

Word Choice in Academic Writing

Word choice in academic writing works to determine the manner in which the reader interprets the text. Therefore, it is crucial that we are cognizant of the various ways in which word choice shapes the manner in which our writing/message is (mis)understood.

Read on for an outline of the ways in which word choice and grammar can be addressed as well as a practice exercise.

We have divided word choice into the following two categories, and sub-categories:

1. **Choosing appropriate language**
 - a. Avoid being pompous
 - b. Learn to use a thesaurus wisely
 - c. Levels of formality
 - d. Sexist language

2. **Picking the right words**
 - a. Connotations
 - b. Specific, concrete nouns
 - c. Specific verbs
 - d. Misused words

Introduction to Word Choice and Grammar

1. Choosing appropriate language

a) Avoid being pompous

At times we might be tempted to use words with multiple syllables in an effort to impress others. However, a work produced with such intentions is likely to alienate the reader, rather than interest them. Thus, avoid jargon since it hinders the reader's ability to quickly grasp the substance of your words.

The work done by Daniel M. Oppenheimer over the years regarding academic jargon is worth noting, especially his article, "Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly", where we can see how within the title itself Oppenheimer lays out his argument for us.

Consider the following example that Oppenheimer (2006) presents:

Original:

This **dissertation** presents a historical study of **the institutional development** of the American religious sector. Through the lens **of institutionalist perspectives** developed in organizational sociology I focus on the co-evolution of the modern denominational form and the denominational system in the United States from 1790 to 1980. Through an empirical study of American Protestant denominations I build arguments which advance three theoretical issues within **institutional theory**.

Simplified:

This **thesis** presents a historical study of the **societal advance** of the American religious sector. Through the lens of **social institution views** developed in organizational sociology I focus on the co-evolution of the modern denominational form and the denominational system in the United States from 1790 to 1980. Through an empirical study of American Protestant denominations I build arguments which advance three theoretical issues within **social theory**.

As you can see, when simplifying your writing, the changes do not have to be extensive as it is more about the quality rather than the quantity. Moreover, notice how the complexity is not shunned, which means that you should also not simplify your writing to such a degree that the reader loses interest as well.

Consider the following example that Oppenheimer (2006) provides:

Complex version:

I desire to go to Graduate School so that I can learn to recognize literature satisfactorily. I want to investigate the character and the connotation of the narrative and its literary antecedents. I desire to comprehend what the narrative has represented in numerous literary periods, and what it is expected to become. I desire to investigate its numerous manners, realism, naturalism, and other approaches, and the Victorian and Modernist consciousness as they are discovered.

Simplified version:

I want to go to Graduate School so that I can learn to know literature well. I want to explore the shape and the meaning of the novel and its literary antecedents. I want to understand what the novel has meant in different literary periods, and what is likely to become. I want to explore its different forms, realism, naturalism and other modes, and the Victorian and Modernist consciousness as they are revealed.

Notice how in this case, the complex version is much more appealing as it communicates your ideas very effectively.

b) Learn to use a thesaurus wisely

Using a thesaurus allows you to enhance the impact of your writing by ensuring that you are using the word that fits the context properly. Consider the following:

Original: Addye Nieves' artwork is difficult to understand.

During the revision stage of my writing, I want to change the word "difficult" because I feel that it is simply too generic. This, however, does not mean that I open a thesaurus, type "difficult", hit enter and pick out any word that I think sounds nice, or seems complex. I must also check the exact meaning of the word to see if it fits the context.

difficult [dif-i-kuhlt, -kuhlt]

[SEE DEFINITION OF difficult](#)

adj. hard on someone; hard to do

adj. complicated; hard to comprehend

adj. unmanageable socially

Synonyms for *difficult*

| | | | | |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| complex | deep | intricate | obscure | thorny |
| confusing | enigmatic | involved | obstinate | ticklish |
| delicate | enigmatical | knotty | paradoxical | unclear |
| troublesome | entangled | labyrinthine | perplexing | unfathomable |
| abstract | esoteric | loose | problematical | unintelligible |
| abstruse | formidable | meandering | profound | vexing |
| baffling | hard to explain | mysterious | puzzling | |
| bewildering | hard to solve | mystical | rambling | |
| confounding | hidden | mystifying | subtle | |
| dark | inexplicable | nice | tangled | |

■ MOST RELEVANT

The options that come up here, especially those which are highlighted, are “complex”, “confusing”, “delicate”, “troublesome”, etc. Recall that what we wish to communicate is that Addye Nieves’ artwork is difficult to understand. “Complex” here does not fit the context because while Addye Nieves’ work might be difficult to understand because it is complex, our emphasis is not on its complexity. Similarly, “confusing” will not work because we do not want to attach any negative connotations either. “Delicate” and “troublesome” are clear outliers that we will not use for both do not communicate that something is difficult to understand.

Finally, from the options that come up, we see that “abstruse” works better here because it means, “hard to understand”, which is exactly what we are looking for. Thus, we revise our sentence to, “Addye Nieves’ artwork is abstruse.”

c) Levels of formality

Depending on the situation, you will be required to modify your writing to communicate in a language that is not only familiar, but also valued by your target audience. Therefore, “Will Rakshanda’s voice be ever as acclaimed as Noor Jehan’s? Many critics think not, but I think it will”, is too informal in its address for academic writing.

The sentence can be revised to, “Many critics not do consider Rakshanda’s musical capabilities to rival those of Noor Jehan’s, however, I disagree with them.”

d) Sexist language

Many feminists have pointed out that by making the male figure the default in our conversations and writings we are excluding people who do not identify as male from our conversations and, more importantly, imaginings.

