

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Better Words*

# 6



#### **TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW EVEN IF YOU DON'T READ THIS CHAPTER**

- 1.** If you're going to focus on one type of word, pick verbs. Nothing will improve your writing more than improving the verbs you use.
- 2.** A strong verb is one that has the meaning of an adverb inside it; it's a verb that not only communicates an action but also tells the reader how that action is performed.
- 3.** Most writing books will tell you that the passive voice is bad. But it has its place, especially when you want to hide the identity of the person or persons performing an action.
- 4.** Many people will tell you to write like you talk. But a better approach is to draft like you talk. Get your ideas down as quickly and as easily as possible. Then go back later in revision and improve your word choice.
- 5.** Most of the things you'll learn about improving your word choice will be about making your language more specific and precise.
- 6.** Big words may seem impressive when other people use them, but small words are often more appropriate and more effective.
- 7.** For a great word choice exercise, try writing a piece without using a certain letter of the alphabet (like "e" or "a") or a certain common word (like "the" or "and").
- 8.** Individual words can be interesting, but more often it's how we group words together in unusual phrases that gets our readers' attention.
- 9.** Improving your word choice is not about finding fancy words. It's about finding words that work—language that reaches readers in a way that sounds true to the writer who writes it.
- 10.** When you're writing for your friends, it's fine to use casual language. But when you're writing for adults, you may have to shift your language into a higher gear, and write more formally, if you want to be taken seriously.

## STICKS AND STONES

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” That may be true on the playground, but here at my desk, under deadline pressure and behind as usual, the fact that I can’t find the words I need is definitely a painful experience.

Most people who know me would say I have a large vocabulary. They’d probably also say I talk a lot, read a lot, love language, and that I’m rarely at a loss for words—unless I’m writing. Anyone who knows how I write knows that most of what I do isn’t writing, it’s rewriting. I labor endlessly over lists of synonyms. I try one turn of phrase and then another—writing, erasing, and writing again until I sometimes forget what I wanted to say in the first place. I’m always looking for better words even when the ones I have are probably good enough.

As ridiculous as it sounds, I like to think of myself as a word warrior, fighting for truth and clarity, wielding language like a sword. But I’m really more of a word worrier instead. I’m always asking questions like: Does this make sense? Will my readers understand me? Is there a better way to say this? I like to think that my word worrying is productive, that the effort I put in really does make my writing better. But that isn’t always the case. Sometimes, while searching for the best way to express myself, I end up creating more problems than I solve.

Take my last book, for example. I must have read and revised every sentence ten times. Then I sent it out to a group of friends over e-mail. Almost instantly, I had a mountain of suggestions in my inbox for better ways to say things. I had spent months carefully constructing my sentences, packing them with the best words I could find, only to discover that, in just a few minutes, several of my friends came up with even better ones.

Ouch. That hurts. Sticks and stones would be less painful.

## TIP:

It's one thing when people tell you your writing could be better. It's another thing entirely when they change your words. And yet, this is exactly what so many people like to do when they give you feedback. How do I deal with it? By remembering that feedback is more about the person giving it than the person getting it. When someone tells me there's a better way to say something, I know that what they're really saying is that that's how they'd say it if they were the author. But they're not; I am. So I get to decide—at least until my editors and publisher overrule me. Since I know that the feedback I get from people is really about them and how they feel, I don't have to let it bother me. I can use what I find helpful and ignore what I don't.



### WHY ARE WORDS SO HARD TO WORK WITH?

Working with words should be the easiest part of writing. After all, we know thousands of them, we use them every day, we only have to deal with them one at a time, and most of them are short. With only the slightest effort, words should fly from our fingers and arrange themselves in perfect order on the page. But they don't. And even the best writers can't explain why.

Deep inside each of us there has to be some brain-to-body process we use to find words for our ideas. And since our brains and our bodies are more alike than they are different, that process should be more or less the same for every writer. But how that process works is one of the great mysteries of our craft. Or maybe it's not a mystery. Maybe it's a puzzle. Or a riddle. Or a conundrum. Or an enigma. Or any of a half dozen other words I just looked up in my favorite online thesaurus.

Aye, there's the rub: We've got so many words to choose from, we don't know which ones to choose.

Scientists estimate that the average kindergartener knows 10,000 words. A high schooler, 60,000. A well-educated adult, 120,000. People in specialized professions, like doctors and lawyers, may have vocabularies even larger than that. And this isn't nearly all the words there are. Some large English-language dictionaries have half a million words in them.

Worst of all is the fact that we have no way of knowing if our readers know the same words we do. Writing is communication. But we don't communicate very well when we use words our readers don't understand. And things get even crazier when we start using words we don't understand.

Words are tricky. The same ones mean different things to different people. They change their meanings depending on how they're used. Old ones die out. New ones are invented every day. And even the most respected dictionaries sometimes disagree about what certain words mean.

Words: Can't write with 'em, can't write without 'em.

### WORDS TO DESCRIBE WORDS

One thing we can be sure of is that readers appreciate well-chosen words. The quality of a writer's language is one of the first things people notice. But what is it exactly that they're noticing? Here are five important things:

- **Strong verbs that show how actions are performed.** Did you know that some verbs are stronger than others? I didn't either until I started studying writing. Take a verb like "run," for example. It doesn't give us nearly as much information as the verb "sprint." When we read that someone sprinted away, we know they ran but we also know they ran very quickly. Verbs that include this extra information are said to be stronger—and thus more highly valued—than those that don't.

- **Words that make ideas more specific.** In general, it's better to be specific than it is to be general. You've got an idea in your head. You want to get it down on paper so it can find its way into someone else's head. The more specific your language, the more likely it is that your readers will receive the same message you send.
- **Groups of words that readers find meaningful and memorable.** Readers may read words one at a time, but they tend to be more impressed when writers arrange them in small groups. For the most part, we don't think much about coming up with surprising combinations of words. But a well-crafted turn of phrase here and there is all it takes to turn basic writing into better writing—and better writing is more likely to be remembered by our readers.
- **“Just right” words used in just the right way.** There's a part of effective word choice that some people call “usage.” To use words effectively, we not only have to know their definitions, we also have to be aware of the common situations, or contexts, in which they are used. Good usage takes a long time to develop. Most people pick it up by listening to good speakers and by reading good writers.
- **Appropriate language for purpose and audience.** Everyone knows there are words and phrases that shouldn't be used in some writing situations. People may say this is bad language, or that you're a bad person for using it, but the simplest truth is that it's just bad writing because inappropriate language makes it hard for people to understand your ideas.

Words are everywhere. We can hardly go through a minute of our lives without seeing them, saying them, hearing them, or thinking about them. But writing them is a little different, especially when we're trying to write well. Writing isn't about using words; it's about choosing words. And because there are so many words to choose from, and so many different ways to string them together, hunting for the best ones is sometimes a tedious task. But it can also be incredibly satisfying.

There's a feeling we get when we find the perfect words to express an idea. It's like the feeling of solving a puzzle, winning a game, or guessing the number of marbles in a huge glass jar. Better still is the feeling we get when our readers tell us they thought our words were perfect, too. Beautifully crafted language is both meaningful and magical. Like saying a prayer or making a wish, putting the right words together in just the right way can make amazing things happen.



### YOUR CHECKLIST FOR BETTER WORDS

Because the words we use are so much a part of who we are, it can be difficult to discover how we need to improve in this aspect of our writing. To raise our awareness, it's helpful to consider some criteria for effective word choice, along with a few key questions we can ask ourselves when we assess our work.

**You know you're doing a great job with words when your writing has:**

**Strong verbs that show how actions are performed.** Where have you used strong verbs? How do they show readers how actions are performed? What makes them more effective than the weak verbs and modifiers they are replacing?

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**Words that make ideas more specific.** Where is your language most specific? How do these places differ from places where your language is more general? Where you've chosen more specific language, how do you know you understand the exact meanings of the words you're using?

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**Groups of words readers find meaningful and memorable.** Where do you find groups of words that are especially meaningful and memorable? What makes these phrases so effective? Are there similarities or patterns in these groups of words that you can use as strategies to improve other parts of your writing?

