

Diction (1) *Power of words*

On Writing & Words

“A writer’s work is a constant struggle to get the right word in the right place, to *find that particular word that will convey his meaning exactly, that will persuade the reader or soothe him or startle or amuse him*. He never succeeds altogether—sometimes he feels that he scarcely succeeds at all—but *such successes as he has are what make the thing worth doing*.”

1. Criteria for the choice of words

- a. **Effectiveness** is much more than getting across.
- b. Words and phrases should be **appropriate**—meanings of words and their stylistic levels;
- c. **...being exactly/precisely** chosen—no ambiguity, letting the readers come to same understanding as you do;
- d. **... being idiomatic**—i.e., habitual usage by native speakers.

2. How to acquire them?

Read to write

-- To be a careful reader and gather a collection useful vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and well-structured sentences from what you once read.

b. Effective words add color and beauty to your writing. For the sake of effectiveness, we should keep on polishing our diction.

e.g.

--What a dull speech! He’s merely *parroting* what many others have said.

--All would resurface in his books, together with the colorful language that he soaked up with a memory that seemed *phonographic*. (Noel Grove: *Mark Twain—Mirror of America*)

--Now for me life is *coming to bud* again as if in eternal spring.

3. Effective words

Words themselves certainly **merit our consideration**.

“It is the effective word, the *precisely chosen word, fitted into the right situation* in relation to the other words in the sentence that **makes the sentence forceful and meaningful**.”

4. Guidance

Examine the meanings before making the choice.

Denotative meaning

--What it literally means

Connotative meaning

--the feeling or ideas suggested by it

e.g.

Your description of **a student who has established a reputation for doing good academic work** in his classes.

“brainy, intelligent, smart, intellectual, scholarly, bookish or bright...”

Different connotations of the words

When speaking of a friend, you prefer **“intelligent”**, **“scholarly”** and **“bright”**;

When speaking of someone you cared little, you prefer **“bookish”** or **“intellectual”**;

When showing certain degree of scorn, you may say he is a **“bookworm”** or **“egghead”**.

5. Other factors that may decide your word choice

Stylistic features:

--formal

--rather formal

--informal/colloquial

Affective meanings:

derogatory

favorable

Tone:

praiseful

neutral

scornful

sarcastic

indifferent

...

Diction (2)

General vs. Specific

Specific words: to describe and explain things;

General and abstract words: to summarize or generalize ideas.

1. Problems with diction

Problem 1

—naming in a large category

Can these common words be more specific?

Breakfast (as a general term):

To a Chinese student:

porridge, eggs, steamed bread/dumplings...

To a hard-working farmhand or a miner:

pork chops and potatoes or chicken...

To a navy man:

tinned food, such as beans

To a person on diet:

a cup of coffee and a slice of toast or a fruit...

From general to specific

Big can be replaced by a variety of words with different ***shades of meaning*** in different context.

--huge, great, large,
--vast, immense,
--enormous (power of our enemies), tremendous,
--gigantic, extensive...

The meaning of scientist can be pinned down to a more specific research field.

--linguist,
--Physicist, chemist,
--biologist, astronomer,
--geologist, mathematician,
--psychiatrist, anthropologist...

Problem 2

—vagueness (resulting from the **overuse of general words**)

e.g. “By reading good articles, they learned something or they were motivated to think about certain issues. A good article is certainly powerful in some way.”

Modified version

“By reading feature articles in newspaper, they learn recent ideas about important issues, for instance, inflation, regional conflicts and nuclear contamination. These good articles display conflicting opinions and provide insightful ideas about the causes of the issue. They would be inspired to seek more about the root cause of those problems... Then, they come up with new understandings. ...With regard to the above, a good article is certainly powerful in refreshing people’s mind.”

Can this be precisely stated?

e.g. I wasted lot of time yesterday.

(Modified version)

--***Yesterday morning*** it took me a very long time to get to my office because I had got into several ***traffic jams***.

--Then I ***waited*** for half an hour ***without doing anything*** for the manager to begin a meeting.

--In the afternoon I had to go to a ***public lecture***. The speaker talked for two hours but I ***couldn’t make out what his main points were***.

In short, I wasted a lot of time yesterday.

e.g. Within a month, Priscilla had found a job at a restaurant and moved into a cheap apartment in a poor neighborhood of Seattle.

(revised version)

Within a month, Priscilla ***found the work as a cashier*** at a restaurant. She worked there ... hours a day. ...She could earn 200 in wage. Then she moved into a shared

apartment at the cost of 300 dollars *in inner-city* Seattle. (fr. *Holding Onto a Dream*)

**Inner-city: old central area of the city, resided by poor people*

To sum up

--Vagueness and ambiguity are often found in our writing; They greatly reduce the quality of writing; Get yourself in the habit of questioning the vagueness in diction.

Insights:

--If you honestly read every page, if you do every exercise, if you take every test, if you follow every principle, you will go through an intellectual experience that will effect/evoke a radical change in you.

--For if you systematically increase your vocabulary, you will also sharpen and enrich your thinking; push back your intellectual horizons; build your self-assurance; improve your facility in handling the English language and thereby your ability to express your thoughts effectively; and acquire a deeper understanding of the world in general and of yourself in particular.

--Increasing your vocabulary does not mean merely learning the definitions of large numbers of technical words; it does not mean memorizing scores of unrelated terms. What it means—what it can only mean—is becoming acquainted with the multitudinous and fascinating phenomena of human existence for which words are, obviously, only the verbal descriptions.

