Chapter 2: Adaptation and the Selection of Words

Teaching Suggestions

This chapter and the next two contain a great deal of advice about writing. One foundational point deserves special emphasis: what counts as a good style or even clear writing depends on the situation. Every word, sentence, and paragraph needs to be judged in light of the writer’s goals and the readers’ likely reactions. That is why we focus on “adaptation” at the start of this chapter.

Illustration and demonstration are essential to students’ understanding of the word-choice advice in this chapter. The examples on the PowerPoint® slides augment those in the book, and you can add various examples of your own.

The exercises at the end of the chapter enable students to learn by doing.

Text Summary, Lecture Outline

Slide 2-1

You can use this slide to make the point that “adaptation” of one’s writing to the readers goes all the way down to the word level. Good judgment on the word level is key to communication success. One ill-chosen word can alienate readers, thwarting one’s purpose—while an especially well-chosen one can strengthen the cooperation between writer and reader.

Slide 2-2

The key to good writing choices is considering your reader.

Begin the writing task by visualizing the reader or readers (get a mental picture). Consider such things as educational level, how they think, what they know. Then write to this person.

You might ask your students how one gathers information about one’s readers in order to adapt the wording as skillfully as possible.

Slide 2-3

Use this overviewer slide to preview the chapter contents. You can point out that the main goals here are to (1) use words that your reader can readily understand, (2) use an economical, lively style, and (2) avoid any wording that hints of exclusion or discrimination.

Use Familiar, Short Words

Slides 2-4, 2-5, 2-6

These slides emphasize that, all other things being equal, short, common words are preferable to complex, long words.
See if your students can supply simpler, shorter substitutes for the examples on these slides before you reveal the ones on the slides. As you do so, you might ask at times when the longer word might be preferable. For example, “bad” is a substitute for “harmful.” But “bad” is a harsh, blunt word that would rarely be the best choice.

Use Slang and Popular Clichés with Caution

Slide 2-7

When advising students to use slang and popular clichés with caution, point out that such phrases are especially troublesome for nonnative English speakers.

See if your students can provide acceptable substitutes for the examples on this slide, and if they can think of any other examples.

Use Technical Language with Caution

Slide 2-8

When advising students to use technical words with caution, you can invite them to supply examples from the lexicon of their own fields of study.

Every field has its technical language (accounting, information systems, medicine, finance). This language is good for communicating within the field, for those words can quickly cover concepts and specialized information. But it is likely to be meaningless to people outside the field. So avoid technical language when communicating with outsiders.

The real examples on this slide can illustrate the importance of this point.

Use Acronyms with Caution

Slide 2-9

Initialisms and acronyms also are not likely to be understood by people outside a specialized area.

Examples: IRA, CIO, WASP, OSHA

See if your students can decipher the examples on this slide and offer additional examples of their own.

Prefer the Concrete to the Abstract

Slide 2-10

Concrete language adds specificity and vigor to writing. Concrete words stand for specific things that the reader can see, feel, taste, or visualize. They relate to experiences. They are the opposite of abstract words—the words that refer to broad and vague concepts.
Examples:
Concrete:  John S. Simmons, bagels and coffee, Ms. Levi, oil stains
Abstract:  human resources, nourishment, management, damage

Concreteness also involves being specific, as in the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A significant loss vs. a 53% loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The majority vs. 62 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the near future vs. by noon on May 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial amount vs. $3,751,321</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Invite students to propose revised wording for the examples on the slide.

**Prefer Verbs in Active Voice**

*Slide 2-11*

In most cases, one should prefer the active voice to the passive. Active voice is stronger and more direct.

In active voice, the subject does the action:

“Joan examined the equipment.”

In passive voice, the subject receives the action:

“The equipment was examined by Joan.”

More examples follow on the slide.

Before you leave this topic, ask the class in what kinds of situations the passive might actually be preferable. Here are some good answers (from pp. 32-34):

When the doer of action is unimportant: “Sports shoes are manufactured in Korea.”