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**“Just right” words used in just the right way.** Where have you reworded parts of sentences to make them more effective? Where have you been able to make your writing more efficient by removing words that were redundant or otherwise unnecessary? Where have you been able to substitute one or two high-quality words for longer strings of less effective words? Have you checked the meanings of words you’re unsure of so you know you’re using them correctly?

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**Appropriate language for purpose and audience.** Who is your audience? Why are you writing to them? How do they want to be addressed? How do they speak and write? What expectations do they have of you in terms of the language you will use and how you will address them? Have you used any words that your readers may find offensive?

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The way to approach improving your use of words is very gradually, perhaps even one word at a time. Often, I’m happy if I can fix a single phrase in a piece. Concentrating on small victories in the war on words has had two big advantages for me: it keeps me from going crazy looking for every nitpicky little problem; and it helps me gain confidence in my ability to find and fix the common errors I make on a regular basis.

## WHERE THE ACTION IS

Verbs are where the action is—literally and figuratively. As you’ve probably been told a thousand times, verbs are the action words in a sentence. When I go to the store, “going” is the action and “go” is the verb. That’s the literal part of the equation. It’s easy to understand but it’s not going to help you become a better writer no matter how many “find the verb” worksheets your teachers ask you to fill out.

More valuable is the notion that verbs are the engines of our sentences. Nothing energizes writing more than high-powered verbs; no other type of word commands a reader’s attention so effectively. Verbs make the message move. And using them well will definitely make you a better writer.

### ARE YOUR VERBS AS STRONG AS THEY CAN BE?

Year after year when I was in school, and even for many years thereafter, teachers and other writing advisors told me I needed to use strong verbs. But nobody ever told me what a strong verb was, why we used the word “strong” to describe them, or how to exchange them for the weak verbs I was apparently foisting on my readers.

As I mentioned in the previous section, writing is full of mysteries. Some are truly unknowable, like the way words travel from our brain to our fingers to the page. But many others are not. And so it is with the “mystery” of the strong verb.

Because you shouldn't have to go through the many years of frustration I did trying to figure this one out, here's the skinny on strong verbs:

- **What is a strong verb?** A strong verb is one that has the meaning of an adverb inside it. It's a verb that not only communicates an action but also tells the reader how that action is performed. An adverb, as you may recall from many a boring grammar lesson, is a word that modifies a verb. Many of them end in “ly.” So let's say you write the following sentence: “The man walked leisurely down the street.” In this case, “walked” is the verb and “leisurely” is the adverb that modifies it; “leisurely” tells you how the man walked. But instead, you could write this sentence: “The man ambled down the street.” The verb “ambled” means “walked leisurely.” It conveys the meaning of the weak verb “walked” and the meaning of the adverb “leisurely” at the same time.
- **Why do we use the term “strong” to describe them?** When you write “ambled” instead of “walked leisurely,” you're using one word to do the work of two. That's what makes one verb stronger than another. By including in a single word both the action and how that action is performed, strong verbs carry more information more efficiently than weak verbs do. Sometimes a strong verb can do the work of an entire phrase. For example, the meaning in this sentence: “The man walked down the street, showing off as though

he were trying to attract attention” is pretty much the same as the meaning in this sentence: “The man paraded down the street.”

In the first case, “showing off as though he were trying to attract attention” is what some people might call an “adverbial phrase” or a group of words that modifies a verb. In the second case, the strong verb “paraded” carries off the whole scene vividly by itself.

- **How do I put strong verbs into my writing?** Our teachers probably hope that strong verbs would jump right out of us during drafting. But that rarely happens for me. So I focus on strengthening verbs in revision. For the most part, when I draft, it’s all I can do to get my ideas down. But as I re-read, I tell myself to be on the lookout for all the weak verbs I’ve left behind. When I spot one, I ask myself questions like these: “How could I make the verb I’m using more specific? How could I describe the way the action is being performed? Is there an adverb or adverbial phrase in the sentence I might be able to replace with a single strong verb?” Sometimes these questions jog my memory and an appropriate strong verb pops into my head. But when that doesn’t happen, I go to an online thesaurus and look up synonyms for the weak verb I’m trying to improve. When I find a synonym that looks promising, I look up its meaning in an online dictionary to make sure I’m using it accurately.

Strong verbs don’t have to be unusual verbs; strength is not a matter of obscurity, it’s a matter of specificity. Ambling is a kind of walking. But so is pacing, striding, or marching. If we refer to what someone is doing simply as “walking,” that’s a general term. Using a stronger verb gives our readers a clearer, more specific picture of what’s going on.

If you want a shorthand way of remembering what a strong verb is, try this: STRONG VERB = VERB + ADVERB. A strong verb is a single word that carries within it the meaning of a weak verb plus an adverb or adverbial phrase.

## *Read Like a Writer:*

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### Looking for Strong Verbs

While it's important to understand how strong verbs work grammatically, it's much more useful to understand how they feel to your readers. Just about anything you read will have at least a few examples of strong verbs. Seek them out. When you find them, try to break them down. Take the strong verb and see if you can determine the weak-verb-plus-adverb combination that would mean the same thing.

### THE DREADED PASSIVE VOICE

Another famous teacher term that haunted me throughout school and well into my early professional writing years was the “passive voice.” I knew it had something to do with verbs and I knew it was bad. But that was all I knew. Like so many obscure grammar terms, this one really threw me. Turns out, it wasn't nearly as complicated as I thought.

Compare these two sentences:

1. Mr. G. I. Lovemoney purchased the winning lottery ticket.  
(Active Voice)
2. The winning lottery ticket was purchased by Mr. G. I. Lovemoney. (Passive Voice)

In sentence #1, the actor performing the action (Mr. Lovemoney) comes first. In sentence #2, the actor comes last. That's all there is to it. Now, why should you care about this? Actually, there are several very reasonable reasons.

In general, readers prefer active voice sentences because:

- **Active voice sentences order things in the way most readers expect.** There's a natural way we learn to put sentences together in English. Grammar people call it "Subject-Verb-Object." For example, "I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy." ("I" is the subject, "shot" is the verb, "sheriff" is the object—and nobody worries about the deputy because he didn't get shot!) This sounds normal. By contrast, the following passive voice construction sounds strange: "The sheriff was shot by me, but the deputy was not shot by me." Not only is this a poor way to say something, it would never become a hit song.
- **Active voice sentences are easier to remember.** If the police who have captured me need to remember my confession, they'll have an easier time if I express it in the active voice. Of course, if I want to confuse them in the hope that they will let me go, the passive voice might be a better strategy.
- **Active voice sentences are shorter.** If I'm filling out a form to make my confession, I can fit more of the gruesome details of my crime into the small space allowed. If I use the passive voice, I won't have enough room to explain; I may fill out the form incorrectly, and my confession may be invalid.
- **Active voice sentences are less ambiguous.** Because the passive voice plays around with who is doing what, the resulting statement sometimes isn't clear. If I'm not careful, I may end up going to jail for the murders of both the sheriff and the deputy!

Most writing books will tell you that the passive voice is bad. I'm going to tell you that the active voice sounds more natural to your readers and that using it will help you stay true to your own natural way of writing. But I'm also going to tell you that there are occasionally interesting situations where the passive voice may be just what the doctor ordered.

In my twenties, I worked in the software industry. Because software is an international business, I often had to meet international businessmen. One time I was part of a group from our company that had to greet a team of Japanese executives at the airport. There were five of us and seven of them. When we met them at the gate, a comic and chaotic scene unfolded:

For the next fifteen minutes, introductions were awkwardly made, hands were tentatively shaken, and uncertain bows were exchanged so haphazardly no one knew when to stop.

When I write this way, I'm using the passive voice deliberately—I don't want you to know who is doing what, I just want you to know what's being done. I also want you to feel the awkwardness of the situation. By using the passive voice, and leaving out the actors entirely, I keep your attention right where I want it: on a melee of over-politeness that looked more like some strange dance than a bunch of businessmen getting to know each other.

So the passive voice has its place. And that place usually turns up when you want to hide the identity of the person or persons performing an action. Of course, the best time to hide the identity of an actor is when he will end up in trouble if his identity is revealed. As the old saying goes, "When the passive voice is being used, blame is being avoided." Just don't be too eager to use the passive voice to obscure your own misdeeds. When we use it in talking about ourselves, it's a dead giveaway.

