outside the box, in this day and age, plagued by doubts, read between the lines

Recognising that we have used a cliché, we are in a position to choose more unique words.



Some common imprecise word choices that can almost always be replaced with stronger, more precise words include the following: good, bad, thing, stuff, important.