

Language Choices

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial discusses how the form and function of a piece of text are influenced by its purpose and audience. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Purpose and Audience
2. Word Choice
3. Connotation and Denotation
4. Formality and Sentence Structure

1. Purpose and Audience

As we discussed in the last tutorial, writing always has a purpose or goal and an **audience**. Those two factors will strongly influence the kind of language you choose in your writing.

Many words and phrases might reveal unintentional (or intentional) bias by the author. Consider a large group of demonstrators – they may be described as “protestors” or “rioters” depending on how much the writer sympathizes with the group’s purpose. A changing city neighborhood might be described as “revitalization” or “gentrification,” depending on if the author sees it as a good thing or a bad thing. When writing on sensitive topics, writers must be aware not only of how words convey their feelings but how they affect the feelings of their audience.

You generally want to make language choices that help your audience to understand your text, as well as help you meet your goal for that text.

Thus, you’ll want to pay attention to a few facets of your language, such as:

- Your vocabulary level
- Connotations and denotations of the words you choose
- Degree of formality
- Complexity or simplicity of your sentence structures

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TERM TO KNOW

Audience

The reader of a text, which can be intended (targeted by the author) or unintended (not specifically targeted by the author).

2. Word Choice

To navigate those challenges in your writing, start by thinking about the words you choose and the ways you choose them. Word choice refers simply to which words you choose in your writing.

Thinking about words and choosing them carefully is one of the hallmarks of a good writer and can help your writing be more effective and successful. Words do a lot of work for your readers, so be careful to select the best words to help your readers understand you and have the kind of responses that you are aiming for.

There are many different ways to say something and thus many different vocabularies that can be chosen for any situation. You want to think about what your audience is going to be able to understand best.

IN CONTEXT

You want to argue that a peanut butter and jelly sandwich is a great lunch for students. How will your description change based on the audience?

Audience: Nutritionists

First, imagine that the audience is a group of nutritionists. You can expect that scientists will be highly educated and have a high degree of technical knowledge. If you are trying to argue for the PB&J with this audience, you might use technical language, such as in the writing here.

The composition of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich aptly balances proteins, carbohydrates, sugars, and fiber for ideal satiety, making it an ideal meal for the midday.

A lot of technical words were used, and you assumed that your audience would understand some pretty scientific concepts. You also used unemotional language and didn’t focus on the experience of eating the PB&J.

Audience: Parents

Now imagine that your audience is a group of parents. They might have varying educational levels and technical knowledge. You can't assume that they have the same knowledge as the nutritionists. You likely will be more general and less technical, such as in this writing:

*A peanut butter and jelly sandwich is **nourishing** enough to keep your students **satisfied** from lunch until dinner without **overloading** them with unhealthy ingredients.*

What's different? Here, you swapped the nutritional science for a more general explanation, using language such as "unhealthy." Notice also that there is more emotive language, such as "overloading" and "nourishing." *These words have more feeling than the drier technical information.*

Audience: School Board

What if your audience was the school board? You can expect that your readers are intelligent, but not scientists.

A peanut butter and jelly sandwich has the right balance of nutrition and cost per unit, making it both effective for satisfying student and **nutritional needs** and also budgetary constraints.

Notice how the language is more fact-based again. Also, how does the vocabulary of "nutritional needs" compare to "nourished and satisfied" or to "satiety?" These vocabulary choices are all contingent upon the audience; the audience is going to change the kinds of words you use to make the same argument.

3. Connotation and Denotation

Although the two terms sound the same, there is a difference between denotation and connotation. Even when you select words that mean the right thing, you want to also think about what they imply.

Denotation is the literal meaning of a word, or what the dictionary says about it. Connotation, on the other hand, is the associative meaning of the word, or what that word commonly implies or suggests.

You might choose a word that has the correct denotative meaning but creates connotations that don't match your style or purpose, something that makes your audience think what you don't want them to think.

Some words have strong emotional connotations, which can be both a pitfall and an opportunity. Knowing how to use both denotation and connotation can lead to rich and interesting sentences with evocative combinations of words.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The word “awesome” describes something that is almost godlike. It means that you are literally filled with awe, overwhelmed by reverence and even fear. Yet many people describe good lattes as awesome. The meaning has shifted over time, and awesome now connotes something really good.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The word “fanatical” means zealous or even obsessive. Yet how many times have you heard someone describe themselves as fanatical about a popular band or sports team? The denotation is negative, but the connotation has softened over time. But again, be careful how it’s used; the term may still be used negatively to describe fans.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The word “retard” technically means to delay or slow down the progress of; it’s a verb. But in some parts of the world, including the US, it has come to be an offensive term describing someone with cognitive or mental disability. It’s considered to be a slur.