## TIP:

The next time a teacher or anybody else uses a grammar term you don't understand, ask them to stop using it and to explain what they mean in normal everyday language. Almost everyone struggles with grammar. And while some of it is truly challenging, most of it isn't—until someone starts using unfamiliar terms that are not connected clearly to the concepts they represent (like the terms “active voice” and “passive voice”, for example). Even the most complex language concepts can be discussed in simple language. So the next time someone wants you to learn something about grammar, ask them to explain it using words you understand and are comfortable with.



## I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU MEAN

Yesterday, I went out to lunch. The host seated me and gave me a menu. I looked it over briefly and then my waiter arrived. “Can I take your order?” he said cheerfully. “Yes,” I promptly responded. “I’ll have a large house salad with extra chicken, Italian dressing, and a Coke.”

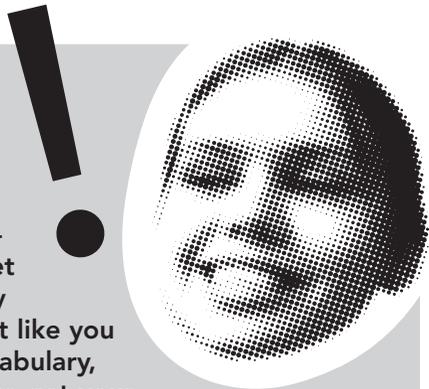
A few minutes later, my order arrived. The chicken and the dressing were on my salad, the Coke was not. How did the waiter know this was the way I wanted it? Why not put the Coke on the salad, too? Or serve the dressing in a glass with ice on the side?

Most people know what we’re saying because of the context in which we say it. That’s why my waiter knew I wanted my Coke in a glass and not in a bowl with my lettuce and tomatoes. And if for some reason he wasn’t sure, all he would have had to do was ask me.

In our speaking and listening lives, we get used to being casual with words. Nothing wrong with that. But when we write something, we can't be there, staring over our readers' shoulders, ready to pop in with a clarifying remark every time we see a raised eyebrow or a confused look. This is why we often have to put forth an extra effort to choose words that say exactly what we mean.

### TIP:

Many writing teachers and writing books will tell you to write like you talk. The problem with this advice is that most of us don't speak accurately or eloquently enough to meet our readers' expectations for clarity and quality. So my advice is to draft like you talk. Use your normal everyday vocabulary, and your natural way of speaking, to get your ideas down as quickly and as easily as possible. Then go back and revise your word choice later.



### SOMETHING WE NEVER THINK ABOUT

We all have a tendency to think that communicating via the written word is a rather straightforward affair. A writer writes something, a reader reads it. It's a simple two-step process. But in reality it's not so simple, and it's certainly more than two steps. It's at least a four-step process, and all kinds of things can go wrong along the way.

Here's one way of looking at it: A writer thinks of an idea (Step 1) and then finds words to express that idea (Step 2); a reader reads the words (Step 3) and then interprets those words to understand what the writer means (Step 4). If all goes well, when the reader finishes interpreting, he'll have in his head the same idea the writer started with at the beginning. But it doesn't always work out that way.

There are three different places where the transaction between writer and reader can break down:

- **Between the writer's idea and the writer's words.** If the words I choose don't accurately reflect my idea, there's little chance that my message will be clear, even if my readers read carefully and understand what I've written.
- **Between the writer's words and the reader's reading.** The fact that I choose my words carefully is no guarantee my readers will bring the same level of care to their part of the deal. Readers make mistakes when they read. Sometimes they're not familiar with the vocabulary they encounter. Sometimes they just skip over stuff they're not interested in and miss something important.
- **Between the reader's reading and the reader's interpretation.** Even if I've chosen the right words, and my readers read them perfectly, the message could still get garbled if they don't interpret my language in the same way I did when I wrote it.

As I've mentioned before, there's no way to be sure our readers understand exactly what we mean. That's why writers have to work so hard to be as clear as they can be, and why carefully considering the words we use, even though this seems like a small part of writing, makes a huge difference in the quality and effectiveness of our work.

*Miss Margot says*

Ensuring clarity is a big role that editors play. Oh, sure, I have to think carefully about what words I want to use to convey the right message in the right way. But my editors are the final check-off point for that. They can get an even keener focus on what the reader needs because they don't have all those other ideas banging around in their heads like us writers do. If you find someone who can be a good editor for you, don't let them get away. Good editors are like gold!

### LET'S GET SPECIFIC

Okay, enough theory. Let's get down to some practical tips for improving the exchange between reader and writer. Any hack with a typewriter can give you advice all day long about how to say certain things more effectively. In fact, there are entire books devoted to this aspect of word choice, each one filled with hundreds of wonderful suggestions. Personally, I've never found these books to be much help because I can't keep track of hundreds of wonderful suggestions while I'm writing. I figure I've got room in my brain for maybe six things at a time; if I have to deal with more than that I can't function.

Almost all the advice you'll ever read about choosing better words comes down to one incredibly important idea: Be specific. While you can't control how your reader reads your words, you can control the words your reader reads. If you make an effort to choose words that are as specific as possible, you'll have done everything you can to minimize the differences between what you mean and what your reader thinks you mean.

Here are six strategies for making your writing more specific:

- **Use strong verbs.** We've already gone over this one, but it bears repeating. Strengthening your verbs strengthens your writing. We don't use strong verbs just because they're cooler than weak ones. We use them because they tell the reader more about what's happening.
- **Use strong nouns.** If we have strong verbs, why can't we have strong nouns? If a strong verb is a verb with the meaning of an adverb inside it, a strong noun is one that includes the meaning of an adjective. For example, I could write something like this: "John was someone you could never figure out no matter how hard you tried; he was a puzzle without a solution." But this shorter, punchier sentence will get the same point across: "John was a conundrum."

- **Use meaningful modifiers.** We don't have to pack all the meaning into single nouns and verbs. It's fine to use adjectives and adverbs. But sometimes we throw them around carelessly. That's when we come up with sentences like these: "The food was unusually unique." (If something is unique, we already know it's unusual); "The ship was completely destroyed." (What's the difference between being destroyed and being completely destroyed?); and my all-time favorite, "You can visually see it!" (How else would you see it?) The point of using a modifier is to make an idea more specific without using redundant words. So when you use adjectives and adverbs, ask yourself these questions: Does the noun or verb I'm modifying already contain the meaning of the modifier I'm using? Does the modifier I'm using conflict in any way with the meaning of the noun or verb it's paired with? How does the modifier I'm using enhance the meaning of the noun or verb to make the sentence more specific?
- **Use the fewest words possible.** The more there is for readers to understand, the less likely they are to understand it. On the other hand, being specific sometimes requires a little extra language. So the rule of thumb is this: Say exactly what you need to say—but nothing more. Remove words that don't need to be there. This is not an easy thing to do. In fact, I find it so challenging that I leave it for a separate editing pass near the end of a writing project. (Want to know something really weird about this? I have never in my life not been able to remove a significant number of words from something I have finished writing. Even in pieces I think I have already picked to the bone, I still find that five to ten percent of the words don't need to be there. And the result is always a piece that is more interesting to read!)
- **Learn the meanings of words that are unusual to you.** This sounds like a dictionary strategy, not a writing strategy, doesn't it? But this is exactly what I do almost every time I sit down for some serious wordsmithing. I'll be looking over a sentence and all of a sudden an unusual word will occur to me. It's often a word I've

heard before but one that is not a part of my everyday vocabulary. So I look it up. About half the time, it works perfectly. But even when it doesn't work, by looking it up, I learn a new word. Ironically, the larger my vocabulary gets, the more I feel inclined to look up words I'm unsure of. At this point in my writing career, I take pride in using words more accurately than I used to, and in knowing how different words are related through their definitions.

- **Learn to differentiate between synonyms.** Another thing I do when I'm revising for word choice is use an online thesaurus. I have a four-step process that looks like this: (Step 1) Find a word that says what I want to say but probably isn't the best word I could use; (Step 2) pop that word into my online thesaurus and see what other choices come up; (Step 3) sift through the list of synonyms for the word I really like; and then, before I use it in my writing, (Step 4) I look it up in a dictionary. This last step is crucial because all synonyms are not created equal. I can't just swap them, one for another, willy-nilly as though they all meant the same thing. If I don't understand the subtle differences between the synonyms my thesaurus offers me, I'm likely to make an embarrassing mistake.

