Word Choice: Style, Tone, and Clarity

Getting the Idea

Careful **word choice** is essential to writing clear and effective sentences. When analyzing a text, think about why the writer chose a certain word or phrase in a sentence and why other words were not used instead. For example:

> The fire engine came <u>roaring</u> down the street, the siren <u>wailing</u> <u>vehemently</u>.

Think about why the writer chose these words. The word *roaring* implies traveling dangerously fast. A fire engine needs to get to a fire as quickly as possible, so the way it travels down the street could accurately be described as *roaring*. It would not have the same effect if the sentence said that the fire truck was *driving* down the street.

Next, the siren is described as *wailing*. The writer could have said that the siren *sounded*, but *sound* is a vague, colorless word. In contrast, *wailing* connotes a loud, mournful cry. This word is more descriptive and precise. By saying that the siren was *wailing*, the author emphasizes a sense of urgency and volume.

Finally, the writer states that the siren was wailing *vehemently*. This word captures the forcefulness and intensity of the siren and reinforces the sense of danger and emergency. This would not be accomplished by the word *loudly*.

As you can see, precise and descriptive words convey meaning more effectively and interestingly. Choosing words carefully also improves the **clarity** of the writing. Read the sentence below:

> The purpose of the telephone was invented to facilitate communication.

This sentence is awkward and confusing. The writer needs to think about the meaning of each word and how the words in the sentence relate to each other. The sentence above says that the *purpose* was invented, which does not make sense. By choosing his words more carefully, the writer can improve the clarity of the sentence.

> The telephone was invented to facilitate communication.

Careless word choice can also result in mixed metaphors. A **metaphor** is an implied comparison of two things, without using the words *like* or *as*. A **mixed metaphor** blends incompatible elements and distorts the meaning of both metaphors. For example, read this metaphor: "The class found that the first half of the exam was smooth sailing." This means that the students taking the exam were able to handle the questions with confidence. Now read this metaphor: "Unfortunately, by the end of the test, they had fallen off a cliff." We can assume that the last part of the exam was more difficult in some way for the students, and they fear that they did not do as well. When you combine the sentences, you get a mixed metaphor.

> The class found that the first half of the exam was smooth sailing, but by the end of the test, they had fallen off a cliff.

The writer compares the students' experience of taking a test with two different kinds of outdoor events, when one will do. Read this revised sentence:

> The class found that the first half of the exam was smooth sailing, but by the end of the test, they had run aground.

Now, the metaphor is consistent in terms of a boat trip. The roughest part of the test is compared with the boat veering off course and hitting the shore.

Word choice is also essential to maintain the appropriate style and tone for the writing situation. **Style** is the overall manner in which a writer chooses to express him- or herself. For example, a formal writing style is typically serious, objective, and elevated in language. When you write an essay for school, you are expected to use formal language. Informal writing style is casual and conversational. It may include colloquial language. It would be more appropriate for an e-mail to a friend.

> **formal:** The movie lacks substance and has an absurd and predictable plot.

> **informal:** The movie is lame, and you totally know what's going to happen.

Thus, word choice determines whether writing is formal or informal. Writing that is overly casual may cause a reader to question the writer's credibility and statements. Writing that is too formal or technical may end up being tedious or confusing.

Tone reflects the writer's attitude toward the subject. Tone is not so much *what* a writer says, but *how* a writer says it. For instance, read this sentence: "The mayor's actions suggest he is being dishonest." The word choice creates a moderate tone. However, if the writer says, "The mayor is a lying, no-good crook," the word choice creates an angry tone. Because the statement seems too personal, a reader may wonder if the writer is biased and unfair.

When you write, consider the context of the writing situation. Choose words that express ideas clearly and descriptively, while creating an appropriate and consistent style and tone.

Coached Example 1

Read the paragraphs below. Then rewrite each one, using a formal writing style.

1. I can't believe that some people still text and drive. That is so crazy dangerous. It's like they have no sense. I bet they wouldn't like it if some fool crashed into them because he was chatting it up with his buddies. Drivers who text should be thrown in jail!

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Hint Eliminate slang and overly casual language.

