

WORK SHEET Word Choice

Three criteria of wording: 1) grammatical criterion (correctly)

2) meaning criterion (accurately)

3) style criterion (effectively)

Objectives: 1) to know the levels of diction;

2) to know how to choose the right words in English writing.

Word choice is very important for the development of a mature prose style. Indeed, to communicate effectively, you need to understand the different levels of diction: **formal and informal, abstract and concrete, and general and specific**. You need to be able to appreciate the connotative as well as the denotative meanings of words, to prune the prose of wordiness and redundancy, and to watch out for slang, jargon, and **cliché**.

1. Levels of Diction

1.1 Formal and Informal

In terms of formality, English words can be categorized as formal and informal. Formal diction is used in the standard discourse suitable for academic or business writing. Rather formal diction is used in the following “thank-you” letter to the CEO of a company after a job interview:

Thank you very much for giving me an opportunity to discuss my application and credentials with you. I enjoyed meeting you and other senior executive officers and I trust that my experience in market analysis will prove useful in helping your company expand your market share among the competitors. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Informal diction is more conversational and reflects a more casual relationship between writer and audience, as shown in the following “thank-you” note to someone the writer knows:

Thanks much for writing that big reference letter for me. It means so much to me. I believe my work in market analysis will be quite useful for ATM South. I hope they will consider my application seriously and offer the position to me.

If the same job applicant writes to a personal friend about the same topic, the diction used could be even more informal, or colloquial:

I've got all the right stuff for them at ATM South, Bob, and I wouldn't be surprised if I get another call from them soon. They must be nuts if they pass me up. Oh, I need this job badly. Wish me luck!

In fact, colloquial expressions are quite popular on college campuses in the United States. For example, you may often overhear conversations between a professor and a student somewhat like the one in the following:

Student: Hi, prof, do you have a sec?

Professor: Hey, Jimmy, what's up?

Student: Well, I was wondering if I'd flunk bio this sem.

Professor: What made you worried?

Student: I'm having a rough time, you know, with everything going on, and all the courses I'm taking, like psych, lit, stats, phys, ed, and all that stuff.

In this conversation, prof stand for professor, sec for second, bio for biology, sem for semester, psych for psychology, lit for literature, stats for statistics, and phys. ed for physical education.

Even more informal than colloquialism is **slang**, a vocabulary of playful but often short-lived "substandard" words and phrases which sometimes carry with them intense vividness and deliberate irreverence (see fuller discussion on the topic in the following).

Abbreviations are usually considered as less formal than full forms. Thus sec. is informal, while section is formal; vol. informal and volume formal. Informal style may rely partly on abbreviations, others being contractions and short sentences.

The formality or informality of diction or language is not absolute, but relative. Much writing you do every day is neither exclusively formal nor completely informal. However, you should be aware of and be sensitive to the different levels of formality, choose words that are appropriate to your rhetorical context (subject, audience, and purpose), and try to maintain a consistent level of formality. Check your academic writing for any excessively informal words or phrases. Similarly, check for excessive formality in your informal writing. Strive to keep the level of formality appropriate to the context and consistent in each piece of writing. To use overly formal expressions on a very informal occasion would be no different from wearing suit and tie and shiny leather shoes at a get-together of old friends. Conversely, to use extremely informal or slang expressions on a very formal occasion would be like wearing T-shirts, baggy jeans, and dirty sneakers at a rather fancy wedding party in a five-star hotel. **An essay written with a mixture of formal, informal, colloquial, and slang expressions would taste like a drink mixed with expensive French wine and cheap locally brewed beer.**

The following example may give you a feel of what it would taste like if you mix different levels of diction together:

Mr. John Smith proclaims that he is concerned with ecology and the preservation of natural beauty. But he doesn't give a flip about littering public places. Johnny purchases clothes from the most extravagant store in town yet he is a happy brown bagger when it comes to lunch. I am clueless about this dude; he is full of contradictions.

In this short paragraph, the mixture of formal and informal expressions (Mr. John Smith/Johnny/this dude; is concerned with/doesn't give a flip) gives it a neither-fish-nor-fowl flavor.

Trying to maintain a consistent level of formality may prove particularly challenging for non-native speakers. If you are not sure of the usage of a word or expression, be sure to look it up in an English-English dictionary.

More examples:

1. 1) My beloved parent has just perished from the earth to his heavenly reward.