Is this all you have to do to make your writing more specific? Hardly. As we've discussed, there are hundreds of different tricks for improving your word choice. But these six strategies cover a lot of ground. Even learning just one of them can make a difference in the quality of your work.

*Miss Margot says*

The other day I was working on a story about theft. In the process, I used the word “theft” so many times that I knew I was over-using it even before I finished drafting! So I went to the thesaurus and checked out a few other options. Most didn’t work because they didn’t “feel” right. When I read them in my sentences, they sounded funny or even wrong. But I settled on a couple that worked. “Pilfering” was my favorite because it refers to the stealing of small items of little value—perfect for a part of my story where people were stealing small things. So watch those definitions when you’re swapping synonyms.

**A SMALL CAUTION ABOUT BIG WORDS**

Big words are cool. And most people will think you’re really smart when you use them. Your friends will be amazed, your teachers will be thrilled, and your parents’ egos will swell with pride when they tell country club acquaintances that their little Johnny or Janey used “sesquipedalian” in a sentence yesterday on the way to T-ball practice.

Your readers, however, may be less enthusiastic.

Even though I’ve showed you strategies that will help you bring more interesting words into your writing, and even though I’m encouraging you to expand your vocabulary, I want you to temper your excitement for complex language with one simple truth: small words are often more effective than big ones.

Here's what I mean:

Imagine employing an enforced rubric for text-based communication in which logograms of only a single syllable were permitted. How would this affect an author's ability to express concepts in a manner consistent with intention? Academic tradition dictates that multi-syllable words are superior. But contrary to popular belief, single-syllable signifiers are exceedingly satisfactory. Their correctness is unassailable; their clarity without parallel. They are easier for readers to understand, and their use encourages us to produce texts more consistent with our own mode of natural verbal expression.

Now give this a quick read:

What if there was a rule that said you had to use small words when you wrote? Could you still say what you had to say? We tend to think big words are worth more than small ones. But this is not true. Small words can do big things. They are clean, they are clear, they are strong, they are true. They help us write the way we talk, say what we mean, be who we are.

Both paragraphs say essentially the same thing. Which one sounds better to you? Which one is clearer and easier to understand? Which one would you like to read? Don't you think most other readers would feel the same way?

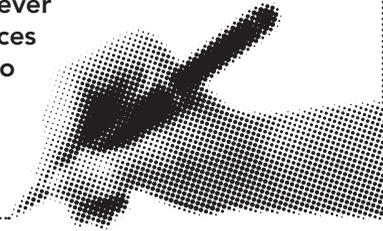
The second paragraph is composed entirely of single syllable words. Go ahead. Check it out. Not one multi-syllable word in there. You won't find a set of smaller words than that. And yet, I think these small words are extremely effective. That first paragraph might sound erudite, but what if my readers don't know what "erudite" means? Why bother with inscrutable displays of sesquipedalian prose when we can say what we mean with words everyone knows?

*Miss Margot says*

One of my editors once busted my chops for using a big word when it wasn't really necessary. He said, "Don't use a dollar word when a dime word will do." So get out there and expand your vocabulary. Do crossword puzzles. Read dictionaries. Study Latin and Greek. Work hard to become more erudite! Just remember that big words won't necessarily get you a big readership.

**ACTIVITY: BIG THOUGHTS, SMALL WORDS**

I've had a blast over the years asking students to write entire essays (and poems!) using only single-syllable words. It's hard at first but soon you get the hang of it. Working with small words gives your writing a unique quality I've never been able to explain. You could just say the pieces sound cool when they're finished. And there's no doubt that writing such a piece is a great word choice workout. Give it a try. You'll be pleasantly surprised with the results.

**MORE GREAT WORD CHOICE WORKOUTS**

It's rare that I suggest exercises for the young writers I work with. Writing your own pieces is exercise enough. But when it comes to experiencing new word choice challenges, most of us—including yours truly—won't make the effort unless we're forced to do so. This means that in order to get better faster, we need to practice a little bit.

Below you'll find several suggestions for exercises that are both fun and good practice. Don't worry about whether you can do them all. Find one or two that interest you and really dig into them:

- **Write the way someone else talks.** This is hard but fascinating. It's an extremely useful skill to master because if you can learn to mimic the way other people speak, you can learn to mimic the way other writers write. Pick a friend. Pick an enemy. Pick a member of your family. Pick a character from a book, TV show, or movie. Choose a person you know well and try to get inside their head as they tell a story from their perspective.
- **Write a piece entirely in dialog.** This is sort of like writing a play, but don't put in any stage directions. Better yet, don't put in attributions either (no "he said" and "she said"). Tell a story with two or more people using only their words to get the message across. Make each character use a slightly different vocabulary. Help your readers keep track of who's talking by the words they use.
- **Write a piece with dialog but without using quotes.** There are some very talented writers who include dialog in their stories without enclosing it in quotation marks. The cool thing is that they write so well, and choose their words so carefully, they don't need to. Try this yourself. It's harder than it seems. The true test is giving your story to someone else and seeing if they can distinguish between the words of the narrator and the words of the characters.
- **Write a piece without any punctuation at all.** You may think this is easy because you do it all the time in e-mail or on your cell phone. But try writing something long and complicated without periods, capitals, and all those other good things. Once again, ask someone to read what you've written and to tell you where they get confused. Then, using only words, see if you can clear things up.
- **Write poems and songs that rhyme.** To write poetry and songs that rhyme, you have to choose your words carefully. A great way to make this even more interesting is to reject the first rhyming words that occur to you and dig a little deeper for rhymes that are not so obvious.

- **Write a piece without using a common word.** Pick a commonly used word like “the” or “and” and write an entire piece without using it. Handicapping yourself in this arbitrary way will force you out of your normal habits and into new and unfamiliar territory.
- **Write a piece without using a common letter.** This is similar to not using a particular word. But in this case, we write a piece without a particular letter. Choose to leave out “s”, for example, and you can’t use plurals or possessives very easily. Leave out “d” and you probably won’t be able to use the past tense. Most challenging of all, however, is to leave out “e”, the most commonly used letter in the English language.

Believe it or not, an entire book has been written without a single “e”. That’s right, thousands of words and not one of them uses the fifth letter of the alphabet. I can’t imagine how the writer did this. It must have taken an incredible effort over a long period of time.

It took me nearly an hour to come up with the little e-less introduction below, and it has fewer than 150 words.

On a pitch black January night, at an hour most inhabitants of Bolin Hollow might find unusual for such activity, a stout man with a small black bag limps slowly out of his yard, down a narrow path, past a row of shops, and into a thick wrap of fog. Unusual as it is, this nocturnal stroll is anything but unusual for Mr. Bostwick; his work brings him to many locations around this small town, and almost always at odd hours. Night is normal for Mr. B; in fact, many in his occupation find sunlight distracting—too much watching, too much human contact. But only fog follows him now, and though his gait is awkward—a motion similar to that of a man for whom drinking was a nightly pursuit—nothing will stop him from carrying out his duty.

I had to rework most of the sentences in this paragraph to stay away from words that had “e’s” in them. To be honest, I’m still not sure I did it right. But if you find an “e” in there, do me a favor and don’t tell me about it. I’m very proud of this little accomplishment.

## BE A WRITER LIKE PETE ANDERSEN

*Even as a high schooler Pete Andersen was a prolific writer cranking out plays and stories faster than his friends could read them. As an adult he has written for newspapers and magazines. He has also been a technical writer at Microsoft for many years. When he's not writing about computer software, he works on novels, screenplays, and essays. He's also a terrific e-mail buddy and he loves making lists.*

Q

WHAT KIND OF WRITER ARE YOU?

A

By day, I'm a technical writer, which means I write manuals which are supposed to help people use computer software.

But by night, I do the kind of writing that actually allows me to call myself a "writer." I write stories, screenplays, novels, whatever. I'm always working on about a dozen projects, and getting ideas for more all the time.

Q

WHY DO YOU WRITE?

A

Because I go crazy when I don't.