When one wants to avoid accusing the reader of an action: “The maintenance instructions were not followed in this case.”

When the doer of action is unknown: “During the past year, three automobiles were stolen from this parking lot.”

When the writer does not want to name the doer of action: “Seventeen accounts were lost in the Portland area last month.”

**Avoid Overuse of Camouflaged Verbs**

*Slides 2-12, 2-13*

Avoiding overuse of camouflaged verbs also adds clarity and vigor to writing.
A verb is camouflaged when the verb describing an action is changed to a noun—for example, when one changes the verb “eliminate” to the noun “elimination,” which results in a long, passive sentence like this:

“Elimination of the deficit was accomplished by Thornberry.”

A better sentence is one that uses the verb: “Thornberry eliminated the deficit.”

Additional examples follow on the slides.

**Select Words for Precise Meanings**

*Slides 2-14, 2-15*

Selecting words for precise meanings is critical to clear writing. It means choosing the word with both the correct denotation and the desired connotation. It also means getting expressions idiomatically correct.

You should study words so that you can use them as precisely as possible.

Words with similar meanings have slight differences in meaning. For example, consider the shades of difference in these groups of words:

- cemetery, graveyard, memorial garden
- fight, dispute, law suit, disagreement
- pleased, satisfied, happy, content, gratified, impressed
- thin, slender, skinny, slight, wispy, lean, willowy, rangy, spindly, lanky, wiry
- fired, dismissed, canned, separated, discharged

Knowledge of language also permits you to use words that carry the message you want to communicate.

For example, “fewer” means a smaller number of items and “less” means reduced value, degree or quantity.

“Affect” means to influence; “effect” means to bring to pass.

“Continual” means repeated but broken succession; “continuous” means unbroken succession.

You should also take care to use correct idiom (the way things are said in a language).

Much of our idiom has little logic. It is just the way we have historically used words.

For example, we say “independent of” (rather than “independent from”); we “agree to” a proposal, but we “agree with” a person; we are “careful about” an affair, but we are “careful with” our money.

The slides illustrate further.
Avoid Discriminatory Wording

Slide 2-16

We should strive to use nondiscriminatory wording—wording that treats all people equally and with respect.

This means avoiding words that refer negatively to groups of people, such as by gender, race, nationality, age, disability, or sexual orientation.

The more common problems are covered by the following suggestions.

Avoid sexist labels.

Slides 2-17, 2-18, 2-19

These are labels that discriminate against a person because of his or her gender.

Although there can be discrimination against men, most sexist wording discriminates against women. The problem exists primarily because our language developed in a male-dominated society.

Some of the more troublesome labels are on these slides.

But be aware that not all words containing “man” are sexist.

Avoid sexist use of pronouns.

Slides 2-20, 2-21, 2-22, 2-23

These slides cover three excellent ways to avoid the generic male pronoun:

1. by rewording the sentence,
2. by making plural references, and
3. by substituting a neutral expression.

When discussing solution #2, be sure to point out that the sentence needs to be made consistently plural.

Incorrect: Each team member should turn in their schedule tomorrow.
Correct: Team members should turn in their schedules tomorrow.

Avoid other stereotyping words and phrases.

Slide 2-24

For example, it is unfair to stereotype all members of a race or nationality.
Chapter 02 - Adaptation and the Selection of Words

Words that imply that Jews are miserly, Italians are Mafia members, Hispanics are lazy, and the like are unfair. All groups have members with a wide range of characteristics.

Eliminating such references requires taking two steps:

1. You must consciously treat all people equally.
2. You should refer to minority membership only when it is a vital part of the message.

Likewise, our words should not discriminate against the young and the old. Some in these age groups object to words such as “senior citizen,” “teenager,” “adolescent,” “juvenile,” “golden ager,” “elderly.”

Sometimes people with disabilities are offended by the words we use in talking about them.

Instead of saying “the disabled” or “disabled people,” say “people with disabilities.”

Avoid negative layperson’s terms such as “fits” or “spells.” Use more precise words, such as “seizures” or “epilepsy.”