--Increasing your vocabulary through reading extensively—properly, intelligently, and systematically—means treating yourself to an all-round, liberal education.

--And surely you cannot deny that such an experience will have a discernible effect on your methods of thinking—on your store of information —on your ability to express your ideas—on your understanding of human problems.

Suggestions on how to improve your diction

--Run a big bank of words by extensive reading;

--Consult English-English dictionaries and examine how a word is defined in English;

--Use thesaurus dictionary (dictionary of synonyms) or collocation dictionary;

e.g. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus>

--!No word-for-word translations, no transfer from Chinese all the time.

--Use the website sources to search specific words in certain situational contexts

e.g. 1. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/> for the definition of new words.

<https://www.freecollocation.com/search?word=> for collocations

Websites of corpus

<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

<https://www.english-corpora.org/coc...> for various contexts of its use with large number of sample sentences from extensive sources.

Hints for peer reviewing

Read your peer's first draft of "What makes a good essay?" and examine whether it uses specific words or supplies detailed information (with examples).

Global issues:

-- thesis statement? Key points? Well-supported? They work well? Well-organized?

Fresh ideas?

Local issues:

--diction, sentence structures, grammatical problems with sentences, transition between two parts? mechanics...

Grade it and sign your name

Comment on the task of W1

Something about writing (How can it be more effective?)

I agree with the claim "... writing (makes) an exact man". Reasons are as follows: **(A better beginning? How to make a thesis statement?)**

Firstly, we can regard writing as kind of "output", whose fundamental function of noticing and triggering. When we are writing, we can easily notice the gap between what we want to express and what we can actually express. If the words fail to convey the idea, we, as writers, will be motivated to acquire and recognize new language knowledge to make the internal and external meet. This kind of targeted and repeating training promote our exact diction in an article. For example, as usual, we say "the gap between cities and the countryside". But we can find that when the same meaning showed by the Press, they use "the urban-rural divide", which is brief, concise, spot-on and more attractive.

Secondly, Rome was not built in a day. Likewise, no good article can be written at one go. Unceasing feedback, embellishment and modification facilitate our sensitivity to language. The process of **setting our mindset as an English native** can help us activate and consolidate the expressions we have learned before. **(How?)**

Thirdly, writing is the communication between the writer and reader. A strategy of writing is to **polish the words** to convince others and arouse the same kind of feeling among readers as well. On the one hand, an article is the appearance of writer's thoughts. So the word usage and the order of unrolling a story play a vital role to make sense. On the other hand, readers pick out the splendid part to add to their own knowledge base. They don't just follow one's opinions blindly but think critically and even do response (odd). The integration sharpens the thinking pattern of both. **(A good point!)**

In conclusion, accomplishing an article can be divided into 3 steps: writing, modifying and conveying. With the deepening, we become more and more exact in all directions. **(Polish the language.)**

Analysis and comments on students' draft

It is very easy to see why Tu Youyou is called a great scientist. She displays every quality that we respect and admire. When I think of her contributions to mankind, I am aware that she is a person set apart. Every virtue that we have heard about from childhood was clearly evident in her life. Her great deeds command our adulation. She did the kinds of things that we ought to do. For all these reasons, Tu Youyou is truly great.

Anything very vague?

It is very easy to see why **Tu Youyou** is called a great scientist. She displayed **every quality** that we respect and admire. When I think of **her contributions to mankind**, I am aware that she is **a person set apart**. Every virtue that we have heard about from childhood was clearly evident in her life. Her **great deeds** command our adulation. She

did **the kinds of things** that we ought to do. For all these reasons, Tu Youyou is truly great.

Comments:

Words there are

--too general to convey any exact meaning;

--failing to indicate the writer's intention;

--having logical problems;

The writer seems hesitant and unconfident. He or she almost fails to communicate.

Suggestions for the improvement of this draft

1. **Use specific diction, taking into consideration the academic background of the scientist**

“Tu Youyou (屠呦呦; born on 30 Dec., 1930) is a Chinese **pharmaceutical chemist** and **malariologist**. She discovered **artemisinin** (/ˌɑːtɪˈmiːsɪnɪn/ qīnghāosù) and dihydroartemisinin (二氢青蒿素), used to treat **malaria**, a **breakthrough** in twentieth-century tropical medicine, **saving millions of lives** in South China, Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. For her work, Tu received the 2011 Lasker Award in clinical medicine and the 2015 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine jointly with William C. Campbell and Satoshi Ōmura.” (<https://pantheon.world/profile/person>)

2. **Describe her qualities as a devoted pharmaceutical chemist;**

e.g. consistent experiments with ... and numerous analyses of the components for the medicine; countless testing of its effect...

3. **Narrate about and explain her role in identifying artemisinin or finding the cure for malaria;**

4. **Argue for her contribution to maintaining the public health of people around the world in the past decades.**

Going on with the revised draft

***A Great/Respectable/Memorable/True/Sincere...Scientist
(Educator/philosopher/chemist/...)***

Description shows his or her character, appearance, habitual behavior;

Narration displays the important event that highlighted his or her career as a scientist;

Expository explains what he or she has achieved;

Argumentation defends the point that she or he deserves the honor of being a great scientist.

Write an essay of 400 words, with a focus on the concept of being great.