

Writing: Word Choice

Because descriptive writing is characterized by detailed and interesting illustrations, word choice is a very important writing skill for this type of writing. For this writing practice, we will focus on incorporating new and more specific words to emphasize your meaning.

A challenge with introducing new vocabulary into your writing is appropriately including a new word into a sentence. There are three important parts of word knowledge to consider before including the word: part of speech, connotations vs definitions, and collocations.

Synonyms

Think of how in the fictional books you read in English the word *said* might be replaced with *yelled*, *cried*, *declared*, *insisted*, *whimpered*, or *stated*. Although at the core these words are all used as verbs for speaking, they carry extra meaning that gives more information to the reader than a simple *said*.

Be aware that some vocabulary may also have an expression (phrase) that could be used instead of a single word. For example, someone may say *tired* or *exhausted*, but the expression *I'm beat* or *I'm worn out* or *I'm spent* also mean the same thing.

One step that may be helpful is making a list of adjectives and adverbs that more accurately describe the person and their impact on others. A thesaurus is a great place to look for synonyms:

- <https://edtechbooks.org/-xJldG>
- <https://www.thesaurus.com/>

Part of Speech

Most of the words you encounter when looking for synonyms or translating words from your first language will be in the same **part of speech**: noun, verb, adjective, adverb etc. However, it is possible that you will find a word that changes to a different word form.

Now that you've practiced looking at descriptive words and synonyms in isolation, you need to start thinking about how the words are actually used in sentences.

As mentioned in the previous exercise, it is important to check that the part of speech of your synonym is the same. This is the first step to knowing how to include it in a new sentence.

Sometimes, a synonym that uses a different part of speech is the best word for the job. Other times, you may find that the sentence you want to write would be most clear if you change the form of the word on your list.

Examples

Same Part of Speech:

(Less descriptive) We bought an inexpensive car.

(More descriptive) We bought a cheap car.

Different Part of Speech:

(Less descriptive) We bought an inexpensive car.

(More descriptive) We bought a car at a **discount**.

(More descriptive) *The car is **competitively priced**.

*You may also use a phrase instead of a single word if it is more descriptive.

Connotation

The word synonym can be deceptive. As mentioned with the word *said*, a synonym can add meaning. Sometimes this additional meaning, or **connotation**, is clear in the definition.

- For example, the additional meaning of *insist* compared to *said* is directly explained in the definition: to demand something forcefully.
- Take a look at the dictionary definitions of the words *said* and *state*. In this case, the difference is not as obvious.

Connotations and Culture

An important note is that connotation is largely determined by culture. A direct translation of a word can often lose an intended connotation or gain one accidentally. An example of this can be seen within the general culture of the United States with words like *fat*, *chubby*, *skinny*, or *slim*. While the dictionary definition of these words may simply describe the physical shape of a person, there is often a cultural connotation to such descriptions that could be seen as offensive.

When the dictionary does not provide enough information to know the connotation of a new word, the additional meaning can often be found by viewing example sentences. Look at the example sentences below for *said* and *state*. Can you recognize a difference in meaning now?

- He *said* he will be home at 8.
- He *stated* his full address.

After looking at a few additional example sentences, you may come to the conclusion that *state* has an additional level of formality, usually used to talk about speaking in an official way.

The Grammar of Vocabulary

In addition to knowing the part of speech and full meaning of a word, you will need to be aware of any grammar patterns that are connected to that word. The part of speech is one step in this direction, but it does not give you the full information about how the word is commonly included in actual written English.

A **collocation** is a word that frequently occurs together with a target vocabulary word. Likely as you have memorized verbs, you will have noticed that there is a particular preposition that goes with it.

- For example: *decide to/on, depend on, come from, or laugh about*

There are also times that a collocation (particularly a preposition or adverb) can create a phrasal verb. A phrasal verb creates a completely new meaning when the words are found together.

- For example: *turn on, get out, take off, move in, go through, or drop out of*

Because a collocation can either be required to complete the grammatical unit or can signal a change in meaning, it is important to look for clues about a new vocabulary word before trying to include it in a sentence.

