

Effective Word Choice

I do not choose the right word. I get rid of the wrong one.

- A. E. Houseman

As you read and listen to other people speak, you cultivate a rich vocabulary of **precise and colorful words** that let you say exactly what you want - not come close, but nail it right on the head. This is the essence of good word choice. Every new word increases your power.

“But there are so many words to learn; where do I begin?” you might ask. In his book, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser says, “*Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum... flail, poke, dazzle, squash, beguile, pamper, swagger, wheedle, vex. Probably no other language has such a vast supply of verbs so bright with color.*” Learn to **develop a critical eye toward the verbs** in your work. Are they active, powerful, full of energy and pizzazz?

Keep the vocabulary natural. Never write to impress or you’ll end up with sentences like this: “He cultivated his way into the kitchen,” or “Our friendship was highly lucrative.” See what happened? In an attempt to use words that were bigger, these writers forgot to make sure they made sense. A thesaurus can be a good friend to a writer, but only if used sparingly and with thought.

Your writing works best with **specific words, carefully chosen to create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind.** Play around with the words until they sound good. Don’t say, “The dog was big and mean.” Say, “A hundred pounds of snarling yellow fur launched itself from the porch, straining at a rope thin as spaghetti.” Now that’s something we can see happening!

The race in writing is not to the swift, but to the original.

- William Zinsser