

Diction

When choosing the words we use in conversation, we always pay attention to the person we are talking to and the situation we are in at the time. We don't use the same words around our parents that we use around friends, for example, nor do we use the same words at work that we use at a party, and chat speak has its own shifting conventions. Similarly, we must consider our audience, the context, and the image we want to project when we write. Because writing is quite different from talking, we cannot get immediate feedback on the effect of our words, nor can we use gestures or facial expressions (or emojis) to convey meaning. Therefore, we must pay even more attention to the words we use if we want to communicate effectively.

Denotation

To do that, we must have a good grasp of the meaning of the words we use. If we don't, we will almost certainly confuse our reader. That is why developing an extensive working vocabulary is so important. But it is not enough simply to memorize a list of words and their meanings. When we look up a word in the dictionary, we discover its *denotation*, the thing or idea that it represents. Some words, however, have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used. For example, the word *play* has 7 different senses (meanings) as well as a number of sub senses as a noun, 5 senses as an intransitive verb, and 5 as a transitive verb plus a number of different phrases in which it is used. The only way to know the different meanings of words and the appropriate contexts in which to use them, therefore, is to read and keep a dictionary handy.

Connotation

Besides their denotations, words also have *connotations*, or implications beyond their literal meaning. Words can have positive or negative associations, masculine or feminine associations, age-related associations, and a panoply of emotional suggestions. The connotations of words evolve over time within a particular language and within specific linguistic communities. For example, consider the connotations of the following words, all of which denote, basically, the same thing—a female: *woman, girl, maiden, damsel, lass, wench, gal, tomboy, lady, chick, crone, debutante, schoolgirl, biddy, girlfriend, witch*. Or those for a male: *guy, chap, lad, boy, gent, shaver, stripling, fellow, buck*. None of these can be interchanged willy-nilly. The exact meanings of words are highly dependent on context. For example, in the above list for female, *damsel* and *maiden* are archaic, that is, they are words used in the past that are now only used in historical contexts, or perhaps ironically. For more information, see the following website: [Connotation and Denotation](#). California State University Northridge.

Concrete vs. Abstract Words

Another distinction can be made between *concrete words* that refer or point to things that we can sense (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste)—such as *table, book, truck, flower, and dog*, and *abstract words* that refer to things that we cannot sense—such as *honor, truth, happiness, freedom, and ignorance*. When we use concrete words we create pictures for our readers and communicate more directly. For example, I can write, “The boy got in his bright red Ford pickup

and sped away, shattering the silence with the roar of his engine and scattering the rocks in the driveway.” While we must also use abstract words, we should be careful to make their meaning clear. We all know the word *freedom*, but it has a wide range of meanings: according to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, it “has a broad range of application from total absence of restraint to merely a sense of not being unduly hampered or frustrated.”

Vocabulary

A vocabulary is a collection of words. As a writer, the more words you have at your command, the better able you are to express your ideas and feelings—to communicate with others. Nearly all cultures have praised those of its members who were good with words. Odysseus, for example, was feared by the Trojans not only because of his prowess in battle but also because of his wit and facility with words. And the Anglo-Saxons praised those who had a great “*word hoard*” and honored those accomplished in speaking. Beowulf was as highly respected for his ability to speak in the great hall as he was for his superhuman strength. Even today people who are skillful at communicating in speech and in writing are promoted and paid more than others who are not. As a television advertisement selling a vocabulary-building course used to say, “You are judged by the words you use.”

One way to develop your vocabulary is to keep a list of new words that you encounter in your reading, whether in books or online. Keeping such a list in a notebook or on your phone and then referring to it from time-to-time will greatly expand your reading vocabulary as well as the pool of words available to you as you write. If you want help in developing your vocabulary, there are a number of apps that will gladly help you do it. See a comparison of several of them in the following article by Minda Zetlin: “[Want a Bigger Vocabulary? Try These 7 Mobile Apps](#)” at *Inc.com* (2016). As Mark Twain famously said, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

Etymology

Another way to develop your vocabulary is to learn something about etymology. The etymology of a word is its linguistic history, that is its root (language of origin, such as Latin or German), affixes (prefix and suffix), and the changes it has undergone over time. Since English is an amalgam of many languages, knowing something about a word’s origin can help you add other words based on the same root or affix. A number of English words are derived from classical Greek and Latin, so a knowledge of their roots and affixes can be especially helpful. See “Appendix 4: Common Roots and Affixes from Greek and Latin,” in your text. An extensive list can be found at [Root Words & Prefixes: Quick Reference](#). If you wonder about the origin and history of a word, you can look it up in the [Online Etymological Dictionary](#).