Word Choice Review

Throughout this chapter of the textbook, you have looked at how to select vocabulary that provides more specific detail than the low-hanging fruit* of the most common words of English. As you write your short descriptive essay, pay special attention to the words you choose. Is the meaning clear and direct? Is the word form used appropriately for the grammar of your sentence? Have you checked to ensure any new vocabulary words match the intended meaning?

*Low-hanging fruit: obvious or easy choice or action

Descriptive Writing Tip

As a final note, it is important to remember that at the college level, your writing will have a main purpose other than to describe. The description adds to the overall impact of your writing, but there is such thing as too much description. Be careful not to overwhelm your reader with so much description that your actual purpose is lost.

Since the purpose of this essay is to isolate the language skills needed for descriptive writing, you do not need to worry too much about this here. However, look carefully at the feedback you receive from the teacher. Are there supporting ideas that are overdescribed? Are there additional places where descriptions would enhance the writing?

Exercises

Exercise 1: Synonyms

Make a list of words that could replace each word below. Try to choose more descriptive words that could replace each word.

1. elderly

2. huge

3. slow

4. chair

5. principal

6. walk

Exercise 2: Vocabulary List

Make a list of vocabulary that would be useful in describing the event you are writing about. Along with the list of words you already know, try making a new vocabulary list of synonyms that you can try to include in your writing.

Example

fast: quick, rapid, swift, brisk, speedy, sprint, high-speed.

Exercise 3: Synonyms and Part of Speech

Part A: Practice making synonyms with the following words. Use a thesaurus to find a more descriptive synonym. Then use a dictionary to check its part of speech. Write a descriptive synonym for each word with the same part of speech. The first word has been done for you as an example.

Basic Word (Part of Speech)	Descriptive Synonym (Part of Speech)
Example: <i>pretty</i> (adjective)	<i>charming</i> (adjective)
<i>pretty</i> (adjective)	1. _____ ()
<i>smart</i> (adjective)	2. _____ ()
<i>share</i> (verb)	3. _____ ()
<i>make</i> (verb)	4. _____ ()
<i>easily</i> (adverb)	5. _____ ()
<i>happily</i> (adverb)	6. _____ ()

Notice how some words have different meanings in different parts of speech like “share” the verb meaning to give to many people and “share” the noun meaning a part of a company or business. When you look for a synonym, make sure the part of speech *and that* the meanings are the same.

Exercise 4: Synonyms in Sentences

Practice using the synonyms you found in the previous exercise in sentences. Rewrite the sentences below to use the synonyms you found. You may need to change the word order of the sentence or give more context to specify which meaning of the synonym you are using. Two examples have been done for you.

Example: The decor at the restaurant was very **pretty**. The decor at the restaurant was very **charming**.

Example: Albert Einstein was very **smart**. *Albert Einstein was very **quick**; his genius was well-known.

**More context was needed to clarify that the meaning of "quick" here was intelligent, not physically fast-moving.*

1. The painting that was displayed was **pretty**.

2. The math problem was solved by an 8 year old, so we thought he was very **smart**.

3. I **share** the moments that are unforgettable with friends through Facebook.

4. The chef **made** a pie in the oven.

5. He **easily** finished the math exam within half an hour.

6. She **happily** played her games during breaktime.

Exercise 5: Changing part of speech

Practice changing the synonym you chose in the previous exercise to a different part of speech. This will let it be used in a different way in a sentence. If the synonym you chose in the previous exercise does not keep the same meaning when it changes the part of speech, then choose a new synonym word with a different part of speech. The first word has been done for you as an example.

Basic Word (Part of Speech)	Changed Synonym (Part of Speech)
Example: prettily (adverb)	charm (noun)
prettily (adverb)	1. _____ ()
smartly (adverb)	2. _____ ()
shared (adjective)	3. _____ ()
made (adjective)	4. _____ ()
easy (adjective)	5. _____ ()
happy (adjective)	6. _____ ()

Exercise 6: Original Sentence

Write your own original sentence for each synonym you chose in the previous exercise. Try to use it in the sentence with the new part of speech. The first word has been done for you as an example.

Example: The **charm** of the school enchanted the students.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Exercise 7: Recognizing connotation

1. Consider the connotations of the underlined words below. How does the meaning shift? Does the dictionary definition clearly show you the difference in use?

