

Word Choice Standards in Academic Writing: Things You Should Never See in a Scholarly Document (Including a Discussion Board Post)

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1. Do NOT use colloquialisms.

A colloquial word or phrase is one that is better suited for a familiar, face-to-face conversation than for scholarly documents. Many times, this is a common word or phrase that is being used in a nontraditional, informal way.

- Example: Debra could see that her student was *fixing* to disrupt the class.
- Example: Mart-Co would eventually *dump* Well-Health Management for another insurance provider.
- Better: Debra could see that the student was planning on disrupting the class.

2. Do NOT use slang.

Like a colloquialism, slang is better suited for a face-to-face conversation. The difference between slang and a colloquialism is that the latter could still be used in a more formal instance (Example: “The garbage was *dumped* in the harbor.”)

Slang, on the hand, has no original meaning outside of its slang usage.

- Example: As expected, the company released a series of *sympvertizements*.
[Someone outside of the advertising world might not realize that this term is a combination of *sympathy* and *advertisements*.]
- Example: The nurses were concerned that the patient would be a *bounceback*.

[Someone outside of the medical field may not know that this term is loosely defined as a patient who continually returns to a hospital to receive additional and perhaps unnecessary medical attention.]

- Better: The nurses were concerned that the patient would return in a few days.

3. Do NOT use jargon.

Jargon confuses or muddles a word or expression, perhaps intentionally, with the purpose of swaying its reader towards a particular reading of the presented information.

- Example: McDonald's eventually decided to *right-size their employee-to-restaurant ratio*.

[The author seems to be massaging the meaning of the sentence:

McDonald's didn't lay off employees (a negative); it right-sized its employee-to-restaurant ratio.]

- Example: In 1998, Bill Symons made elective, body mass reallocation surgery a reality for those living in Alapaha, Georgia.

[The author seems to be massaging the meaning of the sentence: Bill

Symons didn't make cosmetic surgery (a term with a stigma attached to it) available; he made elective, body mass reallocation surgery available.]

- Better: McDonald's decided to lay off three employees at each restaurant location.

4. Do NOT use vague adjectives and adverbs.

An inappropriate adjective or adverb would be one that holds little or no quantifiable meaning.

- Example: The teachers were *very* pleased with the results.
[To what quantifiable degree is *very* modifying *pleased*?]
- Example: The students were *really* engaged in the activity.
[To what quantifiable degree is *really engaged* more than *engaged*?]
- Better: The students enthusiastically participated in the activity by clapping their hands and stomping their feet at the appropriate times.
[This sentence more precisely defines the students' engagement.]

5. Do NOT include feeling words.

- Example: I *believe* that Washington (1993) misinterpreted the findings.
- Example: I *feel* that Proposition 8 is unjust.
[A critical reader wants to know how you know something to be true, not why you believe or feel a particular way.]
- Better: Washington (1993), however, misinterpreted the findings.
[This sentence would then be followed by supporting evidence.]

6. Do NOT use multisyllabic words for the sake of using multisyllabic words.

Difficult words force your reader to have a thesaurus nearby. Remember: Your reader should have to do as little work as possible to understand your writing.

- Example: Lynn (2003) blatantly *defenestrated* the survey results.
[Clearer: Lynn (2003) dismissed the survey results.]
- Example: The students *formicated* around the teacher.

[Clearer: The students gathered around the teacher.]

7. Do NOT use meaningless words or phrases.

You'll find that some words or phrases hold little meaning when you consider the potentially diverse backgrounds of your reading audience.

- Example: The daycare was *affordable*.

[By whose standards? How are we defining *affordable*?]

- It took the Soviet Union *a long time* to recover from World War 2.

[By what standards? What constitutes "a long time"?]

- Better: The daycare charged \$560 a month.

8. Do NOT use metaphors or similes.

Metaphors and similes are never precise; the strength of an academic document, meanwhile, is determined by its precision.

- Example: The purpose of Bill 774 was to use Medicare and Medicaid as *economic soup strainers*.

[No matter what, Medicare and Medicaid cannot function exactly like soup strainers.]

- Example: *Like George Washington*, President Reagan could not tell a lie.

[No matter what, Reagan cannot be exactly like Washington in his inability to tell a lie.]

- Better: President Reagan never lied.

9. Do NOT use clichés.

A cliché is a phrase so often used that it has lost all meaning.

- Example: The employees at Mart-Co were *hung out to dry*.
[What does this mean? Were they not paid? Were they fired? Were they left without health insurance?]
- A *cutting-edge company* like Mart-Co is always *one step ahead* of the competition.
[What does it mean to be “cutting edge”? How specifically is someone or something “one step ahead”?]
- Better: Mart-Co rescinded its employees’ health insurance.

10. Do NOT use platitudes.

Platitudes are clichés that also pretend to offer advice, lesson, or moral guidance.

- Example: Firming and Associates had proven that *the early bird always gets the worm*.
- Example: Toy-Max knew that *when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade!*
- Better: Toy-Max was able to recycle the defective yo-yos and reuse them as wheels for their Charles the Truck line.

11. Do NOT use pejoratives.

A pejorative is a word or phrase that expresses the bias of the author.

- Example: Herman and Dean (2003) surveyed 500 *junkies* in Southern California.
- Example: Scientology and other *pseudoreligions* are becoming more popular.

- Better: Herman and Dean (2003) surveyed 500 individuals suffering from heroin addiction in Southern California.