

Choosing Effective Diction

Effective diction is the choice of words that best communicate your purpose to your audience. Your diction must be tailored to fit the specific context of your sentences and paragraphs and of your paper as a whole. Your choices of effective diction depend on your *subject*, *audience*, and *purpose*.

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USE A DICTIONARY

No writer should work without a dictionary. Unabridged dictionaries, like the *Oxford English Dictionary*, usually found in the reference rooms of libraries, contain vast numbers of words and lengthy, thorough definitions. They are useful when you need to find highly detailed information like full word histories or to find the definition of an arcane word. Most of your needs, however, will be met by a standard desk-sized, collegiate dictionary such as

- ▼ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*
- ▼ *Random House Dictionary of the English Language: College Edition*
- ▼ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*
- ▼ *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language: College Edition*

Those dictionaries, and most other standard-sized collegiate dictionaries, provide a wide variety of general and useful information including:

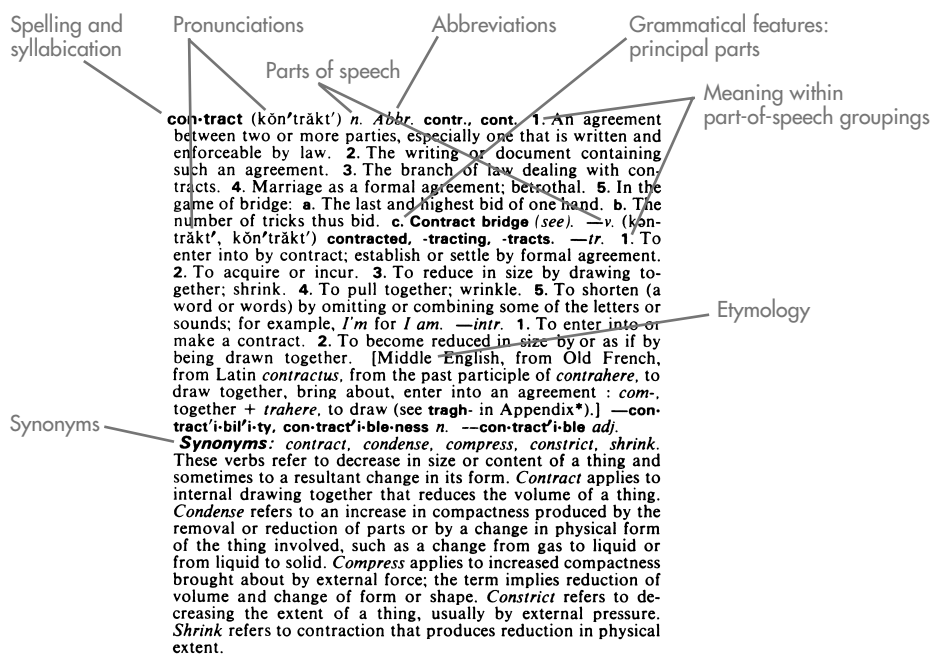
- ▼ A brief history of lexicography (the preparation and study of dictionaries)
- ▼ A brief history of the language
- ▼ An explanatory diagram of a sample word entry, with a key to the abbreviations that are used in the definitions
- ▼ Explanations and definitions of and guidance on matters of grammar and usage
- ▼ The dictionary of words (the main portion of the reference book)
- ▼ Lists of standard abbreviations
- ▼ Biographical entries (brief notes on important people)
- ▼ Geographical entries (brief notes on important places)
- ▼ Lists of foreign words and phrases

- ▼ Comparative tables of alphabets, calendars, and currencies
- ▼ Tables of measurements (both American and metric)
- ▼ Lists of signs and symbols in common use
- ▼ Maps and illustrations
- ▼ Pronunciation guides
- ▼ General guides to writing (business-letter forms, forms of address, manuscript preparation guidelines, and so on)

Dictionaries provide much more than definitions; they offer useful information about many subjects related to writing. Most often, however, you will turn to a dictionary to find information about specific words. To make your use of a dictionary efficient and productive, familiarize yourself with its general pattern of presenting information about words.

