

INACCURATE WORD CHOICE

QUESTIONS: What do you do when you don't know a word? What do word choice errors come from?

Studies show that students take three different approaches:

- They use only safe vocabulary (words they already know), which makes the text boring and repetitive;
- They take a risk and use words they don't really know, which can make sentences inaccurate or imprecise;
- They use a thesaurus and replace words they know with words they don't know well or at all, which creates odd and inaccurate sentences.

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF WORD CHOICE ERROR:

1. Your chosen words convey the wrong meaning in the sentence context.

Example: "My parents may have inflicted my decision at an early age."

Questions: What is wrong with the underlined word? What is the meaning of this word? In what context would you use it? What are other words that could be used instead, in this sentence?

Solutions: Verify the meaning of words. Beware of words suggested by the spell-checker (for example, if you write "sitation," the spell checker will suggest "satiation," when you probably meant "situation.")

2. Your chosen words are not precise enough.

Example: "Because of my flowing English, people do not stare at me anymore."

Questions: What the meaning of the underlined word? Why is it not correct in this sentence? What other word could be used instead?

Solutions: Ask a friend or writing centre tutor to read your text and identify words that don't sound right. Work on building your academic vocabulary. Type the words or phrases you are not sure about into *Google* (for example, if you type "attaining my credentials," Google might generate the following message: "did you mean *obtaining* my credentials?"). Learn idiomatic expressions (for example, you don't "hold a secret" but you "keep a secret." You don't "give someone a visit" but you "pay someone a visit.")

3. Your chosen words don't fit with other words in your sentence.

Example: I enjoy science a lot, which helped me remove certain majors off my list.

Questions: What is the problem with the two underlined words? What are some correct options?

Solutions: Verify and memorize idiomatic expressions and verbs + prepositions (in a dictionary such as the Meriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary or englishpage.com). For example, you can say "remove from" or "take off" but not "remove off;" you "listen to your music" but you "listen for a suspicious noise."

INFORMAL LANGUAGE:

QUESTIONS: What do you know about formal and informal features of written language? What different levels of (in)formality do you use every day when you write? What specific choices can be made to achieve the appropriate level of formality for particular situations (assignment type, audience, etc.)?

CONSIDER LEVELS OF FORMALITY:

This handout is based on Dana Ferris' *Language Power: Tutorials for Writers* (to be published soon).

1. Keep contractions in check.

Example: I think this isn't a good policy.

Solution: The more formal the context, the more important it is to avoid contractions.

2. Take care when using first- and second-person pronouns.

Example: In my opinion, you should avoid binge drinking because it can lead to organ damage.

Solutions: When the assignment does not directly concern a personal experience, it is often best to avoid using first-person references (but verify with the instructor). It is also a good idea to avoid addressing the reader directly unless the assignment specifically requires it.

3. Consider formality when using titles and names.

In emails: University professors often receive emails that do not use the appropriate level of formality they expect. For example, start emails with “Dear Dr. Smith” or “Dr. Smith” but not with “Hey Bob!” or no greeting at all. Also use correct punctuation and spelling, as well as a proper signature.

In academic and professional writing: The conventions for referring to authors vary according to the discipline. For example, MLA requires the use of first and last names (*e.g., Jane Austen wrote...*) but APA requires last names only (*e.g., Austen (1813) wrote...*). Never refer to people by their first name only.

4. Pay attention to fragments and other structural issues.

Example: Many students were late for class. Why? Because of the snowstorm.

Problem: “Why” and “Because of the snow storm” are fragments. While fragments and other informal constructions (such as parentheses and dashes) are fine in certain contexts (*e.g.* Facebook), they should not appear in very formal academic writing.

5. Monitor writing for informal words and phrases.

Example: Mitt Romney's been taking a lot of hits during his presidential campaign.

Solution: Avoid clichés, slang (*e.g., YOLO*), taboo terms (*e.g. pissed off*), curse words, shortened words (*e.g., prof* instead of *professor*), idioms (*e.g. a piece of cake*), and sentences starting with coordinating conjunctions.