



APPROPRIATE WORD CHOICE

11a Check for exactness and clarity

1. Be precise

Make every word and phrase count by making your point in the fewest possible words.

Wordy:

- ➔ In point of fact, in language, a code is a sign or rule that allows you to change a piece of information into another sign, form, or representation, and this new sign, form, or representation does not necessarily have to be of the same system.



Concise:

- ➔ **A code is a sign that changes information into another sign, sometimes not in the same system.**

2. Use specific, concrete words

Student writers often are asked to give their opinions about literature, films, or music. Using vague descriptors such as *good*, *bad*, *great*, *best*, *greatest*, and *worst* weakens writing. Make descriptions stronger by using specific, concrete words.

Vague:

➔ *The Old Man and the Sea* is the best novel.

Specific:

➔ In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway depicts the accurate and heart-wrenching life of a fisherman.

In addition, be sure to use concrete words, instead of vague or abstract ones, to make a description the strongest it can be. This would be a good time to check a thesaurus (see **Chapter 14**).

Using specific, concrete words

Instead of this...	Try this...
blue	azure, cobalt, navy, sea blue, turquoise
car	Ford Escort, Toyota Camry, Volkswagen Beetle
friend	school acquaintance, close friend, movie pal
house	home, abode, igloo, apartment, student dormitories
hungry	famished, ravenous, starving
piece of literature	short story, poem, novel, play
river	Danube, Mississippi, Nile
the city	Austin, Los Angeles, Nashville, New York

When searching for a more specific or concrete word, be careful not to just let your computer thesaurus make an automatic replacement. For instance, if you just automatically substitute a more specific word for *blue*, you might end up with a problematic sentence, as shown below.

➔ I wanted to buy the **blue** car.

Automatic substitute from thesaurus ➔ I wanted to buy the **depressed** car.

Effective substitute from thesaurus ➔ I wanted to buy the **navy** car.

3. Delete empty words and phrase

It is not the number of words you use, but the exactness of the words that demonstrates writing maturity. Using empty phrases or expletives, such as *there/it + be*, may be grammatically correct, but you can be more concise by just dropping them.

Wordy:

- There were only three sailors on *The Enterprise* who knew semaphore signs.

Concise:

- **Only three sailors on *The Enterprise* knew semaphore signs.**



If your instructor assigns a first-person essay, be sure that you do not overuse the empty phrases that can sometimes go along with this type of writing. Some instructors call these empty phrases “weasel words” because they can make your writing sound non-authoritative. By dropping these empty phrases or weasel words, you can present your views with more authority.

Wordy:

- In my opinion, I think that learning Morse code is difficult.

Concise:

- **Learning Morse code is difficult.**



Weasel words

I am sure (that)	In my opinion
I believe (that)	It is my opinion (that)
I know (that)	It is true (that)
I think (that)	To my knowledge
I think the facts reveal (that)	

4. Replace wordy prepositional phrases with more concise adverbs

Wordy descriptions sometimes fill up a lot of space but do not say anything important or necessary. This type of wordiness usually includes unnecessary prepositional phrases that can be deleted without changing any real meaning.

Wordy:

- ➔ In this day and age in the event that a boat has trouble in the water, semaphores or Morse code can be used to signal for help.

Concise:

- ➔ **When in trouble, boaters can use semaphores or Morse code to signal for help.**

Using adverbs for conciseness

Replace these prepositional phrases	with these adverbs
at all times	always
at that point in time	then
at the present time	now, today
at this moment	now, today
beyond a shadow of a doubt	certainly, surely
due to the fact that	because
for the purpose of	for
in order to	to
in point of fact	undoubtedly, clearly
in spite of the fact that	although
in the event that	if, when
in the final analysis	finally
in this day and age	today
in view of the fact that	because
it is clear that	clearly
it is obvious that	obviously

it is my opinion that	(drop completely)
there is no question that	unquestionably, certainly
without a doubt	undoubtedly

5. Describe exactly who, what, when, where, why, and how

Vague descriptions or empty words contribute nothing to the meaning of the sentence or the description you are trying to give. Rephrase these vague descriptions into specific words. Once you have identified the specifics (who, what, when, where, why, how), do not repeat the same information.

Wordy:

- ➔ When on the water and not in close contact with other boats, boaters can use Morse code, but when on the water and in eye view of another boat, boaters can use semaphores.