Other terms associated with word origins in English are *acronyms*, and *eponyms*. An *acronym* is a word formed by the initial letters of a phrase, such as *NATO* (from North Atlantic Treaty Organization), *radar* (radio detection and ranging), and *snafu* (situation normal, all fouled up). See [Acronym Finder](#). An *eponym* is a word derived from someone’s name, such as *sandwich*, *mesmerize*, and *gerrymander*. For a list of eponyms, see [Alpha Dictionary.com](#).

Further, since English must keep up with an ever-evolving technology and ever-changing society, new words are created all the time. These *neologisms* come in from all quarters—

science, the arts, technology, and in-groups such as pop musicians and gamers. See the latest “new word” list on the OED site: [New Words List September 2016](#). Another source of new words is the combination of two other words to create a hybrid. These are called *portmanteau words* from the term’s first use by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*. See [86 Great Examples of Portmanteau](#) for a list.

Dictionaries

Since the Renaissance, in English at least, writers have seen the need for making lists of words to help writers choose the best means of expressing themselves. Such “Dictionaries of Hard Words” gradually evolved until Samuel Johnson published his *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755, the first major definitive dictionary in English. Johnson was the first to illustrate word use with quotations from published writers, and many of his definitions were “passed down” to later dictionaries.

In America, Noah Webster published his *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828. It became the “authority” and “arbiter” of the language in the United States; its descendent is *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*. Its latest edition was published in 2016, and it can be bought as a stand-alone app for your phone, or you can access Merriam-Webster’s web site which allows you to look up words and use a thesaurus: [Merriam Webster](#). A recent article by James Sullivan (2017) in *Globe Magazine* discusses its current status: “[How the Dusty Merriam-Webster Dictionary Reinvented Itself. Bigly.](#)” There are, of course, many other dictionaries available, such as [The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language](#). One problem you might encounter is that different dictionaries handle words and their meanings in different ways. Some list senses or meanings in historical order, while others list them from the most current to the oldest. Some are prescriptive when it comes to usage, while others are descriptive.

Words and their meanings also change over time, have different uses in different parts of the English-speaking world, are used primarily in specific crafts, or professions, or are considered inappropriate in certain contexts. So when you look up a word in a dictionary, it may have a **usage label** attached. For example, *Merriam-Webster* uses three types of labels— *temporal*, *regional*, and *stylistic*— to indicate words that are not in what it considers normal vocabulary. Words may be labeled *obsolete*, *archaic*, *Southern*, *chiefly Australian*, *dialect*, *slang*, *nonstandard*, and *vulgar*, for instance. Other definitions may have words or phrases attached such as *mining*, *of a watch*, or *in medieval philosophy*, to indicate specific contexts.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* uses *subject labels*, such as Chemistry or Sports, *status labels*, such as Nonstandard, Slang, Informal, Offensive, and Derogatory, *regional or dialectical labels*, such as Chiefly British or Upper Midwest, *Archaic or Obsolete labels*, and the label *Usage Problem* to indicate grammatically or stylistically contentious words. For such words, both dictionaries add usage notes briefly discussing the problem.

For a look at some of these differences, see [Word Up: Which Dictionary is Best](#), published in *Slate* by Yiling Chen-Josephson (2003). A later (2017) comparison of currently available dictionaries is “[Top Ten Best Dictionaries Reviewed in 2017](#),” *AMA: Top10*.

For a recent discussion of the current state of lexicography, by an insider, see *Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries* (2017), by Kory Stamper, who has worked for Merriam-Webster in Springfield, Massachusetts, for years and is the author of the blog [Harmless Drudgery](#) and various videos on You Tube.

The recognized authority on English words, their origins, and their history is the [Oxford English Dictionary \(the OED\)](#), first published from 1884 to 1928. Its second edition, published in 1989, is in 20 volumes and it was updated in 1993 and 1997. It is now online, with yearly updates, but the online version is by subscription only, so if you want or need to trace the history of a word from its origin to today, you will need to use your library's subscription or a hard copy.

Thesauruses

One resource that many writers, particularly novice writers, turn to is a thesaurus. Peter Mark Roget is the name most identified with this ubiquitous aid for the linguistically challenged. He published *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* in 1852. According to Simon Winchester, more than 30 million copies of his book have been sold since that time. However, given that words have varied denotations and connotations, we must be very careful in using such aids as thesauruses or synonym finders. If we look up the word *talk* in the thesaurus of *Miriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, for instance, we find the following: *speak, converse, chat, chatter, babble, utter, prattle, prate, run on, yak, blab*, and *gossip*, among others. None of them is interchangeable. See Merriam-Webster's [Thesaurus](#).

