

ENGLISH AS A FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE

PART 4: GOOD WORD CHOICE

Words are our basic tool for getting meaning across. Without them, communication would be primitive at best. But what's the right word to use in a given case?

The answer seems obvious: the one that gets our meaning across most clearly. But unfortunately, life is not that simple: in almost any act of communication, we have secondary purposes, such as proving that we are sophisticated, well-educated, or hardworking, or signaling that we are members of an "in" group. Although sometimes justified, these sub-agendas may steer us toward words that express our main meaning poorly or even distort it.

For instance, you certainly sound fancy when you write: *The delay, albeit unfortunate in some ways, afforded an opportunity to apprise the insipid threat of subcomponent shortages which mitigates against continuance of our current production strategy* instead of *The delay, although unfortunate in some ways, gave us a chance to evaluate the threat of subcomponent shortages, which argues against continuing our current production strategy*. However, some readers may not understand the archaic *albeit*, and three words (*apprise*, *insipid*, and *mitigate*) are misused: the correct choices would be *appraise*, *incipient*, and *militates*.

As the example illustrates, the safest words, both for writer and reader, are the clear, simple ones. Not only do they carry information with fewer accidents, they also avoid embarrassing mistakes. So, let's look at some common secondary purposes and see how you can tame them so they won't interfere with your meaning.

THE URGE TO BE FANCY

It's tempting to show off your sophistication by using fancy words, especially those of Latin or Greek origin. However, to readers (especially non-native English speakers), this can be frustrating if they have to guess your meaning because either their vocabulary is too limited or you misused some words.

Here are just a few examples of fancy words or expressions that may cause trouble; their simple equivalents are almost always better.

be cognizant = be aware of
effectuate = carry out
fulsome = excessive
hold in abeyance = postpone
impassive = unemotional

inured = accustomed to
occasioned = caused
pertaining to = about, for
predicated on = based on
remunerate = pay
spurious = false
take cognizance of = note

FOCUS ON MEANING, NOT ON MAKING AN IMPRESSION.

This doesn't mean you should ban difficult words from your vocabulary. A fancy word may be appropriate to avoid repeating a simple one (e.g., *endeavor* can avoid repetition of *try*) or to convey a technical meaning (e.g., *incinerate* may express *complete* burning better than the common word *burn*).

Furthermore, there is a difference between simple and simplistic language.

Here is an example of simplistic word choice: *I called outside contractors to come in and give advice on how to help the situation*. [Better: *I brought in outside contractors to give advice on how to improve the situation*.]

In this example, the grade school flavor results from *called* and *come in*, which dwell on useless details, and from *help*, which is more appropriately used with people and organizations or systems than with *situation*.

"MEMBERSHIP LANGUAGE"

In their desire to prove they're "one of the boys," writers or speakers may use clichés, jargon (e.g., *to solution* for "to solve"), slang (e.g., *dreck* for "inferior product"), or even vulgar words. Vulgar language is of course never appropriate. Clichés, jargon and slang are admissible in informal communication -- but even there, they often create vagueness that interferes. For instance, *I think we're barking up the wrong tree here* may express your meaning less precisely than (1) *I think we're missing the real opportunity*, (2) *I think we're attacking the wrong problem*, or (3) *I think there is no real problem there -- we're wasting our time*.

Here are some other common clichés: *flash in the pan*, *gild the lily*, *high dudgeon*, *let the cat out of the bag*, *pay the piper*. They do add some imagery, but at the cost of vagueness. Besides, put yourself in the position of non-native readers trying to make sense of them! Chances are they'll emerge with a colorful muddle.

So, before you reach for that worn cliché, or that bit of fashionable technical or business jargon, think for yourself and choose fresh words that fit your thought precisely!

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