I think every person finds many ways to express what they're feeling, through art, movement, relationships, whatever. For me, my main form of expression has always been writing. Thoughts grow in my head and need to find a way out—writing is my outlet. I can write them, look at them, deal with them, and sometimes even learn about myself. (Most writers I know are surprised by how much they learn about themselves through the writing process.) It's very important to me—so important, in fact, that my big discovery as a writer wasn't that I could write, but that I couldn't not write. It's just part of who I am, and I'm lucky to have discovered that.

I also enjoy the process itself. I love balancing the creativity with the rules. When you're thinking about story, character, and tone, it's pure creation, pure freedom. But you're also dealing with language, so there are strict rules. It's like a tango—you need your own passion, flair, and style, but the dance has certain steps, rhythm, and tempo you must follow. So when you actually sit down to write, something happens that's both planned and spontaneous. I'll sit down to write a story and I'll have tons of notes, outlines, and all that, but I really won't know until I write it how it's going to turn out. That's exciting.

Finally, I like getting my views “out there” for others to see. Some people tell me that my writing helps them see things differently, and to appreciate things more. Everyone has a gift, and I think once we find that gift, we're obligated—and privileged—to use it to make some contribution to our community. I try to do that with my writing.

**Q**

**WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER?**

**A**

Well, funny thing—I didn't!

And that's one reason I know I really am a writer. I never set out to be one, and I never really wanted to be one. But at some point in my life I discovered that I am one. That's how you know it's real. Of course at that point I started taking lots of writing classes and doing things that writers do, but that was all after the fact. The big moment was the discovery, and that probably came when my daughters were little, because I started writing about them—just describing them as little children—and before I knew it I had written an entire book about them. I didn't have a choice; I just did it, and I loved it, and I can't imagine not having done it.

When I started telling my friends that I'd made this discovery, and that I was a writer, they all laughed and told me they'd known it for years.

## Q WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A FELLOW WRITER WHO WAS JUST STARTING OUT?

A I had a terrific writing teacher once who told me: “I can’t teach you how to write. No one can. That’s because it’s not something one person gives to another person. It’s something you already have inside you. But what I can do is try to help you bring some of it out.”

In other words, don’t look to someone else to show you how to be a writer. You have an incredible, untapped talent inside you that is a million times more powerful than any teacher who ever walked the earth. Listen to that talent. Respect it. Find ways to bring it out! Your ways will be unique to you. Some people get up at 5:30 every morning and write ten pages. Some people write a poem on the bus. Some people dictate stories into a tape recorder. Some people jot down ideas for a year, and then type an entire best-selling novel in two weeks.

Follow your instincts. I’ve done a lot of writing and talked with a lot of people and you know what? The smartest person in the world can’t write your story—the only person who can do that is you. They say you should ignore ninety percent of what your readers tell you, and I think that’s true.

Do what you have to do. I went through a period of about five years when I couldn’t read anything. I was writing all the time and couldn’t bear to read even a paragraph of anyone else’s work. Then I went through a period where I had to read all the classics—I devoured them, one after another. So do what feels right for you. Take classes, read Faulkner, attend workshops, join writers’ groups. Or not.

Finally, remember that everyone out there thinks he or she is a writer, and a better one than you. They're wrong! Writing is an "invisible" talent. Opera singers and tightrope walkers can instantly prove their credentials to anyone, so nobody questions their ability. But writing is subjective, so prepare to be critiqued, panned, dismissed, and most of all, rejected. All great writers go through this, and you can too! It actually shows that you're doing your job. Go read those stories about all the publishers who rejected *Gone With the Wind* or more recently, the publishers who rejected the Harry Potter books. Can you imagine?

The day I stopped listening to critiques was the day I got rejection letters from two different publishers. One said they loved my book but they wouldn't publish it because the market for this kind of writing was too small. The other said they loved it but they wouldn't publish it because the market was too big! I laughed out loud.

Remember that writing isn't about you and the critics. It's about you and the page.

## MEANINGFUL MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Words are amazing things. At least they are to me. I've always been fascinated by them—how they look, how they sound, what they mean. I guess this is a good quality for a writer. But it was something I felt even before I started writing. I think most people are captivated by words in some way, whether they think of themselves as writers or not.

Big words rarely fail to get our attention. When I was little, every kid on my block wanted to know how to spell “antidisestablishmentarianism.” I never knew why exactly. I think someone said it was the longest word in the dictionary. None of us even knew what it meant, but that didn't matter. It was the length of the word—and its obscurity, I suppose—that fascinated us.

Years later, even when I discovered that it wasn't the longest word in the dictionary (“floccinaucinihilipilification” is one letter longer); even when I realized that spelling it was easy because it was just a bunch of normal words, suffixes, and prefixes jammed together (anti + dis + establish + ment + arian + ism); even when I finally looked it up and found that all it meant was wanting the Church of England to remain the official church of that country (I mean, seriously, how many kids in America care about that?); even after admitting that I have never in my life had occasion to write it or read it (except when I looked it up); even after all that, I still remember it, and it is, in some strange way, still one of my favorite words.

As I got older, I became more interested in small words. Bumping up against the challenges of adult life, words like “love,” “hope,” “faith,” and “peace” began to command my interest. I guess when you're trying to find a job, a date, or a decent place to live, you don't care anymore what the longest word in the dictionary is, or whether you can spell it.

But when I hit my mid-thirties and started taking my writing more seriously, I realized there was more to good word choice than merely choosing good words. Good words are wonderful all by themselves,

but they don't reach their full potential until they're arranged in good groups. This is often when we experience language at its best, when a writer turns a phrase so artfully we can't help but pause to examine it, savoring the moment and the meaning we've discovered.

These meaningful moments are the stuff of great reading. And readers take great satisfaction when they encounter them. But sometimes they take even more than that. We write to communicate. And while we hope to reach our readers as they read our work, we also hope they take some of it with them when they're done. Our goal isn't just to have readers understand our words as they go by, we want them to remember our words long after the final page has come and gone.

### WHAT MAKES SOME WORDS MORE MEMORABLE THAN OTHERS?

When it comes to language, the human brain is staggeringly powerful and strangely deficient. Almost instantaneously, people can snatch words from a mental lexicon with tens of thousands of entries. But almost no one can remember the last fifty words of a conversation. Our brains have an extraordinary capacity for storing and retrieving words in long-term memory. But our short-term memory for language stinks. And this is why writers have to work so hard to come up with words their readers will remember.

A typical novel is 60,000 to 100,000 words long. Magazine cover stories often run 2,000 to 3,000 words. And at 500 to 1,000 words, even an essay by the average high school writer is much longer than the average reader can easily memorize. So what do we have to do to get readers to remember our words?

- **Get them to notice.** With all the words readers have to deal with, it's unlikely they'll take note of the ones we write unless we give them something special to notice. This means we have to take risks to express our ideas in unusual ways. We don't have to resort to obscure words our readers have never heard of. But we may want to consider putting familiar words together in unfamiliar combinations.

- **Get them to think.** Remembering something is often determined by how much time we spend thinking about it. If a reader reads 240 words per minute, that's only a quarter-second per word. If we expect readers to remember some of the interesting words and phrases we come up with, we need to slow them down a bit by presenting them with language that will keep them thinking beyond the brief moments they spend decoding.
- **Get them to feel.** As we read, every word we decode enters into our short-term memory for language. But few words stick around for very long thereafter. If we want our readers' short-term memories to become long-term memories, we have to stir their emotions. The more we can evoke strong feelings in our readers, the more likely they will be to remember what we write.

If we want our readers to remember our words long after they've finished reading, we have to give them writing that is worth remembering. Readers read to get meaning from text. So the more meaningful our writing is to them, the more memorable it will be as well. Meaning is made in the mind of the reader. But the words we write spark the meaning-making process. So how we can use our choice of words to light the fire of our readers' imagination and create meaningful memorable moments?

### LOOKING AT MEANINGFUL MEMORABLE MOMENTS

My friend, Ben Hippen, wrote a wonderful short story called *Eddie Takes Off*. It's about an unusual boy who doesn't fit in very well with the rest of the world. There are many things I like about this story but what I like best is how Ben created so many meaningful memorable moments with his words. This story is packed with vivid verbs, clever modifiers, evocative expressions, and many a satisfying turn of phrase. Here are ten of my favorite sentences.

1. Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a *bit of a social problem*.

I told you Eddie was unusual. Apparently he has been able to fly since birth and his parents have never known exactly what to do about it. The phrase I love is “a bit of a social problem.” What an understatement! Eddie’s parents know their little boy is in for all kinds of problems once people in town discover his secret.

2. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnsons’ lawn, Eddie’s parents had treated his *airborne peculiarity* as something of a childish whim.

Again, notice the understatement here in the words “airborne peculiarity.” “Childish whim” is nice, too, though not as unusual. Most children are whimsical. But it sure would be peculiar if one of them became airborne.

3. Eddie’s mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father *vetoed* the idea.

“Vetoed” is a great verb. The author could have said that Eddie’s father didn’t like the idea or that he disagreed with Eddie’s mother. But “vetoed” is so much better because it makes it seem as though Eddie’s father has the power of a president or a governor who can’t be overruled.

4. His father shot him a *look so full of “No!”* that Eddie desisted at once and sulkily spent the rest of the day firmly seated on the carpet.

I’ve never in my life come across the expression “a look so full of ‘No!’” and yet I know exactly what that look looks like. Don’t you? Hasn’t your mom or dad or a teacher ever looked at you that way? It’s even worse than having them say it, isn’t it? When a writer can introduce his readers to language they’ve never before encountered, and communicate his meaning with perfect accuracy, something rare and wonderful is happening on the page.

5. Alex began hitting Eddie with a *chubby, half-closed fist*.

In this moment, Eddie finds himself in a fight with a neighbor boy. Both boys are five years old and there's no better way to describe how little kids fight than to say that one hit the other with a "chubby, half-closed fist."

6. His pleading was *swallowed by his mother's mortified silence*.

Think about this one for a second. There's no way silence can swallow anything. Nor can silence be mortified. And yet, these words make perfect sense in the story. Eddie has just done something he shouldn't have and embarrassed his mother in public. She's the one who's mortified. But as he pleads with her to understand why he misbehaved, she remains silent.

7. And so Eddie made a promise to himself with *the intensity of a child's confused pain*.

Little kids get upset all the time. But sometimes it's worse than that. They get frustrated, angry, and finally confused. Then they seem to collapse into deep sadness. The phrase "the intensity of a child's confused pain" is a wonderful way to describe this.

8. He would slowly levitate off the mattress, raising his brown comforter from underneath, looking *like a loaf of bread rising in the oven*.

Sometimes, when writers want to describe something out of the ordinary, like a boy levitating in his bed, they compare the unusual scene to something their readers can more easily imagine. When they introduce the comparison with the words "like" or "as," this technique is called a *simile*. Here, the words "like a loaf of bread rising in the oven" give us a perfectly playful picture of what's happening.

## TIP:

Another way to make your words more memorable is to use a technique called alliteration. Alliteration occurs when words that are close to each other in the same sentence begin with the same sound, like the words in the phrases “perfectly playful picture” or “meaningful memorable moments.” We’ll talk more about this technique in “Chapter 7: Better Sentences.”



9. Eddie twitched with *a spasm of heartache*.

When we're very sad we feel like our hearts ache. But usually our sadness comes on gradually and we ache for quite a while. Here, Eddie experiences that feeling instantly, and his whole body reacts with a twitch.

10. He felt *the surprise in her arms* as they tightened around him.

This is another one of those impossible expressions that makes perfect sense in the story. How can someone have “surprise in her arms”? And yet, as the girl puts her arms around him, Eddie can sense that she's surprised by what she feels.

I don't know about you, but I'd be happy to have one of these moments in a piece of my writing. And this story has many. It's a wonderful example of effective word choice and a great piece to use as a model for your writing. If you'd like to read the whole thing, you can download it here: [www.eddietakesoff.com](http://www.eddietakesoff.com).

## THE SECRET SAUCE

I've always wished there was a technique I could learn that would help me write sentences like these. But in twenty-five years of studying writing, I haven't found one. However, there does seem to be a pattern. And by figuring out how that pattern unfolds, you can learn to reproduce it in your work.

Lines like these call attention to themselves because of their uniqueness. But they do more than that. They not only get our attention, they hold onto it, as we find ourselves hovering over them for a few extra moments, puzzling out their meaning. Why do these phrases have such a strong effect on us? Because in almost every case, they pair ideas together that aren't normally associated with each other in our minds. For example:

airborne	+	peculiarity
a look	+	so full of "No"
a chubby, half-closed	+	fist
swallowed	+	by his mother's mortified silence
a spasm	+	of heartache
surprise	+	in her arms

If the story says that Eddie did something wrong and his father "shot a look" at him, in my mind I'm thinking "angry look", "threatening look", or maybe "a look of disapproval". But I'd never in my wildest dreams expect to find a look "so full of 'No'". It's no surprise, then, that this unusual choice of words might get my attention. And if I know two kids are fighting, I expect their fists to be balled up tight and strong. I don't associate "chubby" and "half-closed" with someone who is making a fist to fight—even if that someone is five years old. But perhaps the most interesting phrase of all is this one: "swallowed by his mother's mortified silence". I think that what makes this phrase so special is that it has a second unusual pairing (mortified + silence) inside it. That really makes us take notice—and take longer to figure out what it means.

These unexpected word combinations are called *juxtapositions*. To juxtapose two things means to put them side-by-side to see how they contrast. When writers put two unusual words together, readers experience the pleasure of teasing out the differences between the meaning they expect and the meaning they infer.

### **THE TRUTH ABOUT CREATING MEANINGFUL MEMORABLE MOMENTS**

The first time I noticed the way great writers create great language by putting unusual words and ideas together, I got very excited. Eureka! I thought to myself. I've discovered the secret. Now I'll be able to write like that, too. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. For a while, every time I sat down to write, I tried to force words to come together in unusual ways. But all I got was unusually bad writing.

This doesn't mean that the pattern we just learned about isn't useful, or that you can't apply it to your own work. It just means that you'll probably be more successful if you think less about being a "great writer" creating "great language" and focus instead on doing a great job of being yourself.

Keep in mind that finding the right words may be more about reading than it is about writing. Great writers create great language not because they write so well, but because they are alive to the wonderful ways words create meaning in the minds of their readers. To do this, they have to be great readers, too. So as you think about how to improve the words you use, think less about conjuring up great language when you write, and more about hunting down great language when you read.

## *Read Like a Writer:*

### Hunting Down Great Language

Try copying down your own set of ten favorite sentences from every good book you read. It takes only a little while to do, but the benefits stay with you forever. Keep a reading journal with you as you read, and jot down great bits of language as you run across them. Then, later on, type them up and annotate them by writing down a few sentences that explain why you think they're so good.

## WORDS THAT WORK

Good word choice doesn't mean using big words, it means using just the right words. The piece below is a good example of this. With everyday words and phrases, young writer Bojia Chen tells an entertaining story about an epic battle with bees.

### **Yellow Horror**

As I grabbed the shovel with both hands and gave the dirt a jab, a big clump of earth broke into pieces, and from the crack in the ground came a wisp of yellow smoke that soon turned into a mass of yellow fog. The fog was a foot away from my face when I realized it was a swarm of yellow jackets.

I dropped my shovel and ran. I saw my pool, should I jump in? Nah, the pool would be freezing, so I took a sharp right for my house. I didn't dare look back; I was sure the angry swarm was right behind me.

Then I saw it. Oh, I'm saved, I'm saved, I'm saved! Sweet salvation! There it was: a can of "Guaranteed Kill, Yellow Jacket and Hornet Killer" sitting on a platform under my deck where I had left it just the day before.

I was still afraid to look back, so I snatched the can and ripped off the cap. As a bee buzzed just inches from my face, I did a quick 180-degree turn and pulled the trigger. There were dozens of them everywhere.

Unfortunately, I found out that the can I was counting on wasn't to be trusted. It wasn't a spray but more like a jet of expanding foam. The jet made contact with only a few yellow jackets, but I still had a million more to worry about, and they were all very angry now. My only choice was to run for the house.

Little did I know that a yellow jacket had flown up my shorts. When I raised my leg to climb the back steps, my pants tightened around the little invader and he stung me. I felt an instant wave of dizziness and almost collapsed on the stairs.