Quotations

Another resource that writers and speakers (or those who write speeches for speakers) have at their command are appropriate quotations from famous writers and speakers of the past. These phrases and sentences are used for embellishment or emphasis, or to attach the aura of a revered person from the past to the present writer or speaker. For example, a politician might use a quotation from George Washington or Abraham Lincoln to enhance his own speech and reputation. As Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric* about maxims, "If the maxims are good, they also make the speaker seem of good character." A "book of famous quotations," arranged by topic, used to be on every writer's bookshelf. Today, there are many lists on the internet. Here are a few:

[60 Selected Best Famous Quotes](#). Litemind.

[Famous Quotes and Authors](#). Famous quotes and Authors.com. You can browse authors alphabetically or quotations by topic.

[Good Quotations by Famous People](#). Gabriel Robins.

Maxims, Adages, Aphorisms, and Epigrams

Besides quotations, writers have also relied on short, dramatic statements that express a generally accepted truth. For example, a maxim is a pithy statement that encapsulates a truth that is instantly recognized. *Merriam-Webster* defines it as a "a general truth, fundamental principle, or rule of conduct." Maxims have been used by speakers and writers since ancient times. For instance, Hesiod, next to Homer the oldest known Greek writer, uses them throughout his *Works and Days*. Maxims are also many times specific to particular languages and regions, and modern writers have coined more contemporary ones. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a

number of writers produced books of “sentences,” or wise sayings (many translated from Greek and Latin), as sources for other writers. Bacon’s books of essays, for example, are expansions of this tradition, and in 1665 the Marquis de la Rochefoucauld published *Maxims*, a list of 642 short, pithy statements about life. See below.

Other terms closely associated with maxims are *sayings*, *adages*, *aphorisms*, *proverbs*, *apophthegms*, and *epigrams*.

[Maxims by Francois de la Rochefoucauld](#). Goodreads.com.

[Examples of Adages in Literature](#). YourDictionary.com.

[Adage](#). Literary Terms.net.

[Aphorism Examples](#). YourDictionary.com.

[Proverbs](#). Bible, King James Version. U of Michigan.

[Proverbs from Around the World](#). UCLA.

[Examples of Epigrams](#). YourDictionary.com.

[Epigram: Poetic Form](#). Poets.org.

[The Best Epigrams and Quotes from Literature, Poetry, Philosophy, Politics, Science, Sports and Religion](#). *The Hypertexts.com*.

Linguistic Faux Pas

But with all of these resources to explain and ornament what they write about, writers (even experienced ones) can make missteps. These *faux pas* create at least momentary confusion for the reader and can cause a complete breakdown of communication. Even worse is the conscious use of obfuscatory language by writers who want to hide the truth or their own lack of knowledge, or who want to deliberately mislead their listeners and readers in order to promote selfish ends.

Malapropisms

Unbridled use of a thesaurus, for example, can lead to confusion and unintended humor. The misuse of a word is called a *malapropism*, which *Miriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* calls “the usually unintentionally humorous misuse or distortion of a word or phrase; especially the use of a word sounding somewhat like the one intended but ludicrously wrong in the context.”

There are many examples of malapropisms in student writing, some of which have been collected by Richard Lederer in [The History of the World According to Student Bloopers](#). And even college students create some hilarious lines (although spell-check has reduced the number). Here is a short list compiled over the last thirty years: Student Faux Pas [[Link](#)]. Yet another source of fractured English can be found in signs in English in other countries. See, for example,

[Funny Signs in English from All Over the World](#). As we read these examples, we laugh, but in writing, you don't want people to laugh—unless you intend it!

[Malapropism](#). Wikipedia.

[Some Famous Malapropisms](#). Fun-With-Words.com.

Commonly Confused Words

Writers also confuse words that sound alike, are spelled alike, or have similar meanings. Even professionals do it. For example, the following headline appeared in the now defunct *Houston Post* on July 31, 1989:

41 Fathers Show Their Meddle in AG's Paternity Roundup

The problem word here is the word *meddle*, which is a verb meaning to interfere in someone else's business. The intended word was not *meddle*, *medal*, nor even *metal*, but *mettle*—meaning vigor and strength of spirit. There are many such words in English, called *homonyms*, which can be broken down into *homophones*, words that sound alike but that differ in meaning (to, too, and two), and *homographs*, words that are spelled alike but that differ in meaning (bow of a ship and bow and arrow). Also confusing are [heteronyms](#), words that are spelled the same but have a different pronunciation and meaning (such as polish and wind), and [paronyms](#), which are different words derived from the same root. For a list of some of the most commonly confused words, see Appendix 3: Commonly Confused Words and Phrases, or [Alan Copper's Homonyms](#) for numerous examples.