Concise:

- ➔ Boaters can use semaphores when close to another boat and Morse code when farther than eye view.

MORSE CODE		
	American	International
A	• —	• —
B	• — • —	• — • —
C	• — • —	• — • —
D	• — • •	• — • •
E	•	•
F	• — • •	• — • •
G	• — —	• — —
H	• — • •	• — • •
I	• •	• •
J	• — • —	• — • —
K	• — • —	• — • —
L	• — • —	• — • •
M	— —	— —
N	• —	• —
O	— —	— —

6. Use figurative language when appropriate

Using words in an imaginative or creative way, rather than in the literal sense, is figurative language. The most common figures of speech are metaphors (a comparison of dissimilar things) and similes (a comparison of dissimilar things using *like* or *as*).

Simile ➔ The boat glided on the water like a pelican in flight.

Metaphor ➔ Morse code is the Model T of communication.



However, be careful about being too flowery with descriptions. Flowery language is writing that often contains too many adjectives, adverbs, or words that you have looked up in a thesaurus and used incorrectly.

Flowery:

- The old faded scarlet dinghy sa-shayed on the cool, fresh, and blue water like a storm-tossed pelican in dangerous flight.



Concise:

- The old red dinghy bounced on the water.

EXERCISE 1

Directions: In the following sentences, revise any word choice problems.

Example: In my opinion, the signs posted in my city should have reflective letters. → *The traffic signs in Murfreesboro should have reflective letters.*

1. There has been an accident at a corner near campus every day beyond a shadow of a doubt.
2. Fraught with tension, the room where the recent city manager's meeting was held felt like it was swimming with the sweat of all the attendees in the room.
3. I think the facts reveal that better signs are needed.
4. It is quite surprising that in this day and age more people do not protest the number of accidents that have occurred in our city each and every day.
5. We all hope that the city manager will come out of the apparent comatose state he is in and work on changing how the signs are made and posted.

11b

Check for completeness

The words we use in conversations often have clear references in the environment or context around us. However, in academic and professional writing, some conversational words need to be replaced for full clarity and transparency.

Deictic or pointing words, such as *here*, *there*, *this*, and *that*, that are frequently used in spoken language need clear antecedents or full descriptions in writing.

Unclear reference:

- When traveling by sea, be sure to take that manual.

Clear reference:

- **When traveling by sea, be sure to take the semaphore manual.**

Intensifiers, such as *so*, *such*, and *too*, that are used in speech to mean “very” or “exceptionally” usually need an extra phrase or clause to describe **why** something is being intensified.

Unclear reference:

- Morse code is so out of date.

Clear reference:

- **Morse code, which was created in the early 1840s, is so out of date that it is rarely used anymore.**

When comparing two or more things in academic writing, be sure to provide both parts of the comparison.

Unclear reference:

- Semaphore codes are even older.

Clear and full reference:

- **Semaphore codes, created in the early 1800s, are even older than Morse code, which was first used in the 1840s.**

11c

Check for tired, stale, or unnatural language

Descriptive language that is innovative can quickly capture the reader's attention and interest. Note the difference between the following two sentences.

Simple → The boat floated out to sea.

Descriptive → **The rowboat drifted two miles off shore.**



However, as writers, we need to be careful not to get so caught up in our description that we borrow the overused expressions of others. As a rule, it is best to stay away from clichés and idioms that have lost their original innovativeness.

Some clichés to avoid

after all is said and done	easier said than done
beat around the bush	face the music
believe it or not	fish out of water
best foot forward	flat as a pancake
better late than never	food for thought
calm before the storm	grin and bear it
cart before the horse	in a nutshell
chalk up a victory	in one ear and out the other
come through with flying colors	in the nick of time
crying shame	last but not least
don't rock the boat	more than meets the eye
drop in the bucket	raining cats and dogs

Overused idiom/cliché:

→ I felt like I was *out to sea* as I learned Morse code.

Straightforward description:

→ **Morse code was difficult to learn.**

If you are asked as a writer to be creative and innovative in your expressions, such as when you write a narrative or descriptive essay, stay away from clichés, and use some creativity of your own.