Answers for Critical Thinking Questions

1. Explain how you would change your word choice to adapt to each of the following writing tasks:

   a. An editorial in a company newsletter.

      Answer: The readership of the newsletter is likely to be broad, ranging from lowly educated to highly educated people. The writing would have to be aimed at the lowest level to reach all readers.

   b. A message to Joan Branch, a supervisor of an information systems department, concerning a change in determining project priorities.

      Answer: Probably Joan has an average education as well as a fair technical knowledge in her work area. The language used should fit this background.

   c. A report to the chief engineer on a technical topic in the engineer’s field.

      Answer: Engineers are highly educated. Also, they are well acquainted with the technical language of their field. Writing that uses words commonly used by engineers would be appropriate.

   d. A message to employees explaining a change in pension benefits.

      Answer: The employees’ likely level of formal education would need to be taken into account. If some of the employees have a low reading level, the writing would need to be simplified. But even in a company of college-educated professionals, some readers may be unfamiliar with technical jargon in finance—so a measure of
Chapter 02 - Adaptation and the Selection of Words

simplification/definition would probably be wise in any case.

e. A letter to company stockholders explaining a change in company reporting dates.

Answer: Typically, stockholders span a wide group of educational backgrounds. Some are likely to be totally unfamiliar with technical terms. The report would need to be simplified.

2. Evaluate this comment: “I’m not going to simplify my writing for my readers. That would be talking down to them. Plus, if they can’t understand clear English, that’s their problem.”

There are ways to simplify one’s content for readers without being insulting, and writing in a way that they will find difficult to understand will hinder both the communication and the human-relations goals of the message.

3. “Some short words are hard, and some long words are easy. Thus the suggestion to prefer short words doesn’t make sense.” Discuss.

This specific rule is based on the general rule that word length and difficulty are correlated. Exceptions do not disprove the general rule. The fact remains that most short words are easy and most long words are difficult. Plus, the more syllables the words contain, the more the writing conveys the impression of being difficult to understand.

4. “It’s important to use business clichés like cutting edge and state of the art to sound professional.” Discuss.

To some extent this can be true. For example, thought leaders and best practices are current business phrases that do seem to evoke a favorable response and make one sound in step with other business problem-solvers. But such phrases should be used sparingly and judiciously. They should never be used as a substitute for thought or concrete evidence. A communication riddled with business clichés suggests a writer who is trying too hard to impress and not working hard enough to be specific.

5. As technical language typically consists of acronyms and long, hard words, it contributes to miscommunication. Thus it should be avoided in all business communication.” Discuss.

Technical language often consists of long words, jargon, and acronyms. But these are familiar to those in the field, who understand them quickly and easily. Therefore, we should use them when communicating in such circumstances. Still, an overuse of technical language, even when the words are understood, can make reading difficult. To make the reader’s job as easy as possible, writers should explain and paraphrase too much rather than too little.

6. Using examples other than those in the book, identify some technical terms that would communicate effectively to others in the field but would need to be clarified for those outside the field.
Your students will probably come up with good examples on their own—but to get them started, you might suggest ROI (return on investment), GAAP (generally accepted accounting practices), WiFi (“wireless fidelity,” which isn’t much help—readers would need more explanation), or CTO (chief technology officer).

7. Define and give examples of active and passive voice. Explain when each should be used.

Active voice is the structure that has the logical subject doing the action. Passive voice has the logical subject receiving the action. You will need to judge each example offered on its merits. As a general rule, active voice is better, but there are some good uses of passive voice (when it isn’t important who does the action, when the writer doesn’t want to name the doer of the action).

8. Style experts advise against monotonous-sounding writing—that is, writing that has a droning, “blah-blah” effect when read aloud. What advice in this chapter might help you avoid a monotonous style?

The advice to use active verbs and precise words, remove excess words, avoid camouflaged verbs, and perhaps others.

