

Word Choice

Even the most logical argument can be helped or hurt by the style in which it is written. Many people have difficulty developing an effective style, however, because they think that a good style is either a magical gift that one acquires at birth or the result of learning a set of infinitely complex rules. Neither of these impressions is correct. Style is a matter of decisions--bad or good--that can be made about every word one uses; style is therefore something that one can think rationally about, and something that one can learn. What one learns, however, is not merely a collection of arbitrary rules (though rules are of considerable importance); it is, instead, the habit of making conscious choices according to rational principles.

Here are some of the most important principles by which effective writers choose one word or phrase rather than another.

1. The structure of the language

This is the homeland of grammatical rules, rules that need to be obeyed in formal writing if one is not to be regarded as illiterate. Basic rules in formal English include, for example, the prohibition of double negatives. In many other languages, there will be no misunderstanding if you say that "Mary didn't never go to Indianapolis"; this will be regarded as simply an emphatic way of saying that she didn't go there. In formal English, however, this looks like a self-contradictory statement. Another example is subject-verb agreement; in formal English, a singular subject requires a singular verb, and a plural subject requires a plural verb: "I go there once a year" is correct, "I goes there" is not.

2. The established meanings of words

We use words in order to communicate with others--not in order to confuse them or make ourselves look confused. If we are trying to communicate with well-educated people, we must make sure that we attach the same meanings to words that they do. Often this requires a reference to the dictionary or to a handbook that lists words that are frequently misused. (Your teaching assistant will help you to develop a list of such words.) Many people, for instance, are unaware of the distinction between "capital" and "capitol," or "disinterested" and "uninterested." When they write that "Judge Smith was too disinterested to occupy a bench in the capitol," they think they are saying he is too uninterested, too inattentive, to be a judge in the leading city of the state. Actually, though, they are saying that he is too unprejudiced to be a judge in a certain building. They don't know that they are writing nonsense, but some of their readers do. This sort of thing can be fatal in college papers, job applications, or any other formal writing.

3. Clarity

Clear language is necessary if you are not to puzzle or irritate your audience. When revising your papers, check to make sure that you are using clear, rather than vague or misleading words. Here are two ways to check.

First, underline the words you use that are capable of taking more than one meaning. These may well be the most important words in your paper, since words that are commonly used and widely debated (like "democracy" or "freedom") often acquire many meanings. Look at your underlined words and make sure that you make clear the precise sense in which you mean to use these words. (Your teaching assistant can point out some ways of doing this.)

Second, read through your paper and picture or visualize the literal meaning of each word and sentence. When you do this, you can detect problems such as appear in the following examples. "I had trouble relating to Plato." This creates a very vague picture in the reader's mind. "Relating to" should be replaced by something more specific --"understanding," "agreeing with," "reading," "living by the teachings of," depending on what the writer wants to say. "Her argument centered around the ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures." I can picture something being centered, and I can picture something being around, but I can't picture something "centered around." "From this perspective we can start our next battle for university reform." Two different, conflicting images appear--one having to do with looking from a perspective, one having to do with fighting. It's hard to combine them both into one picture. How would you correct this sentence so as to make its meaning more visualizable?

4. Brevity

Long words and phrases generally tire an audience more than short ones, and some long words and phrases have a pompous sound to them. Why say "utilize" rather than "use," or talk about "the author of the Republic" rather than "Plato"? Some long expressions also contain redundancies or tautologies; they say the same thing twice: "we shared the book in common"; "the house was dark-colored, grey"; "she was the most important author in the history of nineteenth-century novel-writers" (this sentence could be reduced to: "she was the most important nineteenth-century novelist").

5. Audience

The audience to which you write will not always be a "general" one; it may be a very specific group of people united by age, sex, position, professional or political interests, etc. If you are writing to a group of computer salesmen, terms of professional jargon like "input," "interface," and "user-friendly" may be fully acceptable, even mandatory. But when you write a letter to the editor praising a government agency as "user-friendly" and "receptive to the public's input," you will make yourself look like either a pretentious show-off or a person ignorant of the normal language.

The degree of formality that your audience expects is also an important consideration. Contractions, for instance, are associated with rapid, informal conversation. They violate no grammatical rules or traditions, but one doesn't expect to see them in extremely formal writing. The audience of Supreme Court decisions might be shocked if Justice O'Connor began one of her decisions by saying, "We've checked the law-books, and there's no basis for the lower court's decision." But she might use many contractions in an address to the Washington Press Club, where less formal language is expected.

6. Connotations

The issue of audience is to some degree an issue of connotations. In the example above, the word "checked" may have the same denotation as the word "consulted" would have; it may refer to the same activity of looking at books. But the connotations, the associations of these words, are quite different. "Checked" is associated with breeziness, informality; "consulted" with formal, careful deliberation. The two words have different tones; they project different emotions about O'Connor's work. Everyone has been in the position of agreeing with someone's views but resenting his tone. The owner of a restaurant might resent my calling it a "drive-in," even though it's located by the highway and people drive up to it. "Drive-in" carries negative connotations, a negative tone, at least if your audience is the drive-in's owner. Of course, if you want to be sarcastic or satirical, you can carefully manipulate connotations in order to achieve your desired effect. Someone writing against Justice O'Connor's decisions could describe her "checking her lawbooks" and thereby convey the impression that she is not very serious about her work.

Manipulations of tone can be used to glorify as well as to condemn: "traitor," "rebel," "guerilla," "insurgent," "fighter," and "freedom-fighter" are words that may be used by people of different political beliefs to refer to precisely the same person. But whether they are used legitimately or not is a matter of fact, and not a matter of style. A writer who is merely an "effective stylist" will not fool careful readers into agreeing with "arguments" that are merely manipulations of tone. A "tyrant" does not really become a "leader" just because his propaganda department gives him an attractive label.

7. Emphasis

Good stylists generally choose the most emphatic terms that are available. Often they do this simply by choosing the briefest and commonest phrases, saying "janitors" rather than "sanitary engineers." Another method of achieving emphasis is to use unexpected words. Justice O'Connor, for instance, could achieve great emphasis by injecting a contraction or colloquial phrase into one sentence of a formal decision--though she would not achieve this kind of emphasis by loading her decisions with contractions, because then no one sentence would contain the element of surprise. Something similar might be said about authors who put flowery, "imaginative" phrases into every sentence, or load every sentence with highly emotive words. This is a way of depriving all sentences of emphasis, by making all sentences the same. No one likes an essay to laugh, snort, screech, weep, or applaud continually.

Another problem with using emphatic terms is the necessity of providing a logical foundation for them. Here are two sentences that say approximately the same thing, but say it in different ways:

Smith's interpretation of Plato is mistaken.

Smith's interpretation of Plato is fallacious and irresponsible.

Which sentence would you put at the beginning, and which at the end, of an essay? The first simply announces a thesis, so it can be placed at the beginning. The second goes at the end, because it needs to be prepared for by logical argument if it is not to be regarded as simply offensive.