Innovative/creative description:

- ➔ **Morse code was as difficult to learn as snowboarding on a mountain of Jell-O.**

Jargon, the language used by a particular profession or a group of people, is usually too technical to be natural for an academic essay. Reword techno-speak into more straightforward descriptions.

Jargon:

- ➔ Morse code is a type of character encoding that uses rhythmic language and telegraphic information to transmit a given communication.

Straightforward description:

- ➔ **Morse code uses dots and dashes to send out messages.**

DID YOU KNOW?

William Shakespeare is credited with the first usage of around 2,000 words in the English language. He is also responsible for some of the most well-known idioms, some of which are now clichés: *neither rhyme nor reason*, *in my mind's eye*, *I must be cruel only to be kind*, *dead as a door-nail*, *it was Greek to me*, *love is blind*, *pomp and circumstance*, *a good riddance*, and *I have been in such a pickle*.



11d

Check for appropriate levels of formality

What is Academic English? For some instructors, this term refers to good grammar and formal style. For others, it refers to having students be constructive critics and clear writers. Whatever it means, most instructors will expect you to use a style that is more formal than your conversational English but not to the point where your writing sounds stilted and pretentious. Remember that formality depends on the audience and purpose of the writing assignment; if you are unsure about what is expected of you, ask your instructor.

Informal language, in the form of slang or colloquial language, is usually not part of your academic writing, unless you are writing a narrative that uses dialogue. Even though some slang words (such as *jazz* or *mob*) can become part of the broader standard language, most slang is considered too localized and too informal for academic writing.

Slang description:

- ➔ That boat was too cool.
- ➔ That boat was wicked.
- ➔ That boat was tight.
- ➔ That boat was dope.

Academic description:

- ➔ *The Enterprise, a new addition to the fleet, has innovative engines that are less harmful to the environment.*

Colloquial language, relaxed or casual speech used across many speakers, is also not usually part of academic writing. Words or expressions such as *a lot*, *gonna*, and *wanna* are too informal for essay writing.

Colloquial description:

- ➔ The boaters wanna learn how to use semaphores in case of emergency.

Academic description:

- **The boaters want to learn how to use semaphores in case of emergency.**

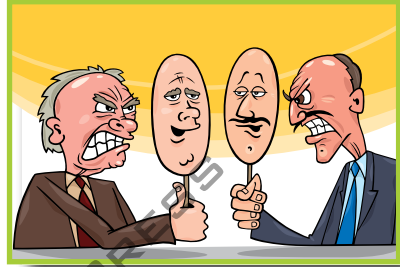
Doublespeak or doubletalk are words or expressions that are used to hide or distort the truth, such as using *protective custody* instead of *imprisonment* or *pre-hostility* instead of *peace*. In argumentative essays, using doublespeak can sound cagey or shifty.

Doublespeak description:

- State employees now have job flexibility.

Academic description:

- **State employees now have a lack of job security because they are only employed week to week.**



Be careful that when you are more formal in your writing, you do not go too far and sound pretentious, sometimes referred to as writing *gobble-dygook*. This can happen if you use a thesaurus without considering the context or formality of the essay or letter you are writing. Also, be sure to use American English spelling, rather than British English.

Pretentious:

- When I finalized my perusal of the optimal methodology to acquire the semaphore signals, I ascertained that it was more effortless to gain knowledge of Morse code.

Academic:

- **Learning Morse code was easier than learning semaphore signs.**

Pretentious words

Instead of...	Try...
aficionado	fan
ascertain	find out
commence	begin
conviviality	friendliness
desist	stop
imbroglio	mess
stantiate	support
finalize	finish, complete
impact	affect
jejeune	boring, childish
lugubrious	gloomy
methodology	method
nadir	lowest point
optimal	best
peruse	look at, read
potentiate	improve effectiveness
utilize	use

DID YOU KNOW?

British and American English, though mutually intelligible, have a number of distinct differences. Aside from pronunciation and vocabulary, spelling is often very different. We can thank Noah Webster (writer of the eponymous dictionary) for standardizing many American spellings, such as dropping the *u* from words like *colour* and *labour*, ending words with *-er* instead of *-re* (*center/centre*), and replacing *-ce* endings with *-se* (*offense, suspense*) to name a few examples. Not all of Webster's spelling reforms were accepted, though—*medicin*, *soop*, and *tung* never caught on.



11e

Check for sexist and offensive language

Use language that gives equal value and respect for all people and places.