(吾之先考猝然逾越红尘往受上苍之嘉奖。)

1a) My dear father has just expired. (先父适才气绝。)

1b) My dear father has just passed away. (我亲爱的父亲刚刚离去。)

1c) My dad has just died. (我爸爸刚死。)

1d) My old man has just kicked the bucket. (我那老子刚才蹬腿了。)

2. 2) As regards the man I deem him an incredible one. (论及此人，鄙人以为难以信赖。)
- 2a) In my opinion he is not of the individual who we desire. (以我之见，他并非我们期望之人。)
- 2b) I believe that he is not the man we want. (我认为他不是我们所要的人。)
- 2c) I don't think he's the man we're looking for. (我看他不是我们要找的人。)
- 2d) 'fraid he's not our man. (恐怕他不是我们要的那号人。)

以上五句句意相差无几，但它们文体的正式程度不同，自上而下由正式到非正式依次递降。

Task 1

1. Distinguish between the informal and the formal words in the following pairs:

boss, superior; brainy, intelligent; friend, pal; fail, flunk; relatives, folks; position, job; kid, child; knock off, stop working; mean, ill-natured; meagre, skimpy; sloppy, untidy; nap, snooze; bike, bicycle; laboratory, lab; exam, examination; man, guy.

2. Classify the following as formal, informal, slang, derogatory, literary, American English, etc.

- 1) cash, currency, dough, legal tender, lucre, money, sugar;
- 2) all in, exhausted, fagged out, fatigued, tired, weary;
- 3) apparel, clothes, garments, rags, raiment, clothing;
- 4) cinema, films, flickers, motion pictures, movies, photoplays, pictures;
- 5) job, place, position, post, situation, station.

3. The following is a student's essay in which the author uses a mixed style. Revise the essay, making it consistent in style.

Practice Makes Perfect

A famous saying goes that "practice makes perfect". It means that when people are learning to do something new, they will be good at it only after having lots of practice over and over again.

I have had such experiences for many times. In learning English it's especially true. To learn English well, we must read more, speak more, listen more and write more. At the beginning, I **couldn't** speak English fluently, so I took every chance to practice, such as going to the English corner, talking to foreigners, reading English aloud in the morning, and even speaking to myself from time to time. I kept the practice for a long time and to my delight, my spoken English was much better than before. It's also the same in English listening and writing.

Another example, when people first learn to type, they are not familiar with the keyboard and **cannot** type very fast. As long as they keep on practicing, they are sure to learn the skill and type fast enough.

I like the saying – practice makes perfect, which encourages me to practice more till I reach perfectness.

1.2 General/Abstract and Specific/Concrete

General words identify broad categories (people, place, and fruit) while specific words identify individual members of broad categories (John, Shanghai, and apple). Abstract words identify ideas and ideals that cannot be perceived by the senses (love, patriotism, and honesty) while concrete words identify things tangible to the senses (rose, battle wound, and returned money). Successful writers employ a broad spectrum of words, using abstract and general terms to represent ideas, explain attitudes, and explore relationships such as contingency (if something will happen), causality (why it occurs), and priority (what

is first in time or importance); using concrete and specific words to clarify and illustrate general ideas and abstract concepts.

General/Abstract: Technology has impacted every aspect of life in Chinese society today.

Specific/Concrete: Millions of residents in both the country and the city have had telephone services installed in their homes. **Lived/dwell/inhabit/reside**

Note: the language used in the second sentence gives specific/concrete information to illustrate the first sentence. The following sentence gives even more specific/concrete information to illustrate both the first and second sentences:

Specific/Concrete: Now a farmer in a small village in Anhui Province can simply pick up the phone to order the seeds or fertilizers from the comfort of his home instead of having to get on crowded buses and travelling for hours if not days.

Concrete images and specific details can help make your writing clearer and more vivid. Consider the following sentence: "Mary walked into the restaurant." The diction in this sentence may at first seem specific, but it is not. Aren't there different ways to "walk"? And what restaurant did Mary enter? Because the sentences below use more specific diction, they answer both of these questions.

Mary staggered(蹒跚) into Denny's.

Mary paraded(炫耀) into Red Lobster.

Mary shuffled(慢吞吞地走) into McDonald's.

Mary sashayed(滑步走) into Oogies.

Mary strutted(大摇大摆地走) into The Red Door.

Mary limped(跛行) into Burger King

Mary waddled(蹒跚) into Oink's Gourmet Bar-B-Que.

Mary sauntered (漫步, 闲逛) into Subway.

Mary crept (匍匐爬行) into Monari's 101.

Mary marched (长驱直入) into Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Mary tiptoed (用脚尖走) into Pizza Hut.

Mary strolled (散步, 闲逛) into Hardee's.

Mary slinked (溜走) into Uptown Bar & Grill.

