

What, Why, and How?

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STYLE:

Word Choice

WHAT IS WORD CHOICE?

Of course, it is what it sounds like: choosing the best, most effective words to form clear and convincing sentences. So what makes the best word choices? When writing academic essays, you want to use concrete words that directly engage the senses and give precise meaning. Here are some definitions of different types of words to consider:

- **Abstract words** refer to ideas or concepts rather than physical objects. For example, words like *love* and *hate* represent concepts with no physical referent.
- **Concrete words** refer to objects that we can hear, see, feel, touch, and/or smell; for instance, *tattoo* relates to something we can see and touch while you cannot touch, smell, or taste *justice*, an abstract term.
- **General words** refer to large classes of objects; for example, “jobs” and “video games” relate to general types of objects.
- **Specific words** refer to specific objects; for example, “high school teacher” and “*Call of Duty*” relate to specific jobs and video games.
- **Clichés** refer to overused word phrases and statements like, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

WHY IS WORD CHOICE IMPORTANT?

As you work on your academic essays, you want to create sentences that express clear, precise ideas to your readers. You want to be mindful about overusing abstract terms because your writing will lose clarity. In conveying the importance of favoring concrete terms in writing, French poet Alain de Lille once said, “Your sentences should be full of stones, metals, chairs, tables, animals, men, and women.”

Although abstract ideas have an important place in many academic essays, you will need to use concrete and specific language to clearly and effectively communicate your meaning to your readers. This also means that you should avoid using clichés because they do not show original thoughts and lack specific meaning.

HOW DO I APPLY IT?

As you revise your academic essays (and other types of communications), you will need to revise your sentences for concrete and specific language. Let's look at a few examples:

1. **Abstract vs. concrete**—To give your reader a clear understanding of your meaning, you will often need to replace abstract terms with more concrete terms.

- **ORIGINAL**: To develop a strong academic essay, you will need to work hard.
- **REVISED**: To develop a strong academic essay, you will need to spend time prewriting, organizing your ideas, writing an outline, and completing multiple drafts.

2. **General vs. specific**—Good academic essays will use specific language for more precise and clearer sentences.

- **ORIGINAL**: The student found the class fascinating. (NOTE: the reader might need more information here; why does he find the class fascinating?)
- **REVISED**: Jimmy found Professor Lachmayr's class fascinating because it focused on race and gender.

3. **Clichés**—In everyday speech, we might use clichés, but academic writing requires more thoughtful ideas and originality. Thus, you should not use clichés in your writing; instead, think of more original and specific ways of stating your idea.

- **ORIGINAL**: Because Jimmy submitted his essay late, he had to "pay the piper." (NOTE: The cliché "pay the piper" needs to be replaced to indicate exactly what this means in reference to the late essay.)
- **REVISED**: Because Jimmy submitted his essay late, he lost ten points and had to meet with Professor Williams.

PRACTICE

Word Choice

Revise the following sentences to replace abstract language with more concrete language and details.

1. I wrote a great research paper.
2. College students have a lot of freedom.

Revise the following sentences to replace general language for more specific language and sentences.

3. The book was very interesting.
4. Skyline College has a lot of great resources.

Revise the following sentences to replace the underlined cliché with more original and precise language.

5. John let the cat out of the bag when he told my parents which college I chose to attend.
6. Travelling to different parts of the world has taught me to not judge a book by its cover.

ANSWERS

POSSIBLE ANSWERS FOR WORD CHOICE SECTION

1. I wrote a great research paper. **REVISED:** My research paper did an excellent job of incorporating evidence from both sides of the issue while also providing a clear, consistent argument.
2. College students have a lot of freedom. **REVISED:** College students have a lot of scheduling freedom as they can take classes during the daytime, evenings, and even online.
3. The book was very interesting. **REVISED:** *Drive* gave me a better understanding of how constant praise can negatively affect motivation.
4. Skyline College has a lot of great resources. **REVISED:** Skyline College offers health services, psychological counseling, academic counseling, tutoring, and career counseling.
5. John let the cat out of the bag when he told my parents which college I chose to attend. **REVISED:** John *accidentally revealed my secret* when he told my parents which college I chose to attend.
6. Travelling to different parts of the world has taught me to not judge a book by its cover. **REVISED:** Travelling to different parts of the world has taught me to *take the time to understand cultural differences and not make quick and in accurate judgments.*