Spelling and Syllabication Entries begin with the word spelled out and divided into syllables, usually marked with dots: **con•tract**. When a word has several acceptable spellings, each of them will be listed, but the most common spelling will be listed first. If alternative spellings are listed as *Am* (American) and *Brit* (British), use the American spelling in your writing.

Pronunciations The pronunciation (usually enclosed in parentheses) follows, presented in a simplified phonetic transcription. The markings are matched to a pronunciation guide, which is usually printed at the bottom of



each page. When words have more than one syllable, accent marks (') indicate which syllables receive primary or secondary stress.

Parts of Speech Abbreviations such as *n.*, *v.*, and *adj.* indicate how a word can be used in a sentence. When a word can be used in various ways, the definitions are divided by parts of speech with, for instance, all meanings of the noun grouped together, followed by all meanings of the verb.

Abbreviations If a word is commonly abbreviated, some dictionaries include the abbreviation in the entry; other dictionaries list abbreviations in a special section.

Grammatical Features Distinctive grammatical features are noted in the entry. The principal parts of a verb are included, information that is especially helpful with irregular verbs—for example, *go*, *went*, *gone*, *going*, *goes*. Plural forms are provided for nouns that form plurals irregularly—for example, *mouse*, *mice*. When comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives and adverbs are formed in ways other than by adding *-er* or *-est*—for example, *good*, *better*, *best* or *many*, *more*, *most*—dictionaries generally list them.

Meanings Within part-of-speech groups, meanings are most commonly presented in order of their frequency of use. Some dictionaries, however, present definitions in historical order (from oldest to newest) or hierarchical order (from primary to secondary). Read the front matter of the dictionary you are using to see which pattern it follows.

Etymology When word origins are known, they are provided, sometimes in abbreviated form (*Gk.* for Greek, *ME* for Middle English, and so on). Thus *contract* is one of a large class of words that came into English from Latin by way of Old French. It is made up of the prefix *con-* (from the Latin *com-*, meaning “together”) and the root word *tract* (from the Latin *trahere*, meaning “to draw”).

Labels Labels are used to identify words according to a number of specific criteria: general level of usage (Nonstandard, Informal, Slang, Dia., and so on), regional usage (Brit., Southern), and usage within an area of specialization (Law, Med., Computer Sci.).

Synonyms and Antonyms Many dictionaries include brief lists of synonyms for defined words (often introduced by the abbreviation *syns.*), to illustrate comparable word choices. Some dictionaries include antonyms as well (often introduced by the abbreviation *ant.*). Check the front matter of your dictionary to see whether these aids are used and where they are placed in the entries.

Exercise

Use the following questions to familiarize yourself with your own collegiate dictionary. You will have to use all parts of the dictionary to find your

answers—the front matter, entries, and appended materials. Keep in mind that your responses may vary slightly from those of people using other dictionaries.

1. If you have to hyphenate *maleficence* at the end of a line, where could you appropriately place a hyphen before finishing the word on the next line?
2. How are the following words pronounced: *acclimate*, *banal*, *data*, *impotent*, *Wagnerian*?
3. Which is the preferred spelling, *aesthetics* or *esthetics*? Is the word listed under both spellings or under only one?
4. What synonyms does your dictionary list for *ghastly*, *lure*, *puzzle*, *single*, and *yield*?
5. What is the British meaning of the word *torch*? When *torch* is used as slang, what does it mean? What idiomatic expression uses the word *torch*?
6. What is a *schlemiel*? What is the origin of the word?
7. How many meanings are recorded for the word *vulgar*? By what pattern are the definitions arranged?
8. As what parts of speech can the word *square* be used? In what order do the parts of speech appear in the entry?
9. What are the plural forms of *alumna*, *fungus*, *graffito*, *hippopotamus*, and *medium*?
10. For what do the abbreviations AAUW, EST, FNMA, MCAT, and VISTA stand?
11. In what years were *Marian Anderson*, *D. W. Griffith*, *Marie Antoinette*, *Alfred Nobel*, *George H. Ruth*, and *Mary Cassatt* born?
12. In what countries are *Addis Ababa*, *Caracas*, *Kuala Lumpur*, *Mecca*, and *Sarajevo* located?