Mary swaggered (大摇大摆, 趾高气扬地走) into Verucchi's Ristorante.

Mary trudged (步履艰难地走) into Wendy's.

Mary pranced (昂首阔步地走) into Taco Bell.

More examples:

General: John is a good student.

Specific: In college, John has been rewarded a scholarship over five years.

General: Your relative is nice to me.

Specific: Your aunt Betty always stops and talks to me when she meets me in the street.

General: He has a big house.

Specific: He has a two-storeyed house with four bedrooms, two living-rooms, a dining-room and a kitchen.

General: We had fun at the beach.

Specific: Last Sunday night we barbecued hamburgers at Sagamore Beach, played volleyball, and then sat around singing and telling ghost stories.

General: It was such a nice thing to do. It made me feel grand.

Specific: It was such a generous remark that it brought tears to my eyes.

Task 2

1. Decide which word in each group is more general.

- 1) book, publication, Huckleberry Finn, novel
- 2) clothing, men's wear, jeans, trousers
- 3) food, apple, fruit, Winesap
- 4) tools, equipment, wrenches, crescent wrenches
- 5) music, art, Beethoven's Fifth, piano concerto

2. Rewrite the following sentences, making general words more specific.

- 1) I did a lot of things during my vacation.
- 2) Several aspects of the room made it unattractive.
- 3) It's an interesting book.
- 4) The injury that our best player had suffered was serious enough to keep him out of the game.
- 5) After eating, we had some really good entertainment.
- 6) One member of the group was irresponsible about some of her duties.
- 7) During the last part of the trip, we encountered several difficulties.
- 8) Many items around the place needed to be repaired before the people could move in.

3. Revise the following paragraph from a job application letter by substituting specific, concrete language for general or abstract words and phrases.

I have had several part-time jobs lately. Some of them would qualify me for the position you advertised. In my most recent job, I sold products in a store. My supervisor said I was a good worker who had a number of valuable qualities. I am used to dealing with different types of people in different settings. I feel that my qualifications would make me a good candidate for your job opening.

1.3 Denotation and Connotation

Denotation is a word's literary or dictionary meaning while connotation is a word's associative meanings along with its literal meaning. Denotations tend to be neutral and objective and connotations are usually subjective, personal, and frequently involving feelings and suggesting concrete images.

As a writer, it is important to know the connotations of the words you use. Although you cannot know how different readers may react to particular words, you do need to know the positive and negative connotations certain words convey. For example, although mother means "female parent" and father means "male parent", both words have emotional implications that go beyond the objective definitions. Those emotional implications have a lot to do with the feelings, attitudes, and experiences our own mothers and fathers conjure up in our minds and hearts. In Chinese culture at least, we tend to associate tender kind-heartedness with mothers (hence the expression *ci mu*) and strict discipline and moral upbringing with fathers (hence the expression *yan fu*) even though many fathers are known to be tender kind-hearted (hence the expression *ci fu*). Across all cultures, the mother and the father have a set of generally shared public connotations, the former suggesting nurturing and devotion to children while the latter suggesting strength, courage, and leadership. In English, there are a spectrum of other words which also express the same objective definitions but suggest different levels of relationship and attitude: ma, mam, mama, mammy, mom, old lady, and old woman; dad, dada, daddy, pa, papa, pappy, pop, and old

man.

Some English words seem to have almost exact equivalents in Chinese as far as denotations are concerned, but they have quite different connotations. Take propaganda, for example. Propaganda (xuan chuan in Chinese) is a rather neutral if not positive term in Chinese; in fact, many Chinese are engaged in the so-called xuan chuan work. But this term has a rather pejorative connotation in English, suggesting deliberate spreading of false information or rumors for certain purposes. To use this word to describe certain activities and jobs associated with xuan chuan can cause rather negative feelings on the part of native-speakers of English.

Since English is rich in synonyms, often you can have a whole spectrum of words to choose from to describe a subject. These words, similar in denotations, are quite different in their shades of meaning. For example, an assignment can be either difficult, tough, or challenging. While all three express the same idea that the assignment is not easy, the word challenging suggests a more positive and upbeat attitude on part of the speaker or writer.

Different shades of meaning among synonyms can be quite challenging to non-native speakers and developing a sensitivity to them is critical to your ability to use the language clearly, accurately, and effectively.

Task 3 Please rearrange the words in the following groups according to their connotations, from the negative, the neutral, to the positive.