After stumbling into the house, I told my mom about the sting. She applied some of that weird gooey stuff all moms seem to carry with them for just these occasions.

It took a few hours for the yellow jackets to clear up, so I used the time to examine the can that I had hoped would save my life but didn't. That's when I realized that it wasn't for killing the insects, it was for destroying their nests.

Four hours passed and the yellow jackets still hadn't left. Determined to even the score, I put on a thick coat, four layers of sweat pants, a mask, and heavy-duty gloves. Then I went back outside to deal with them.

I read the directions on the can very carefully this time. Then I proceeded to the nest where I emptied the entire contents down the hole and waited as the foam expanded and overflowed. Almost immediately, the buzzing settled down. My heart stopped racing. And I never saw a single yellow jacket again.

You won't find a lot of fancy words here. But you will find words that work—language that tells an interesting story in a way that sounds true to the writer who wrote it. That's what we look for when we look for better words.

## CONFESSIONS OF A WORD NERD

There's a wonderful book in my library called *Choose the Right Word*. It was written by S. I. Hayakawa, a former member of the U.S. Senate. But it's not about making political speeches. It's a usage guide.

What, you may ask, is a usage guide? And why would anyone pay upwards of \$20 to own one?

A usage guide is exactly what it says it is: a guide to the effective use of language. As to why I'd rather have one on my shelf than a \$20 bill in my pocket, the only answer I can give you is that I'm a word nerd. After all, who but a word nerd would care about the difference between gobbledygook, gibberish, and claptrap?

As I've already mentioned, the English language is full of words that seem to mean the same thing but actually mean slightly different things. For example, gobbledygook, gibberish, and claptrap all refer to language that is meaningless or otherwise difficult to understand. But each of these words has a deeper meaning:

- “Gobbledygook” is often used to describe language that is more complicated than it needs to be: “The contract my lawyer drew up was full of the usual gobbledygook.”
- “Gibberish” is often used to describe language that may be appropriately complex for the subject matter under discussion but too complicated for certain readers to understand: “Any explanation of Einstein's Theory of Relativity would seem like gibberish to a fourth grader.”
- “Claptrap” is often used to describe language that seems fake, insincere, or otherwise worthless, as though the person using it is showing off merely to appeal to an audience's emotions: “The mayor's speech riled up the crowd, but experts agreed it was mostly claptrap.”

Even if we think these small differences in meaning don't matter much, we can't claim that they don't exist. Nor can we assume our readers lack interest in the matter. Word nerds are everywhere, and you never know when one will descend upon some words of yours. (Be on the lookout for people who love crossword puzzles or who seem to become overly excited by the mention of a game of Scrabble).

*Miss Margot says*

Word nerds can be fun to hang out with, and can help you become a better writer. If you know some good crossword puzzlers, lean over their shoulders next time and ask them how they figure out all those strange clues. And if you have a chance to toss tiles with a championship Scrabble player, don't hesitate to fill up a rack and sit down at the board. You'll be amazed at all the new words you can learn.

Then there's your future to think about. How well you do in high school, college, or on the job may depend at times on the breadth of your vocabulary. And since the best way to learn new words is to use them, a little word nerdiness on your part may help you get ahead in life.

Finally, if we're going to be serious about becoming better writers, I think we owe the language that gives us our most basic ingredients a little respect. English didn't just pop up overnight. Like our parents and teachers, and even yours truly, English is old—really old. It outlasted the Roman Empire and was present at the signing of the Magna Carta. It served in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and two World Wars. It prospered in the Great Depression and has survived earthquakes, floods, fires, and locusts. Regardless of how tedious,

tortuous, and downright confounding it can be at times, it deserves to be honored by those of us who take such interest in its use that we deign to call ourselves writers.

### LEVELS OF MEANING

When we say that gobbledygook, gibberish, and claptrap are synonyms, what we're really saying is that they share the same general meaning. But each has a specific meaning that is slightly different. Like the difference between a weak verb and a strong one, knowing the specific meaning of a word helps us make the best choice when we have a list of synonyms to choose from.

There's another interesting way words can differ from each other even when they share the same meaning. Take, for example, the words "house" and "home." If I said, "I'll be at my home tonight after work" or "I'll be at my house tonight after work," I'm pretty sure everyone would agree that I said the same thing in both sentences. After all, "house" and "home" are synonyms.

But when we think of what the two words mean on another level, we immediately notice important differences. A house is a particular kind of building (distinct from an apartment, for example) where people live. A home doesn't have to be a building at all. In fact, the word "home" causes us to think about many ideas that have nothing to do with buildings: the place where our family lives, the town we were born in, or even feelings of safety and security. These other meanings, or associations as they're sometimes called, come from other ways of using the word:

- "I feel at home here" = comfort
- "Home is where the heart is" = love
- "It's great to be back home again" = belonging
- "This feels just like home" = familiarity

Word nerds like me use the terms “denotation” and “connotation” to talk about these different levels of meaning. Denotation refers to the simplest and most common dictionary definition of a word, sometimes called its “literal” meaning. Connotation refers to the collection of related ideas or associations a word has accumulated from being used in different ways. This is sometimes called its “figurative” meaning. “House” and “home” share the same denotation: a dwelling where people live. But they have very different connotations. Just think about the differences between these two sentences:

- 1 During his time at Hogwarts, Harry Potter lived in the House of Gryffindor.
2. At the end of his first year at Hogwarts, Harry Potter returned home to live with the Dursleys on Privet Drive.

In Sentence #1, “house” refers not only to a physical structure but to a special kind of membership in a special kind of community. In Sentence #2, “home” refers to a place where someone grew up. Both words refer to dwellings, but no self-respecting Harry Potter fan would ever argue that Harry’s house and Harry’s home were anything alike.

## **FROM CONNOTATION TO CONTEXT**

If synonyms with different meanings aren’t frustrating enough for you, and technical terms like “denotation” and “connotation” haven’t discouraged you from learning more about words, there’s one last idea I’d like you to consider: A writer can understand both the general meaning of a word or phrase, all of its specific meanings and associations, even its complex connotations, and still not use it effectively in writing.

Take another look at this sentence: “The contract my lawyer drew up was full of the usual gobbledygook.” Here, the verb “drew up” means “wrote,” as in “The contract my lawyer wrote was full of the usual gobbledygook.” Now, you could also write this: “The speech the mayor wrote was nothing but claptrap.” That works, too. But this doesn’t:

“The speech the mayor drew up was nothing but claptrap.” You can draw up a contract, you can draw up a list, you can probably even draw up a plan. But you can’t draw up a speech. It just isn’t done.

In order to make “draw up” work this way in a sentence, we have to understand its denotation (“to compose or create”), its connotation (“a sketch, a picture, a diagram”), and the context in which it is being used (“a legal document representing an understanding between parties”). Context in this sense means how it interacts with other words in the same sentence. Certain words, like “draw up,” are used in certain contexts, like legal agreements, but not in others, like speeches. And that’s another reason why we can’t substitute synonyms for each other any time we want.

Denotation, connotation, and context. That’s a lot to keep track of. And yet, we all instinctively keep track of these complex language elements every day. We just don’t think about stuff like this until someone points it out to us—either in a learning situation or, worse, when we’ve made a mistake and someone misunderstands our meaning.

*Miss Margot says*

**One way to check yourself is to read your sentence out loud. Sometimes, we aren’t even aware that we know the connotation or proper context of a certain word. But we know when we hear it that it isn’t right, even if we don’t know why. This is always a good first check.**

### THE MEANING OF IT ALL

By now you’re probably thinking that this entire section on knowing the meanings of words is nothing but gobbledygook, gibberish, and claptrap. But in our never-ending quest to find the right words for our ideas, this is exactly the kind of information we need.

In school, we often study *what* words mean. But rarely do we think about *how* words mean. It's all well and good to memorize dictionary definitions, but since few of your readers are likely to have done this, you may be disappointed to discover that their interpretations differ from yours, even on words you both claim to know.