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CONSIDER ISSUES OF DICTION

Standard English is the language of educated speakers and writers of English. American schools, government, businesses, and media have long used Standard English as the criterion by which speech and expository writing are judged; yet judgments about acceptable usage are sometimes hard to make because of the fluid nature of language and the effect of different writing situations. In a larger sense, word choices must be made in the context of a given piece of writing, depending on your subject, audience, and purpose. As a result, a word choice that is appropriate in one context may be inappropriate in another.

18a

Changes and Variations in Language

Language is constantly evolving, and as a result standards of usage are also constantly changing. New words are introduced, old words assume new meanings, and some words are discarded. As a writer, you must be aware of such changes and keep your diction current. A newly coined word such as *houseperson* may at the present time be questionable usage, but another fairly recent word such as *chairperson* may generally be acceptable. You need to remain sensitive to such subtleties and make your word choices on the basis of what currently seems to be acceptable. A dictionary and your instructor can provide useful guidance.

Be aware as well that language varies from one region of the country to another. *Tag* may easily be understood in some areas, but in other regions the term *license plate* may be necessary to make your meaning clear. It is therefore important to familiarize yourself with regional word choices and to use or avoid using them, depending on your writing context.

18b

The Writing Situation—Formal or Informal

Writers vary their diction and sentence structure to suit the writing context. A letter to the editor of the local newspaper in support of its position on a local issue, for example, AIDS education in the schools, would differ in many ways from a letter to a friend on the same subject. The difference is one of level of formality within Standard English. Formal usage—which typically uses an extensive vocabulary including learned words, no slang, few contractions, and long, often complex sentences—may be appropriate for some topics and in some circumstances. Informal usage—generally characterized by the use of popular and colloquial words and some slang and contractions and short, simple sentences, often including fragments—may be appropriate for other topics and other circumstances. Whether a writer chooses a formal or informal style, or something in between, depends not on “correctness,” for a broad range of styles is acceptable; rather, it depends on what is *appropriate* to the specific writing situation.

The following discussions address some key issues of diction, both formal and informal, and will help you choose your words selectively. (See Chapter 9, “Diction: The Choice of Words,” for a fuller discussion.)

18c

Considering Denotation and Connotation

When you choose words, consider their *denotations* (the meaning in the dictionary) and their *connotations* (the meaning derived from context). Look at these two sentences:

Nell Gwynn, a **famous** actress during the English Restoration, became the mistress of King Charles II.

Nell Gwynn, a **notorious** actress during the English Restoration, became the mistress of King Charles II.

Both of the words in bold type indicate that Nell Gwynn was well known; the denotations are similar. *Famous* and *notorious* have different connotations, however. *Famous* implies “celebrated,” “renowned”; *notorious* implies “infamous,” “widely but unfavorably known.”

18d

Distinguishing Between Often-Confused Words

Some words are easily mistaken for each other because of similarities in spelling or pronunciation. When such confusion occurs, ideas become jumbled or unclear. Look at these two sentences:

In her closing remarks, the district attorney stated that the defendant had been **persecuted** because the evidence proved him guilty.

Darren received a summons for **wreckless** driving.

In the first, the verb *persecute* has been mistaken for *prosecute*; in the second, *wreckless* for *reckless*.

Commonly confused words include *advice* and *advise*; *cite*, *sight*, and *site*; *council* and *counsel*; *farther* and *further*; *loose* and *lose*; and *principal* and *principle*. Others are listed in “A Glossary of Contemporary Usage” (page 583).

18e

Avoiding Trite Language

Trite language is diction that is commonplace and unimaginative and consequently ineffective. Once-original expressions like *white as snow*, *in the final analysis*, and *rough and ready* have been used so often, in so many contexts, that they no longer offer new insight. Avoid using clichés and instead strive to communicate your meaning in your own language.