1.tame/dull/drab/quiet/boring/monotonous/tedious

2.slender/slim/skinny/thin/slight/anorexic

3.famous/notorious/well known/infamous

4.wealthy/opulent/rich/affluent/privileged

5.teacher/instructor/educator/professor/lecturer

2. Choosing the Right Words

2.1 Avoid Wordiness and Redundancy

Wordiness results when a writer uses more words than necessary to convey a meaning. Wordy sentences often sound formal or official – even intimidating though in reality they say so little. Writers tend to resort to wordy sentences when they want to impress readers or aren't sure what they want to say. Redundancy, on the other hand, is pointless repetition that results from saying the same thing more than once. It's not rare that wordiness and redundancy occur at the same time. Because most readers don't want to wade through repetitious, wordy verbiage that wastes their time, you should try to keep the sentences vigorous by pruning any "deadwood"– unneeded words.

Wordy: In the final analysis, choosing the carrier Japan Airline for my international flight has resulted in my realization that long-distance international flight doesn't have to be uncomfortable.

Revised: Choosing Japan Airline for my international flight made me realize that such long-distance flight doesn't have to be uncomfortable.

Redundant: Sue, who is quick-tempered, usually cannot wait for others to finish and blows up before hearing the whole story.

Revised: Sue is quick-tempered and usually blows up before hearing the whole story.

To invigorate your sentences, you should keep an eye on the following types of “clutter” or “deadwood”.

a. Redundant Word Pairs

English contains many word pairs in which the second word is used to reinforce the first even though in reality it enfeebles it.

first and foremost	null and void	one and only	pick and choose
plain and simple	rules and regulations	fair and equitable	aid and abet

You can avoid redundancy by picking or choosing just one from the pair:

Redundant: Each and every one of us should exert ourselves in this project.

Revised: Every one of us should exert ourselves in this project.

b. Redundant Modifiers

The modifiers in the following phrases are totally redundant and absolutely unnecessary:

absolutely essential	actual truth of the matter	awful tragedy	very unique
basic fundamentals	completely finished	component parts	desired goal
end result	final outcome	foreign imports	free gifts
important essentials	mutual cooperation	past history	totally exhausted true facts

Redundant: Our future hope was to have a chance to visit the Great Wall of China.

Revised: Our hope was to have a chance to visit the Great Wall of China.

c. Redundant Categories

Words designating categories, when used in phrases such as purple in color, oval in shape, and rough texture, are redundant.

Redundant: A bag brown in color was founding the conference room.

Revised: A brown bag was found in the conference room.

Redundant: These imported T-shirts are rather expensive in price.

Revised: These imported T-shirts are rather expensive.

d. Wordy Phrases/Constructs

To streamline your prose, try to replace wordy phrases and constructs with precise words where possible:

Why use...	When you can just use...?
At the present moment	now
At this point in time	now
for the most part	mostly
I am of the opinion that	I think
ideas of a serious nature	serious ideas
in view of the fact that	since
there is a need for	we need

e. Wordy Verb Phrases

Verb phrases (created by clustering verbs, nouns, and prepositions) sometimes can make sentences less vigorous, more cumbersome, and unnecessarily formal. Replace them with simple and direct verbs

wherever possible.

Why say...

Give permission to

When you could just say...?

allow

Have an understanding of

understand

Make a commendation

recommend

f. Excessive Prepositional Phrases

Excessive use of prepositional phrases, though it may not affect clarity, can make the sentences cumbersome.

Awkward: Windows 98 designed and manufactured by Microsoft and released by the company has been rated okay by analysts in the field of computers. [4 prepositional phrases, 23 words]

Revised: Microsoft's newly released Window 98 has been rated okay by computer analysts. [1 prepositional phrase, 12 words]

g. Excessive Nominalization

Nominalization (changing a verb form to its noun form) tends to make writing abstract and formal yet reduces its energy and liveliness. To energize your writing, replace words that end with the suffixes -ment, -tion, and -ance with verbs wherever possible.

Weak: State-run enterprises around the country are currently engaged in an examination of their management structures as part of their plan for the reduction of costs. [25 words]

Revised: State-run enterprises around the country are currently examining their management structures as part of their plan to reduce costs. [19 words, leaner and more energetic]

Weak: It is our expectation that the parts we have ordered will be delivered on schedule. [15 words]

Revised: We expect the parts we have ordered to be delivered on schedule. [12 words]

h. Adjective Clauses

Sometimes replacing an adjective clause with an adjective/adjectival phrase or trimming a clause down to an appositive can make the sentences leaner and more vigorous.

Weak: Professor Jerry Browne, who has been teaching at the same college for almost thirty years and whose house is right next to mine, has decided to retire by the end of this semester. [33 words].