- The chairs were made of a **cheap** material and were unusable after one use.
- The chairs were **affordable** and so buying them was within my budget.
- The chairs were so **inexpensive**! They *were a steal** at that price!

2. Now check the connotations and definition differences between the provided synonyms and a synonym of your choice. How does the meaning shift? Does the dictionary definition clearly show you the difference in use?

- *pretty, charming*, and ____
- *share, bestow*, and ____
- *easy, effortless*, and ____

*This expression is used for when something is so inexpensive that it feels like you didn't have to pay for them

Exercise 8: Connotation Sentences

Read the words below. They have similar dictionary definitions but different connotations. Write a sentence for each word in the pair that demonstrates your understanding of the differences in meaning.

Example:

My cat is very **curious** and always looks out the window.

My neighbor is so **nosy** and is always sharing gossip with anyone who will listen.

1. *curious, nosy*

2. *guest, visitor*

3. *picky, selective*

4. *persistent, stubborn*

5. *childish, childlike*

Exercise 9: Collocations

1. Practice finding collocations for the following words:
 1. *catch* + noun
 2. *give* + preposition
 3. *ask* + preposition
 4. *keep* + noun
 5. *get* + adjective
2. Take a look at these verbs and the phrasal verb form. How does the meaning change?
 1. *hold*: *hold on* and *hold up*
 2. *fight*: *fight over* and *fight for*
 3. *pay*: *pay off* and *pay up*
 4. *hang*: *hang out* and *hang up*
 5. *get*: *get back at* and *get back to*

Exercise 10: Collocation sentences

1. Write a sentence for each of the 5 collocates from question 1 in Exercise 5.
2. Write a sentence for 5 of the phrasal verbs from question 2 in Exercise 5.

Exercise 11: Different Words. Same Meaning.

You may use synonyms to rephrase (paraphrase) information from a source in your own words. A paraphrase uses different words and grammar to keep the same meaning as the original. Consider the paraphrases below. Choose the best paraphrase for each original quote:

1. "It ripped through every economic level, race, religion, and culture" (Graf, 2018, "World War II," para. 1).
 - A. It tore through all economic levels, races, religious groups, and cultures (Graf, 2018).
 - B. It affected everybody. (Graf, 2018).
 - C. There was no economic, racial, religious or cultural group that was unaffected by it (Graf, 2018).
 - D. No groups (racial, cultural, or otherwise) wanted to touch it (Graf, 2018).
2. "The Renaissance gave us new light, pushing aside the Dark Ages when man was directed by superstition and fear" (Graf, 2018, "The Renaissance," para. 1).
 - A. Superstitious beliefs and fear drove man in the Dark Ages, but were replaced by new light during the Renaissance (Graf, 2018).
 - B. The Renaissance pushed aside the Dark Ages because of superstition and fear (Graf, 2018).
 - C. The Renaissance was pushy because the Dark Ages were a difficult time of fear and superstitious directions (Graf, 2018).
 - D. The Renaissance brought light to the Dark Ages when man was directed by superstition and fear (Graf, 2018).

Exercise 12: Write a body paragraph

The partial outline below includes a topic sentence, some developing questions, and some research (quotes and paraphrases). Use the information to create a body paragraph. This body paragraph would be part of an essay about the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. Your paragraph should include rich description through word choice.

Topic sentence: The 1906 earthquake was devastating.

- Q: How did the earthquake cause devastation?
- A: Fire and shaking
 - "In the public's mind, this earthquake is perhaps remembered most for the fire it spawned in San Francisco, giving it the somewhat misleading appellation of the "San Francisco earthquake". Shaking damage, however, was equally severe in many other places along the fault rupture" (USGS, n.d., para. 3).
- Q: What did the devastation include?
- A: Deaths and buildings
 - "The frequently quoted value of 700 deaths caused by the earthquake and fire is now believed to underestimate the total loss of life by a factor of 3 or 4. Most of the fatalities occurred in San Francisco, and 189 were reported elsewhere" (USGS, n.d., para. 3).
 - Deaths were estimated much lower originally than after further research; now the estimate is around 3,000 people. (USGS, n.d.)
 - Over half of the city's residents were homeless (USGS, n.d.).

Sources: Quoting



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