9. Discuss this statement: “When I use he, him, or his as a generic pronoun, I am not discriminating against women. For many years these words have been accepted as generic. They refer to both sexes, and that’s the meaning I have in mind when I use them.”

Probably viewpoints will differ among the class members. Some sincerely feel that these words are generic—that they convey no discrimination. Thus these people can argue that they use these words with no intent to discriminate. Even so, it is evident that the generic use of these words developed in a male-dominated culture, and to many they continue to reinforce the idea that males are superior. Because this usage is insulting to many, the best choice is to avoid it.

10. List synonyms (words with similar meanings) for each of the following terms. Then explain the differences in shades of meaning as you see them.

Some synonyms are listed below. They can differ in terms of formality, positive or negative connotations, the specific contexts they invoke, or other ways.

a. Sales person: sales associate, clerk, service representative, cashier
b. Co-worker: team member, employee, colleague, associate
c. Old: antique, archaic, obsolete, venerable, antiquated
d. Tell: explain, say, report, extol, recount, divulge, reveal, inform
e. Happiness: bliss, felicity, blessedness, beatitude, joy, pleasure
f. Customer: client, buyer, guest, consumer, major account
g. Boss: manager, supervisor, management, superior, team leader
h. Misfortune: bad luck, mishap, adversity, mischance
i. Inquire: ask, request, solicit, question, beg, petition
j. Stop (verb): terminate, end, desist, halt, arrest, check, cease
k. Lie (verb): recline, loll, sprawl, fabricate, invent, tell a falsehood
l. Mistake: error, inaccuracy, blunder, slip-up
Suggested Solutions to the Critical Thinking Exercises

Using Familiar Words
Instructions, Sentences 1-19: Assume that your readers are at about the tenth-grade level in education. Revise these sentences for easy communication to this audience.

1. **We must terminate all deficit financing.**
   We must stop buying on credit.

2. **We must endeavor to correct this problem by expediting delivery.**
   We must try to correct this problem by delivering earlier.

3. **A proportionate tax consumes a determinate apportionment of one’s monetary inflow.**
   A proportionate tax takes a fixed percentage of one’s income.

4. **Business has an inordinate influence on governmental operations.**
   Business has too much influence on government.

5. **It is imperative that consumers be unrestrained in determining their preferences.**
   Consumers must have the right to choose.

6. **Mr. Sanchez terminated Kevin’s employment as a consequence of his ineffectual performance.**
   Mr. Sanchez fired Kevin because his work was poor.

7. **Our expectations are that there will be increments in commodity value.**
   We expect commodity prices to rise.

8. **Can we ascertain the types of customers that have a predisposition to utilize our instant-credit offer?**
   Can we find out which customer types would like our instant-credit offer?

9. **The preponderance of the businesspeople we consulted envision signs of improvement from the current siege of economic stagnation.**
   Most of the business executives we talked with think the economy will improve.

10. **If liquidation becomes mandatory, we shall dispose of these assets first.**
    If we need to raise cash, we’ll sell these goods first.

11. **Recent stock acquisitions have accentuated the company’s current financial crisis.**
    Recent stock purchases have increased the company’s money problems.

12. **Mr. Coward will serve as intermediary in the pending labor-management parley.**
    Mr. Coward will facilitate the upcoming labor-management talks.
13. Ms. Smith’s idiosyncrasies supply adequate justification for terminating her employment.  
   Given the problems her behavior has caused, I recommend firing Ms. Smith.

14. Requisites for employment by this company have been enhanced.  
   This company has raised its job requirements.

15. The unanimity of current forecasts is not incontrovertible evidence of an impending business acceleration.  
   The forecasters’ agreement does not prove that business conditions will improve.

16. People’s propensity to consume is insatiable.  
   People love to shop.

17. The company must desist from its deficit financing immediately.  
   The company must stop spending more than it receives now.

18. This antiquated merchandising strategy is ineffectual in contemporary business operations.  
   This old selling strategy will not work in business today.

19. Percentage return on common stockholders’ equity averaged 23.1 for the year.  
   Stockholders received payment of 23.1 percent of the value of their common stock.