1. Use appropriate words for gender

Give equal treatment to each gender; do not privilege either. Also, be sure not to use the generic *he* for all writing occasions. Try rephrasing singular subjects to plural ones; this allows you to switch from the singular pronoun (*she* or *he*) to a plural one (*they*).

Possible sexist language:

- The sailor learned Morse Code in his training.

Inclusive language:

- **Sailors learn Morse Code in training.**

Do not assume that one gender cannot do a particular type of work or gender role, as in *the male nurse*, *the female astronaut*, *faculty wives*, and *both men and their wives*.

Sexist language:

- The stewardess learned Morse code in training.

Inclusive language:

- **The flight attendant learned Morse code in training.**

Sexist language:

- The sailors brought their wives and kids to the dock party.

Inclusive language:

- **The sailors brought their families to the dock party.**

Here are some substitutions that you might consider when writing about job titles.

Recommended terms for job titles

Instead of...	Try...
barman, barmaid	bartender
businessman	businessperson, executive, manager, staff person
chairman	chair, presiding officer, moderator
congressman	member of Congress, representative, senator
comedienne	comedian
fireman	firefighter
mailman	letter carrier, mail carrier, postal worker
salesman	salesperson, sales representative
sculptress	sculptor
steward, stewardess	flight attendant
usherette	usher
waiter, waitress	server

2. Use appropriate words for age

In academic writing, use non-offensive terms when referring to the age of a person.

Recommended terms for age

Instead of...	Try...
kids (to age 18)	children
kids (college students)	students, young adults, adults, men, women
elderly, old man, old woman	senior citizens, older adults

3. Use appropriate words for ethnicity or race

Be sure to use terms that are non-discriminatory and non-offensive when referring to the ethnic backgrounds or races of people. If unsure, you can check for acceptable general or specific terms in a current dictionary.

Acceptable terms for ethnicity or race

General Terms for People in the United States	Specific Terms for People in the United States
African American, Black	
American Indian, Native American	Alaska Native, Cherokee, Hopi, Navajo
Anglo-American, White American, White	French American, Irish American, Polish American
Arab American	Egyptian American, Lebanese American
Asian American	Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, Thai American
Hispanic, Hispanic American, Latino/a	Mexican American, Puerto Rican
Pacific Islander American, Native Hawaiian	

4. Use appropriate words for disability or illness

The current preference in referring to people with disabilities or illnesses is to put the *person* first. For example, refer to a *person with disabilities* or a *person who is differently abled* rather than a *disabled person*.

Recommended terms for disability or illness

Instead of this...	Try this...
AIDS victim	a person with AIDS
blind person, visually impaired person	a person with a visual impairment
deaf person	a person with a hearing impairment
dumb person	a person with speech impairment
handicapped person, disabled person	a person with disabilities
neurotic person	a person with a psychological disability
quadriplegics	a person who is quadriplegic

5. Use appropriate words for geographical areas

Because social and political boundaries may change, you can use a *person from (place name)* when referring to someone and her place of origin or residence and rarely be wrong. Definitely, stay away from any derogatory terms for a person's origin. The terms that are most frequently seen as problematic include the following.

Recommended terms for geographical areas

Instead of...	Try this...
American	person from the United States, U.S. citizen
Arab	Egyptian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, Yemeni
English, Irish (from Northern Ireland), Welsh	British, person from the United Kingdom, U.K. citizen
Oriental	Asian, Asian American, Japanese, Korean, Chinese
Polish	Pole, person from Poland

EXERCISE 2

Directions: The following summary of a news event contains 12 words that are not appropriate for the more standardized language used for summarizing. Change these words to more appropriately reflect the summary writing you might do in a writing course.

Two kids have been taken into custody by the cops in connection with a recent string of vandalism in the area. The kids are accused of vandalizing stop signs in commemoration of the latest volume of the Harry Potter film franchise, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, by writing the name of evil wizard Voldemort on dozens of stop signs. Fanatics of the series might appreciate the vandals' urging to "STOP Voldemort," but the authorities were less entertained by the trick, which will cost the county \$50 per devastated sign. The cops gave a statement warning would-be vandals that vandalism will not be tolerated, no matter how harmless or humorous vandalism may seem.

<http://www.wisn.com/news/20061083/detail.html>