Original: A policeman is always complicit in state violence.

Revised: The police are always complicit in state violence.

Original: Noor is an excellent chairman for the agricultural department.

Revised: Noor is an excellent chairperson for the agricultural department.

Original: Man is a political animal.

Revised: Human beings are political animals.

2. Picking the right words

a) Connotations

Understanding connotation is important because the same sequence of actions, or things, can be described in multiple ways as connotation is the emotional dimension of the words that we use. For example, while both the words “druggie” and “drug addict” refer to a person who habitually uses drugs, both have slightly different implications. “Druggie” is more pejorative, whereas “drug addict” still has a semblance of neutrality to it. Consider the context. For example, the words, “horse” and “steed” both refer to the same animal, but you would most likely use “steed” when talking about a racehorse as opposed to simply referring to a “horse.”

b) Specific, concrete nouns

Note how moving from left to right the nouns become more specific which allows the reader to visualize your writing.

| | | | |
|---------|------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Service | Colonial service | British colonial service | British colonial service in India |
| State | Capitalist state | Neoliberal capitalist state | A postmodern, neoliberal, and capitalist state |
| People | Students | College students | Habib university students |

c) Specific verbs

Similar to specific nouns, specific verbs allow the reader to visualize your writing. Also, recall as discussed above, in “learn to use a thesaurus wisely” and “connotation” sections you cannot simply substitute one word for another as you must check their meaning specifically.

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Showing change or difference | Broaden, enlarge, exceed, expand, alter, modify, revise, reduce, worsen |
| Shows in-depth study | Analyze, examine, investigate, explore |
| Stating position | Advocate, propose, hypothesize, deny, dispute, reject |

d) Misused words

Always check if you are using the right word form or not. For example, do you mean to use “affect” or “effect”? Additionally, be wary of incorrectly using a homonym as well so that you do not mistakenly write, “lose” when you actually mean “loose”, or vice-versa.

Practice Exercise

Edit the following passage based on everything you've read so far.

The modern nation-states have played an active role in the organization of families for decades, as we might observe by taking the example of China's infamous One Child policy, as it provides them a conduit for establishing the normative social structures by legitimizing certain forms of family and delegitimizing others. Therefore, I will be looking at how the discourse around marriage was formed after the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan.

As many post-colonial historians like Partha Chatterjee and Veena Das point out, the sites upon which masculine power dynamics were played out were in fact women's bodies. Therefore, the starting point of my enquiry will be the Inter-Dominion treaty of 6th December 1947, for it was among one of the few treaties to be signed by both India and Pakistan post-partition in which they agreed to return each country's women to their "proper place". As such, the inter-dominion treaty was enacted as a measure to mend the fractured masculinities of both States rather than any actual concern for the women. In fact, both States were interested in controlling the women's reproductive abilities, more specifically, their ability to reproduce a legitimate family.

In short, my paper will argue how the partition was a formative moment for both States in how they looked at the legitimacy of certain families and, by extension, the illegitimacy of others; and how the States then subsequently set up Institutions that were reflective of their ideology.

If you had any difficulty in figuring out which words to revise, then we have highlighted certain portions of the passage to give you a helping hand, which you can revise for clarity, wordiness, and formality.

The modern nation-states have played an active role in the organization of families for decades, as we might observe by taking the example of China's infamous One Child policy, as it provides them a conduit for establishing the normative social structures by legitimizing certain forms of family and delegitimizing others. Therefore, I will be looking at how the discourse around marriage was formed after the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan.

As many post-colonial historians like Partha Chatterjee and Veena Das point out, the sites upon which masculine power dynamics were played out were in fact women's bodies. Therefore, the starting point of my enquiry will be the Inter-Dominion treaty of 6th December 1947, for it was among one of the few treaties to be signed by both India and Pakistan post-partition in which they agreed to return each country's women to their "proper place". As such the inter-dominion treaty was enacted as a measure to mend the fractured masculinities of both States rather than any actual concern for the women. In fact, both States were interested in controlling the women's reproductive abilities, more specifically; their ability to reproduce a legitimate family.

In short, my paper will argue how the partition was a formative moment for both States in how they looked at the legitimacy of certain families and, by extension, the illegitimacy of others; and how the States then subsequently set up Institutions that were reflective of their ideology.

Corrected Version

~~The~~ Modern ~~nation~~-states have played an active role in the organization of families for decades, ~~as we might observe by taking the example of~~ for example China's infamous One Child policy, as it allowed ~~provided them~~ the state ~~a conduit~~ to ~~establish the normative social structures by~~ legitimizing certain forms of family and delegitimizing others. Therefore, ~~I will be looking at how~~ I will examine the discourse around marriage that was formed after the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan.

As many post-colonial historians ~~like~~-such as Partha Chatterjee and Veena Das point out, the sites upon which masculine power dynamics were played out were in fact women's bodies. Therefore, the starting point of my enquiry will be the Inter-Dominion treaty of 6th December 1947, for it was among one of the ~~few~~ first treaties to be signed by both India and Pakistan post-partition in which they agreed to return each country's women to their "proper place."² As such the inter-dominion treaty was ~~enacted~~ a measure to mend the fractured masculinities of both ~~States~~ states rather than any actual concern for the women. In fact, both ~~States were interested in controlling the women's reproductive abilities, more specifically; their ability to reproduce a legitimate family~~ of the states were interested in asserting their control over women's bodies.

~~In short, my paper will argue~~ Therefore, this paper argues that ~~the p~~ Partition was a formative moment for both states in how they looked at the legitimacy of certain families and, by extension, the illegitimacy of ~~others; and how~~ and how the States then subsequently set up Institutions that were reflective of their ideology.

References

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