20. The company’s retained earnings last year exceeded $2,500,000.  
   The company kept over $2,500,000 of its profits last year.

Using Technical Words Appropriately

21. From a scholarly business journal, select a paragraph (at least 150 words long) that would be difficult for a student less advanced in the subject than you. Rewrite the paragraph so that this student can understand it easily.

   As each student’s work will be different, you will need to judge each on its merits. It is important to determine whether meanings have been changed and whether the revised work really is easier to understand.

   Instructions, Sentences 22-48. Revise these sentences to make them conform to the writing suggestions discussed in the book. They are grouped by the suggestion they illustrate.

Selecting Concrete Words

22. We have found that young men are best for this work.  
   We have found that men under 30 are best for this work.

23. She makes good grades.  
   She has a 3.9 grade-point average.
24. **John lost a fortune in Las Vegas.**  
   John lost $7,800 in Las Vegas.

25. **If we don’t receive the goods soon, we will cancel.**  
   If we don’t receive the goods by January 15, we will cancel.

26. **Some years ago she made good money.**  
   In 2003 she made $125,000.

27. **His grade on the aptitude test was not high.**  
   He scored 54 percent on the aptitude test.

28. **Here is a product with very little markup.**  
   This product has only a 4 percent markup.

29. **The cost of the online subscription was reasonable.**  
   The cost of the online subscription was only $39.

30. **We will need some new equipment soon.**  
   We will need new equipment before September 1.

_limiting use of passive voice_

31. **Our action is based on the assumption that the competition will be taken by surprise.**  
   We take this action because we believe that it will surprise our competition.

32. **It is believed by the typical union member that his or her welfare is not considered to be important by management.**  
   The typical union member believes that management does not consider his or her welfare to be important.

33. **You were directed by your supervisor to complete this assignment by noon.**  
   Your supervisor directed you to complete this assignment by noon.

34. **It is believed by the writer that this company policy is wrong.**  
   I believe that this company policy is wrong.

35. **The union was represented by Cecil Chambers.**  
   Cecil Chambers represented the union.

36. **These reports are prepared by the salespeople every Friday.**  
   The salespeople prepare these reports every Friday.

37. **Our decision is based on the belief that the national economy will be improved.**  
   We base our decision on the belief that the national economy will improve.
Avoiding Camouflaged Verbs

38. It was my duty to make a determination of the damages.
   It was my duty to determine the damages.

39. Harold made a recommendation that we fire Mr. Shultz.
   Harold recommended that we fire Mr. Shultz.

40. We will ask him to bring about a change in his work routine.
   We will ask him to change his work routine.

41. This new equipment will result in a savings in maintenance.
   This new equipment will save in maintenance.

42. Will you please make an adjustment on this invoice?
    Please adjust this invoice.

43. Implementation of the plan was effected by the crew.
    The crew implemented the plan.

44. Approval of all orders must be made by the chief.
    The chief must approve all orders.

45. A committee performs the function of determining the award.
    A committee determines the award.

46. Adaptation to the new policy was performed easily by the staff.
    The staff adapted easily to the new policy.

47. Verification of the amount is made daily by the auditor.
    The auditor verifies the amount daily.

48. The president tried to effect a reconciliation of the two groups.
    The president tried to reconcile the two groups.

Selecting Precise Words

Instructions, Sentences 49-59: Following is an exercise in word precision. Explain the differences in meaning for the word choices shown. Point out any words that are wrongly used. (Although not all of the students will agree, they are likely to mention the following differences.)