Clichés

Clichés are expressions that have become so familiar that they are no longer fresh or interesting. Writers who employ clichés don't have to think very much about their word choice, and their readers probably won't think much either. Clichés are old and sometimes proverbial sayings that have become trite by overuse. For example: “tried and true,” “look before you leap,” “you can't tell a book by its cover.” Many professions and organizations also develop their own distinctive clichés; for example, there are movie clichés, sports clichés, and political clichés. The following web sites will give you a plethora of examples:

[Clichés](#). The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill.

[Cliché Finder](#). Morgan Friedman. Type in a word, and any clichés that use that word will pop up.

Euphemisms

According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, a *euphemism* is “the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant; also the expression so substituted.” Euphemisms can be useful, since what we call things does

affect our attitude toward them. I would rather eat pork than a pig, and I'll probably respect a sanitation worker more than a garbage collector. Further, every culture has words that have negative connotations, so we find "better" words to describe these things: "rest room" for toilet, "handicapped" for crippled, "throw up" for vomit, "intimacy" for sex. However, different cultures and linguistic groups find different things offensive. In Great Britain and France, for example, you will find signs that say "Public Toilet." Don't ask where the rest room is. So when you travel, you need to be careful.

[Euphemism](#). Wikipedia.

[Euphemism](#). U of Oregon. Many examples.

Weasel Words

Another dodge that writers sometimes use to make something appear better than it is, or to cover up a lack of knowledge, is *weasel words*. A weasel word is "a word used in order to evade or retreat from a direct or forthright statement or position," according to *Merriam-Webster*. Some examples of weasel words are *seems*, *maybe*, *possibly*, and *perhaps*. Others are "to a certain degree," "it may seem likely that," and "in some cases."

[Weasel Word](#). Wikipedia.

Jargon and Gobbledygook

Jargon has two meanings. It is the language peculiar to a trade or profession, such as computer jargon or legal jargon, and it is the over-zealous use of abstract language, multisyllabic words, obscure terms and foreign words to parade the learning of the writer, to cover up a lack of knowledge, or to deliberately confuse and befog the reader.

The use of jargon in its first sense outside the field in which it is known, and the use of jargon in the second sense in any writing situation is disastrous if the aim is clear communication. In 1984, George Orwell coined the term *newspeak* for such language, which *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines as "propagandistic language marked by euphemism, circumlocution, and the inversion of customary meanings." Likewise, *gobbledygook* is "wordy and generally unintelligible jargon" and is generally associated with wordy academic and government reports.

[Appropriate Language: Overview](#). *Purdue OWL*. Includes sections on: Levels of Formality, In-Group Jargon, Slang and Idiomatic Expressions, Deceitful Language and Euphemisms, and Biased Language.

[Jargon, Weasel Words, and Gobbledygook](#). *California State U Northridge*.

[Jargon and Doublespeak](#). *Louisiana Tech U*. Many examples.

[Jargon](#). Hamilton College. A list of wordy phrases and their one-word equivalents.

[Verbosity](#). Wikipedia. Includes a discussion of wordiness and a list of other synonyms for jargon.

[Obfuscation](#). Wikipedia.

Doublespeak and Propaganda

Language is often used to manipulate our feelings, and words are many times chosen to “make the bad thing look good.” Advertisers, politicians, lawyers—in fact all of us from time to time—want to present things in a more positive light than they warrant. In his novel *1984*, Orwell uses the term *doublespeak* to describe a society’s attempt to manipulate its citizens’ view of their world by misrepresenting the truth through deceptive language.

Since our perception of the world is in some measure dependent on the words we use to describe it, such deceit can have profound effects on individuals and societies. There are many examples of *doublespeak* in our language today. Check the following web sites:

[Doublespeak](#). Wikipedia.

[Jargon and Doublespeak](#). Louisiana Tech U. Exercises in translating doublespeak into clear English.

Final Word

The words we use, and misuse, matter in the same way our actions do. And words are one of the main ways we have of discovering and describing the truth. They can help to liberate us from the confines of narrow ideologies, or they can distort the reality we must contend with every day. Recently (2017), a lot of attention has been directed toward “alternate facts” and “truthiness,” as though reality itself were subject to the same manipulation as words. Since words define the inner landscape of our minds—try thinking of a blue triangle without the words “blue triangle”—the words we habitually use create, as well as express, our humanity. Words matter.