I wish I could tell you there was a book you could read that combined dictionary definitions, synonyms, connotations, usage guidelines, and examples of words and phrases in common contexts. But there isn't. At least not one book anyway. Even Senator Hayakawa's book doesn't get the job done. Your best bet, if you're really serious about your words, is to get a copy of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But then, you'll have to get a room to put it in, too, because it's over 20,000 pages long! (Thankfully, it's now available on CD-ROM so you don't have to build an addition to your house to own it.)

### BUILDING YOUR VOCABULARY

It would be hard to get through school without having to do a few vocabulary exercises. Most of these will probably involve memorizing the definitions of long lists of words. Work hard at this, and do your best. But don't count on this activity to help you much as a writer. Studying words one at a time outside of the natural contexts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening isn't as helpful as teachers and textbook publishers think it is.

What is helpful is studying words as they come up in real life. Here are three ideas about how to do that:

- **Pay attention to unusual words and phrases.** Yes, there's a lot to know about words and there are a lot of words to know about. But ninety-nine percent of what we hear and read is already in our vocabulary. It's that other one percent we need to focus on. It's natural, especially when we're reading a long novel, to skip over the few words we don't know. Rarely does the outcome of a conflict or the fate of a character hang on our understanding of a single word.

But stumbling upon an unusual word is the best opportunity we have to learn it. Even if you don't want to stop reading to look it up, take a few seconds to make an educated guess about what you think it might mean. You'll be surprised how many words you can learn with this informal approach.

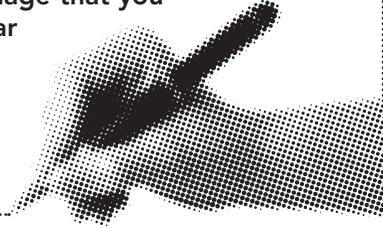
- **Be curious about connotation and context.** While it's good to know the definition of a word, if you're a writer that's probably not good enough. Connotation and context are often more important. When you see or hear an interesting word, ask yourself questions like, "Why was that word used instead of another word that means more or less the same thing?" or "What are some other ways I've seen or heard that word used?" or "What word would I have chosen if I was the speaker or writer?"
- **Start using a variety of word resources.** Until I came across Senator Hayakawa's book, I had no idea there was such a thing as a usage guide. I never knew there were different kinds of dictionaries, either. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a historical dictionary. It not only has the current meanings of English words, it tells you how meanings have changed throughout the history of the language. There are also many valuable word resources on the Internet.

Some people would say that to be a writer you have to build a big vocabulary. But I wouldn't be one of them. In fact, I might argue that it's the other way around: You have to be a writer to build a big vocabulary.

We tend to learn best by doing things. And when we're doing something we care about like writing, we tend to learn a lot. Our quest to be better writers leads us naturally to better words. We start to take risks by using new words that interest us. But we check these words out using dictionaries and other resources. In time, adding words to our vocabulary is as normal as reading a book or picking up a pen.

**ACTIVITY: COLLECTING WORDS AND PHRASES**

At one time or another, most writers have kept a small collection of interesting words and phrases. It's time to start keeping yours. When you come across a tiny bit of language that you like, jot it down on a pad. You may also overhear interesting words and phrases on television or in everyday conversation. Think of the world around you as a dictionary and a usage guide. Turn your life into a vocabulary lesson.

*Miss Margot says*

There are two words I really like. Unfortunately, neither of them comes up regularly in my conversations or my writing. But I like them just the same. The first is "tocsin," which sounds like "toxin" but means something totally different. Rather than something hazardous or poisonous, a tocsin is an alarm bell or a warning signal. The other is "desideratum," something that is both desired and required. I don't know why I like these words, but I came upon them in my reading, made a note of them, and they've stuck with me ever since.

**MATCHING WORDS WITH READERS**

Yesterday there was a fight at school. You weren't in it but you saw the whole thing and people have been asking you about it ever since. After school, your best friend wanted to know what happened. Your mom got wind of it and asked you at the dinner table. The next morning,

your teacher wanted to know about it, too. And finally, at lunch, the principal called you into his office. (Don't worry, you aren't in trouble; he just wanted to get the facts from someone who wasn't involved.)

You've now told the story four times to four different people. Each time you've told it, you've recounted the same events. But you've used different language. With your friend you were casual, you even used some slang. With your mom you were a little more formal but you didn't worry too much about what you said. When your teacher asked you about it the next morning, you felt differently, and you spoke a little differently, too. But when you got to the principal's office, you were suddenly choosing your words with extreme caution, taking care to be as accurate as possible, speaking in crisp complete sentences, even throwing in a few "Yes, sirs" and "No, sirs."

You're the same person you were the day before when the fight broke out. And you haven't lied during any of the four retellings. But you definitely used different language each time. Why? Because you know that the way you speak to your friend on the playground is not the way you speak to the principal in his office.

Some people would call this respect. Others might say it was just good communication skills. But no matter what you call it, we all know how to do it. Every one of us knows how to change our spoken language to meet the requirements of the different people we talk to and the different situations in which we find ourselves. But sometimes when we're writing, we mysteriously lose this natural ability.

We don't actually forget what we know about talking to people, we forget that we're talking to people at all. Sitting in the principal's office it's impossible to imagine that the large imposing former football coach who has the power to change your life in a nanosecond is not actually right there in front of you. But when you're writing at your computer at home, or working at your desk in class, it's easy to forget about your audience—and to forget about the kind of language you should be using to address them.

## CASUAL CONVERSATIONS

When we speak to someone, we know exactly who's listening to us. But when we write, it's easy to believe that the only person reading our words is us. It's as though we're talking to ourselves. And when we talk to ourselves, we tend to talk casually. As a result, we write casually. And that's where we often get into trouble with our word choice.

If you're writing something for your closest friends, this probably won't be a problem. But if you think any of your readers will be adults, or other kids who don't know you, you may have to shift your language into a higher gear, and write more formally if you want to be taken seriously.

In terms of word choice, what does writing more formally mean? In general, it means using standard grammar and conventional spelling, and avoiding slang. It's not that the words you and your friends use in conversation are bad. But when you're communicating with people who are a lot older than you, people who live in a different place, or even other kids who don't know you very well, you may find that the words you use in your everyday life aren't easily understood. Even worse, if you aren't conscious of who you're writing to, you may offend someone.

*Miss Margot says*

I'm from the South and we have certain ways of saying things. If you're not from the South, you might not even understand what I'm talking about. Most of the expressions I use are not offensive per se, but they sure can be hard to follow for folks who aren't from the same region.

## THE CHOICE IS YOURS

You really do have choices when it comes to the language you use. Your vocabulary has thousands of words in it. And the English language you're drawing from has thousands more you will undoubtedly come to know. But when it comes to using language appropriately, it's the words your readers know, and the meanings they associate with them, that matter most.

Some people are deeply offended by certain words and phrases. You have no control over this, and no responsibility to change your beliefs as a result. But if you want to be an effective writer, one who can reach most people and influence them, you need to think about who your readers are and how they are likely to react to your use of language.

As we discovered in the previous section, we not only have to know what words mean to use them well, we also have to know what context to use them in. We defined this linguistic context as the way words worked together in the same sentence. But there's also a social context when we write that is defined by our relationship to our readers and the reason we are writing to them.

When I was little, my parents taught me certain rules about talking and behaving in different social situations. Like many kids, I thought these rules were stupid. I couldn't remember them all, and many of them seemed unnatural to me. It wasn't until I became an adult that I began to understand why it was important for me to learn these things. As a kid, I thought manners and politeness were just a way for adults to control me. But now I realize that these social graces, as they're sometimes called, aren't about me at all, they're about the people I socialize with. The purpose of being polite is to make others feel comfortable—even if I'm uncomfortable doing it.

The same thing goes for writing. You have many ways of using language that are normal and natural to you. But when you write to certain people for certain reasons, your normal, natural way of conversing may not be comfortable to the readers you're trying to reach.

From time to time, we all have to change the way we talk in order to get people to listen. This may not be fair, but it's certainly true. In my own writing, I'm often frustrated by this. I have things I want to say and people I want to say them to. But as soon as the words pop onto my computer screen, and I begin to read them back, I know there's no way in the world my words will work for my readers. So I sit on the backspace key for a while, and then I try to come up with something else. I guess I've decided that writing for my readers is more important than writing for myself. This is a choice you'll have to make almost every time you write.