Ideally, aging
In an ideal world boxers ~~who are over the hill~~ would retire before they ~~were~~ *lost their*
strength and agility
~~past their prime.~~

18f

Avoiding Jargon

Jargon, the specialized or technical language of a particular group, is sometimes appropriate when you are writing only to members of the group, but it

is inappropriate when you are writing for a general audience. Keep your audience clearly in mind, and use specific but common words instead.

By improving the quality and clarity of ~~horizontal transmittal correspondence~~, companies can become more cost-efficient.

interdepartmental memos,

save money

18g

Using Figurative Language

Figurative language imaginatively compares dissimilar things to present a significant insight. Figurative language can add interest to your writing, but you should be aware of some potential problems in its use.

- ▼ **Mixed metaphors** bring together images that clash because they establish incompatible impressions.

Shannon dove into her studies to reach the top of the class standings.

[*Dove*, denoting downward movement, clashes with *reach the top*, connoting upward movement.]

- ▼ **Exaggerated personifications** result when inanimate objects or abstractions are given human or animal characteristics, thus creating images that are so far-fetched that readers find them strained—even laughable—rather than effective.

The craggy peak, covered with a few scraggly pines, brooded over the valley like a disapproving parent.

- ▼ **Unrecognizable allusions** are references to obscure historical or literary events or people. An allusion should illuminate a discussion, so use references that are likely to be recognized by a general audience.

Jeremy's letter to the editor, a condensed *Areopagitica*, railed against censorship. [The allusion to John Milton's tract on freedom of the press might be lost on many readers.]

Exercise

Revise the following sentences to eliminate problems with diction. Consult your dictionary, if necessary.

1. The sight for the new city counsel building has already been chosen.
2. We racked our brains for solutions to our financial problems, but solutions seemed few and far between.
3. The berserk parents shouted at the school's principle and refused to believe that Danny, their pride and joy, could have done anything wrong.

4. Purchasing a residence in a noncity environment was the Smiths' fondest wish.
5. Like a ship without a sail, Scott wandered threw the office building, looking for the lawyer's office.
6. The intelligence operative arranged for telephone surveillance of Dr. Russell's office.
7. For reasons too numerous to mention, Bradley Jennerman resigned.
8. One should always masticate one's food completely.
9. Like a scared monkey, the small child clung to his mother.
10. Researchers suggest that excessive involvement in the television-viewing process can effect the way a young person preforms in an educational institution.

Exercise

Revise the following paragraphs to eliminate problems with diction.

In these troubled financial times, one is likely to find adults returning to their family domiciles to cohabitant with their parents. After attaining degrees from institutions of higher learning, many offspring return to their home areas to find gainful employment and save money by sharing the family dwelling. The money they save they often invest in automobiles, stereos, and haberdashery. Some save money to allow them to invest later in living quarters of their own or save money for a rainy day.

The psychological affects of adults returning to live with parents can be unfortunate. Offspring sometimes feel that they are not establishing their independence from Mom and Pop. Parents sometimes feel that their children, now grown, are imposing on their independence, and returning children create storm and strife when they return to the nest. But at this point in time, adults

living with their parents is becoming more commonplace, and many people will have to learn to live with the situation.

Choosing Effective Diction: Review Exercise

Revise the following sentences to improve their diction.

1. An effective piece of transcribed discourse must be easily decipherable.
2. Like a sponge absorbs water, the dancer listened to and analyzed the comments of her choreographer.
3. In the final analysis, the institution of higher learning's operation was not cost-effective.
4. The NSC's clandestine operations in Central America and the Middle East were less than effective.
5. The aggressive salesperson amassed a sizable commission.
6. It goes without saying that in this day and age oral communication is crucial for getting ahead in this dog-eat-dog world.
7. Sometime or other everyone will have difficulties with interpersonal relations.
8. The principal's principal objection was not to the principal the students presented but to their method of implementing it.
9. The Herculean task of planning the reunion fell on the shoulders of the two organizers.
10. The microscopic listening devices implanted in the concrete structural members of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow would make surreptitious monitoring of conversations possible.