A word’s connotation and its denotation might come to have very different meanings. This may require you to be very careful about your word choice. There are also words that have similar meanings but connote very different things.

How will the meaning of a sentence change when you change between these words?

- terrorist
- revolutionary
- freedom fighter

Each of these has a different value judgement and even political or legal implications. The use of each might signify a particular ideology.

What about the difference between these words?

- nosey
- curious

Being called “curious” might bring to mind Curious George, whereas “nosy” might bring to mind a negative character. You can see how words bring up a host of different meanings, so it’s important to understand how essential it is to pick the best words you can.

4. Formality and Sentence Structure

Now about how to put words together. How do you signal different degrees of formality in your writing?

The level of formality you pick, the rules you follow, and how strictly you adhere to those rules, will be based on a few different things:

- Audience needs
- Purpose of the text
- Subject matter

Each of these factors will influence how formal or informal you need to be. If you're writing for a personal audience, you can be informal, whereas if you're writing for an academic or professional audience, you'll likely need to be more formal.

In the case of the latter, you'll want to avoid using "I" and "you" in your writing. You'll pick a more sophisticated vocabulary, temper the emotion of the text, and likely will not include yourself directly in the content.

In the former, you can be much more personally focused and emotional. You can use a casual vocabulary, including slang and contractions, and you can break many rules of grammar for stylistic effect. If you really want, you can use emoticons and exuberant exclamation points to be more friendly and approachable.

Here are two very short pieces of writing. Each has a similar subject matter but is directed to a different audience with a different level of formality.

| Formal | Informal |
|---|---|
| Selecting Hawaii for a vacation will afford the traveler the chance to experience both tropical beaches and impressive mountain heights, making it an ideal destination for those who like a little adventure alongside their relaxation. | Let's go to Hawaii for our trip! I wanna lay out on the beach and get me some rayz, but I know it'll also be awesome to climb dem rugged peaks! |

Notice the way these examples differ not just in the vocabulary they choose but also in their structure. Again, the structure of your sentences is often quite different depending on the audience that you choose.

As you write and assess your purpose and audience, it's wise to look not just at each individual word but also to the way those words are put together in sentences.

In formal writing, longer, more complex sentences are common and even necessary. In contrast, informal writing often features shorter and simpler sentences. Writing that is very engaging and enjoyable to read almost always includes a variety of sentence lengths and structures, but the particular ratio of long to short and complex to simple that you use will depend on the audience and purpose.

Take a moment to read the following passage.

As many experts have noted, dog training can be nearly as demanding as child rearing; indeed, puppies are the canine equivalent of the human infant, demanding extensive investments of time and energy. Lest undesirable circumstances rear their heads, like an infant one mustn't leave a puppy unattended. Their need for relief would require regular trips out of doors, to spare your carpets the iniquity of their messes, and their sharp teeth can likewise make short work of your furnishings if given satisfaction. Thus, the endeavor of puppy rearing is one that should only be undertaken if and only if the owner has at his or her leisure the time (and indeed the stomach) for such labors.

This piece uses very complicated sentences and a lot of words. Some readers may enjoy this style, while others may feel like the author is being pretentious because this is pretty complex. These lengthy, complex sentences raise this simple topic to a high level of formality, resulting in a paragraph that feels a little absurd.

Here is another passage:

Dog training takes a lot of time. Puppies are like infants. If you are training a puppy, you will have to spend all your time with it. For example, puppies need frequent trips outside before they are potty trained. Also, puppies can be destructive. They might chew or bite your belongings. So training a puppy will mean that you have to have free time to spare.

How does this compare to the previous example? In this one, everything is very short and simple. While this is a nice change from the last one, it may be too easy. Some readers may feel like the author is a little condescending because this is so simplistic; others may feel that the style doesn't really match the content. Perhaps too much simplicity in the sentence structure will seem to contradict that message. Obviously, these two pieces each cover the same material, but to a very different effect.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that in writing, the audience is the reader of your text. While an audience can be either intended or unintended, there are some factors that you as a writer should always consider in relation to your audience and the purpose of your text: **word choice, connotation and denotation, and formality and sentence structure.**

Depending on your audience, the words you choose in your writing will determine how well your message is understood or received. Likewise, it's important to know the distinction between the connotation and denotation of words. While the denotation is the dictionary definition of a word, the connotation is the commonly implied meaning or association of the word. Finally, the level of formality you choose will also depend on your purpose and audience. Some writing may require a more academic style with complexly structured sentences, while other pieces may be more conversational with simple sentences.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.



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