

ACADEMIC STYLE: WORD CHOICE

Principles of Word Choice

- 1. Use specific, precise words.** Words like “stuff,” “things,” and “interesting” are too vague. If you don’t know a more precise word for what you’re trying to say, you might need to revisit your ideas themselves and make sure that they are specific enough. In other words, be concise.
- 2. Choose strong verbs.** In academic writing, we prefer one-word verbs to phrasal verbs (which is a verb plus a preposition). Phrasal verbs are common in spoken or more casual uses of English. For example, use “establish” instead of “set up,” “produce” instead of “churn out,” “tolerate” instead of “put up with,” and “assemble” instead of “put together.” See the list on the next page for examples of strong verbs.
- 3. Avoid overused words and clichés.** Clichés are catchy little phrases (e.g., “ignorance is bliss”; “better safe than sorry”; “throughout history”) that are so frequently used that they have become trite, corny, or annoying. They are problematic because their overuse has diminished their impact and because they require several words where just one would do. The main way to avoid clichés is first to recognize them and then to create shorter, fresher equivalents. For a non-native speaker of English, clichés can be more difficult to recognize. If you as a non-native speaker want to use an expression in academic writing, try to do a little research into whether or not the expression is a cliché.
- 4. Avoid obsolete words.** Also termed “archaic,” these words are no longer in everyday use. Words like “perchance,” “mayhap,” “behoof,” “torn asunder,” and more will make your academic writing sound pretentious and strange to a modern audience. It is also important to note, particularly for non-native speakers, that the meanings of some words have shifted over time; for example, we no longer use the word “queer” to mean “strange.”
- 5. Consider your audience.** When you choose words to express your ideas, you have to think not only about what makes sense and sounds best to you, but what will make sense and sound best to your readers. Thinking about your audience and their expectations will help you make decisions about word choice. Some writers think that academic audiences expect them to “sound smart” by using big or technical words. But the most important goal of academic writing is not to sound smart—it is to communicate an argument or information clearly and convincingly.

Common Word Choice Mistakes

1. **Misused words.** When a word is misused, it doesn't actually mean what you think it does.
 - Example error: *He sighted many prior experiences in his lecture.*
 - Revision: *He cited many prior experiences in his lecture.*
2. **Words with unwanted connotations or meanings.**
 - Example error: *I sprayed the ants in their private places.*
 - Revision: *I sprayed the ants in their hiding places.*
3. **Using a pronoun when readers can't tell who or what it refers to.**
 - Example error: *My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though he didn't like him at all.*
 - Revision: *My cousin Jake hugged my brother Trey, even though Jake doesn't like Trey at all.*
4. **Jargon or technical terms** that make readers work unnecessarily hard. Perhaps you need to use some of these words because they are important terms in your field, but don't throw them in just to sound "smart."
 - Example error: *The dialectical interface between neo-Platonists and anti-disestablishment Catholics offers an algorithm for deontological thought.*
 - Revision: *The dialogue between neo-Platonists and certain Catholic thinkers is a model for deontological thought.*

Examples of Strong Academic Verbs

align	convince	fail	input	prepare
amplify	create	find	judge	provide
analyze	destroy	finish	justify	question
assert	discover	fit	limit	reduce
avoid	dismantle	gain	linger	reject
begin	dismiss	grow	lose	repair
believe	drive	guide	maintain	research
benefit	edit	hamper	monitor	review
broaden	engage	handle	negate	show
build	evolve	identify	offer	simplify
cause	explore	ignore	operate	solve
connect	express	implement	predict	submit
control	fabricate	impress	prefer	suggest

Credit: Adapted from Kalee Hall, University Writing Center

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