Revised: Professor Jerry Browne, a thirty-year veteran of the college and my next-door neighbor, has decided to retire by the end of this semester. [23 words]

Weak: My son, who is fifteen years old and who is a burgeoning pianist, has made it to the Governors' School for the summer. [23 words with an adjective clause]

Revised: My fifteen-year-old son, a burgeoning pianist, has made it to the Governors' School for the summer. [16 words with an adjectival phrase and an appositive]

i. More Examples

Redundant: Persons going into the military in the U.S. know all the benefits that they are going to get out of it: the GI Bill, free room and board, great living, free food, etc.

Revised: Persons going into the military in the U.S. know all the benefits that they are going to get, such as the GI Bill, and free room and board.

Redundant: I think the most qualified person has a right to the job, the most qualified person deserves

the job, and finally the most qualified person is entitled to the job.

Revised: I think the most qualified person both deserves and is entitled to the job.

Wordy: It appears to me from my vantage point that the average new college students (most of whom are only children at home) experience some serious difficulty in making the necessary adjustment from secondary school mind-set to college mind-set. The everyday classroom behavior of the average freshman, as far as I have observed, reflects a level of maturity that is disappointing and considerably below my expectations. [65 words]

Revised: The average new college students (most of whom are only children at home) experience serious difficulty in adjusting from secondary school to college. Their everyday classroom behavior reflects a disappointing level of maturity. [Trimmed down to 33 words and nothing is lost]

Wordy and Redundant: Although all three candidates would likely be successful in adequately fulfilling the duties required in all aspects regarding the position, join me on a quest to decide which one of the three candidates will utilize his or her knowledge, skills, and talents most effectively to ensure the students they have received the best choice in a college professor. [59 words]

Revised: Although all three candidates are qualified for the position, join me in choosing the one whose knowledge, skills and talents would benefit the students the most. [26 words]

Task 4 Rewrite the following passage and delete unnecessary words.

Perhaps the most interesting person I have ever met is an ~~interesting~~ Italian professor of philosophy who teaches courses at the University of Pisa in Italy. Although I last met this man eight years ago, I have not forgotten over the long years his special qualities.

First of all, I was impressed from the beginning by his complete devotion to teaching ~~his students.~~ Because his lectures were always well-prepared and ~~invariably~~ clearly delivered, a great many students always swarmed into his classroom, filling the classroom to capacity. His many followers also appreciated the fact that he thoroughly believed in what he taught ~~to students~~ and that he was always intellectually stimulating to hear. Furthermore, he could be counted on in every class session to explain his ideas in an imaginative way, introducing such various aids to student understanding as oil paintings, photograph records, pieces of sculpture, and guest lecturers who were invited to speak to the class. Once he even sang a song in class before the students' eyes in order to illustrate a philosophical point.

Second, I admired the fact that he would confer with students at almost any time outside of the classroom or talk with them on the telephone. Drinking coffee in the snack bar after having taught a class, he would ~~easily~~ make friends with students with great ease. Sometimes he would issue a challenge to a student to join with him in a game of chess. At other times, he would quite readily join groups of students to discuss subjects ranging broadly from astronomy to scuba diving. Many young people visited him at one time or another in his office for academic advice; others came to his home for the purpose of social evenings.

Finally, I was favorably impressed and attracted by his lively wit. He believed that no class hour is a success unless, during it, the students and the professor have a reason to join together to share several chuckles and at least one loud laugh. Through his inimitable and captivating sense of humor, he made learning much more enjoyable and ~~much more~~ lasting. If it is true, as it seems to be, that life makes a wise man smile and a foolish man cry, then my friend is without question truly a wise man. Probably the best example he could ~~possibly~~ have given to us of his wit is this interesting idea with which he once ended a

lecture: "It is as dangerous for man to model himself upon his invention, the machine, as it would be for God to model Himself upon His invention".

Task 5 Rewrite the following by using standard dictions:

- 1) Bob is really a big mouth and likes to jump all over others. Likes to gossip and behaves arrogantly
- 2) The fans went nuts when their team finally won the game. Were ecstatic
- 3) Harry told his supervisor to get off his back and go fly a kite. Go away and stop bothering him
- 4) My office is really a goldfish bowl and I have to be careful who I'm talking to.
- 5) Stop grandstanding and get down to honest work.

Task 6 Look up the following expressions in an up-to-date English-English dictionary; pay particular attention to their usage:

- 1) tried and true
- 2) know the score/rope
- 3) sell/go like hotcakes
- 4) tip of the iceberg
- 5) turn a deaf ear to