49. Performance during the fourth quarter was (average) (mediocre).
    a. average—middle ground
    b. mediocre—not so good, a more negative meaning

50. This merchandise is (old) (antique) (secondhand) (preowned) (used).
    a. old—has existed for a long time
    b. antique—implies value
    c. secondhand—not new, not as valuable as new, possibly shabby
    d. preowned—more neutral (less negative) than “secondhand”

2-12
e. used—not new, of less value than new, not so negative as secondhand but more negative than “preowned”

51. **The machine ran** (continually) (continuously).
   a. continually—occurring in rapid, but not unbroken, succession (probably not intended in this sentence)
   b. continuously—occurring without interruption, unbroken

52. **The mechanic is a** (woman) (lady) (female).
   a. woman—an adult member of the female sex
   b. lady—a woman with genteel (perhaps old-fashioned) manners
   c. female—a general reference to any member of the female sex, including all ages

53. **His action** (implies) (infers) that he accepts the criticism.
   a. implies—suggests, hints
   b. infers—derives by reasoning (will not work in this sentence)

54. **Her performance on the job was** (good) (topnotch) (excellent) (superior).
   a. good—generally favorable
   b. topnotch—of the highest quality (informal expression)
   c. excellent—very good (formal expression)
   d. superior—better than excellent (formal expression)

55. **On July 1 the Company will** (become bankrupt) (close its doors) (go under) (fail).
   a. become bankrupt—a formal and legalistic way of describing the action
   b. close its doors—an informal expression; suggests ending the business, but not necessarily through bankruptcy
   c. go under—a strong, informal way of referring to the end of the business; has no legalistic meaning
   d. fail—formal reference to not meeting the objective; no legalistic meaning; very negative

56. **The staff** (think) (understand) (know) the results were satisfactory.
   a. think—believe
   b. understand—believe, with some supporting reasoning
   c. know—have valid supporting evidence

57. **I cannot** (resist) (oppose) her appointment.
   a. resist—keep from doing something (probably not the best word for this sentence)
   b. oppose—be against

58. **Did you** (verify) (confirm) these figures?
   a. verify—prove to be true
   b. confirm—give new assurance of the truth of something (probably not intended here)

59. **This is an** (effective) (effectual) (efficient) plan.
   a. effective—producing the desired results
   b. effectual—refers to producing desired results, but regards it as adequately fulfilling a purpose
c. efficient—highly capable, productive, good return for the cost/energy spent

Using Proper Idiom

Instructions, 60-67: These sentences use faulty idioms. Make the changes you think are necessary.

60. The purchasing officer has gone in search for a substitute product.
   “. . . in search of . . .”

61. Our office has become independent from the Dallas office.
   “. . . independent of . . .”

62. This strike was different than the one in 2000.
   “. . . different from . . .”

63. This letter is equally as bad.
   “. . . is equally bad.”

64. She is an authority about mutual funds.
   “. . . authority on mutual . . .”

65. When the sale is over with, we will restock.
   “. . . is over, we . . .”

66. Our truck collided against the wall.
   “. . . collided with . . .”

67. We have been in search for a qualified supervisor since August.
   “. . . in search of a . . .”

Avoiding Discriminatory Language

Instructions, Sentences 68-77: Change these sentences to avoid discriminatory language.

68. Any worker who ignores this rule will have his salary reduced.
   Workers who ignore this rule will have their salaries reduced.

69. The typical postman rarely makes mistakes in delivering his mail.
   The typical letter carrier rarely makes mistakes in delivering the mail.

70. A good executive plans his daily activities.
   Good executives plan their daily activities.

71. The committee consisted of a businessman, a lawyer, and a lady doctor.
   The committee consisted of a business executive, a lawyer, and a doctor.
72. A good secretary screens all telephone calls for her boss and arranges his schedule. A good secretary (or administrative assistant) screens all telephone calls and arranges the boss’s schedule.

73. An efficient salesman organizes his calls and manages his time. Efficient salespeople organize their calls and manage their time.

74. Two representatives of our company attended the conference: a Hispanic engineer and one of our younger managers. Our company was represented by two employees—an engineer and an assistant manager.

75. Three people applied for the job, including two well-educated black women. Three women applied for the job, one white and two black. (Or, Three women applied for the job.)

76. Handicap parking spaces are strictly for use by the crippled. Handicap parking spaces are strictly for use by those with physical impairments.

77. He is one of the best gay designers in the city. (remove “gay”)