2. Owls are the coolest hunters around. They've got awesome eyesight that allows them to hunt at night. They can also hear like nobody's business. They can actually hear sounds from inside the human body. Say what? No wonder owls usually get their prey. Those mice and frogs that owls love to eat ain't got a chance!

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Hint This paragraph uses slang and colloquial expressions.

Coached Example 2

Read the paragraphs below. Answer the questions that follow.

Jayne was upset that her two best friends were not speaking to each other. She had tried to mediate but had hit a brick wall. Her friends seemed to have hearts of stone. So, Jayne decided to throw a party and invite both of them. She would have a great time and get her friends in the same room. She would fit the pieces of the puzzle together and help the girls reboot.

1. Which sentence is a mixed metaphor?

    A. "She had tried to mediate but had hit a brick wall."

    B. "Her friends seemed to have hearts of stone."

    C. "She would have a great time and get her friends in the same room."

    D. "She would fit the pieces of the puzzle together and help the girls reboot."

Hint The writer's confused word choice creates a nonsensical sentence.

Babysitting my little brothers is like running a three-ring circus. Actually, it's like running a three-ring circus in fast forward! By the time my parents come home, I'm usually semi-comatose on the couch and covered in creamed sweet potatoes. Don't get me wrong—I love my brothers dearly. But sometimes I wish I had something more fun to do when my parents go out—such as getting a root canal.

2. Which word BEST describes the tone of this paragraph?

    A. angry

    B. exciting

    C. scornful

    D. humorous

Hint Look closely at the word choice to help you determine the tone.

Use the Writing Guide to help you understand the passage.

Writing Guide

A vague word may have multiple synonyms that are more descriptive.

When you replace words to improve word choice, make sure the new words maintain the style and tone of the passage.

The Man with the Coconuts

1   One balmy spring morning, a man packed two large sacks with coconuts to sell at the market. He fastened the sacks to his horse, mounted it, and trotted off down the road. Soon, he met a boy and asked him how long it would take to reach the market.

2   The boy looked at the man, looked at the horse, and then turned to the man again and replied, "If you go slowly, you will arrive by noon, but if you go quickly, it will take you all day."

3   The man gave the boy a peculiar look, and he thought to himself, "How can the trip take more time if I go faster? That doesn't make any sense."

4   So, the man and his horse left as swiftly as they could. As they left, several coconuts fell from the horse's back. The pair stopped, and the man walked back, picked them up, and carefully placed them back on the horse. They left again quickly, but before long, some more coconuts dropped off the horse. Again, the man stopped to retrieve them. This process happened repeatedly. By the time the man arrived at the market, it was already dark, and everyone had gone home.

The author uses the word *left* three times in the last paragraph. Rewrite those sentences, using more descriptive, precise word choice.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Lesson Practice 2

Use the Writing Guide to help you understand the passage.

Writing Guide

Which words in the passage help you visualize what the narrator is doing?

Precise, descriptive words make writing clearer and more interesting.

Just Another Monday Morning

1   I opened my eyes and looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It took me a second to realize that it was 8:05 a.m. and that I wasn't still dreaming. Bolting out of bed, I made a mad dash for the bathroom. In minutes, I had brushed my teeth, changed my clothes, and combed my hair.

2   I raced down the stairs and waved off the bagel and orange juice that my mother offered me. "I have a history test first period!" I yelled and ran out the door. Ten seconds later, I was back. "I left my book bag!" I shouted, dashing out the door a second time. I sprinted down the sidewalk, looking over my shoulder for the bus. That was when I stepped on a "gift" from my neighbor's dog. I looked at the bottom of my shoe and made a noise. I was afraid to speculate on how the rest of my day was going to turn out.

---

1. What does the author's word choice do for the story?

   A. It gives it a fast pace.

   B. It makes it highly formal.

   C. It creates a mocking tone.

   D. It makes it difficult to understand.

2. Read this sentence.

   I looked at the bottom of my shoe and made a noise.

   Which sentence BEST improves on the author's word choice?

   A. I looked down at the bottom of my shoe and was not happy.

   B. I stole a quick glance at the bottom of my shoe and groaned.

   C. I took a quick look at my shoe and let my feelings show.

   D. I looked at the sole of my shoe and uttered a sound.