

# To Use or Not to Use

*The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. —Mark Twain*

Of all languages, English has the largest vocabulary. English has a powerful arsenal with which to communicate precisely, effectively, and excitingly.

## Be Precise

Denotation is the literal or dictionary definition of a word.

- Beware of homophones (e.g., rained/reigned, there/their/they're, and to/too/two).
- Beware of malaprops (e.g., granite/granted, and threw out/throughout).
- Beware of words that are very close in sound, spelling, and sometimes meaning—*yet are **not** identical* (e.g., further/farther, effect/affect, continually/continuously, and then/than).
- A thesaurus offers words with similar, *but not necessarily identical*, meanings. It does not consider emotional impact or context. For example, “hard” and “firm” are synonyms, yet a “hard job” is not a “firm job.” Using a thesaurus runs the risk of selecting inappropriate words. Before deciding to use unfamiliar vocabulary, or if unsure of the appropriateness of a word, **open a dictionary**.

## Effective Words

When writing about emotions, select the word that carries the proper level of intensity.

- Discovering a snake just outside my front door startled me. — Low Intensity
- I was shaken when I discovered a snake just outside my front door. — Moderate Intensity
- I stood petrified when I discovered a snake just outside my front door. — High Intensity

All of the underlined words indicate a sudden onset of fear. However, the first indicates a passing reaction, the second a keenly-felt impact, and the third an incapacitating terror.

Adjectives and adverbs also carry different levels of intensity.

- A meaningful amount of evidence against the defendant exists. — Low Intensity
- A significant amount of evidence against the defendant exists. — Moderate Intensity
- An endless amount of evidence against the defendant exists. — High Intensity
- He labored methodically at his task. — Low Intensity
- He labored determinedly at his task. — Moderate Intensity
- He labored arduously at his task. — High Intensity

## The Importance of Context

A word's emotional impact can change depending on the situation. For example, a lazy weekend may sound appealing, but a lazy student will not get an appealing grade.

## Be Vivid

The object of good writing is to take control of what the reader sees in his or her mind's eye. Using precise words accomplishes this. Writing "a large animal" leaves the reader to decide whether an image of an elephant or a hippopotamus flashes through his or her brain. The author who writes "rhinoceros" controls what the reader pictures. Avoid "catch all" words, such as *stuff* and *things*, unless previous text specifically tells the reader what they are. Minimize various forms of "to be" verbs, such as *is* and *was*. For example, "dinner was good" is not a strong compliment. What was "good" about it? However, "dinner tasted delicious" is more likely to result in a second invitation. Use sensory terms such as *sounded*, *tasted*, and *smelled* to summon a response from readers.

## Name Names

Use proper nouns. A name makes a person, place, or thing come alive in a way a pronoun does not. Linda Garcia seems more real than "she." It is fine to use pronouns *after* identifying a person, place, or thing but return to the use of the proper noun from time to time to reinvigorate the writing.

## Be Varied

English's immense vocabulary allows writers to avoid repetition. A runner who is fast may also be called fleet, swift, or speedy. Using different words, even when they do not add nuance, is advantageous because it keeps the reader awake and engaged.

## Avoid Confusion

- Double negatives (for example *not never*) cause distraction by forcing the reader to guess what the writer really means and often result in unintended interpretations.
- Double superlatives (phrases such as *absolutely perfect* and *very unique*) are incorrect because there are no degrees of perfection or uniqueness.

## Dude, Like, Stay Away from Slang, Totally

Slang's purpose is to exclude outsiders from understanding what is being said. It is often transitory, regional, and/or age specific. Slang limits the writer's audience.

## Clichés or Been There, Done That

The use of pat phrases such as "deader than a doornail" shows a lack of originality. Quotes and paraphrases demonstrate the writer has done research, but using clichés adds no authority to an essay.

## Don't Use Contractions

Contractions *aren't* considered formal words. They *won't* be looked on favorably and a student who uses them *shouldn't* be surprised if she *doesn't* make an "A."