

Word Choice Strategies and Resources

Think about how you choose words when you write. How do you know when a word is perfect versus not quite right? When do you feel proud or frustrated about word choice? Do you use a dictionary or thesaurus? Why or why not?

Word choice is not always obvious or instinctual, especially if clients are non-native speakers or if they have to write about complex ideas in a new discipline or format. However, if they use online resources, they can select more appropriate words more often.

When clients need help achieving solid academic tone, breaking down the following concepts often helps: **conversational expressions, precise verbs, conventional usage or connotation, and sentence-to-sentence transitioning.** Let's take a look at each of these, along with helpful resources, so that you can help clients find answers for themselves.

Conversational Expressions

Give clients ways to recognize informal language. One way to do this is to draft a list together of "shortcut" words we use in speech. Consider including the following:

- Very
- Really
- Good/bad/nice
- Interesting/important
- Didn't/couldn't/won't/etc.
- Big/a couple of

These words are shortened or general. In speech, they can be applied in hundreds of different ways using tone of voice to convey true meaning. Discuss how written words must be complete and specific in order to limit a reader's need for interpretation, which means the words on this list should be avoided in papers.

Another way to recognize informal language is to study examples of slang, jargon, and phrasal verbs.

- 1) Skim Section 9 in *A Pocket Style Manual* (pp. 17-20) with your client.
- 2) Show them the Phrasal Verb Quizzes here:
http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/quiz_list.htm. Emphasize that a verb + a preposition is a signal that we use it in speech, not writing.
- 3) Enter "build off" and then "build" in the Cambridge Dictionaries Online:
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us>. Point out that the verb + preposition results in a list of phrasal verbs; however, the base verb "build" results in specific definitions with a list of phrasal verbs and idioms on the right hand side. You can also do this test with thesaurus.com and vocabulary.com.

Again, emphasize that a verb + a preposition is a signal that we probably use it in speech, not writing. Suggest that this is why these resources present the base verb, not the full expression.

Verbs

Verbs are the powerhouses of academic writing. When a writer chooses the most precise, most appropriate verb, efficient communication reflects sophisticated thought.

Tell clients to avoid the following general verbs: “do,” “get,” “go,” “make,” “set,” and, to some extent, “have.” For example, in speech, we can “make a deal,” “make a cake,” and “make a living.” In writing, we need a verb directly related to what is being made: “negotiate” a deal, “bake” a cake, and “earn” a living are more precise, thus, more formal.

“Have” is a necessary word in certain situations and certain verb tenses; however, sometimes clients use it to describe a condition or quality, which results in imprecise writing.

“Have” correctly shows possession and present perfect tense in these sentences:

They have several facilities.

They have hired enough employees to finish the project.

This sentence, however, fits neither of these criteria, resulting in informal tone:

The company will cut jobs where they have more workers than work.

Help the client see that “employ” is better than “have.” Also, advise clients to use “where” only when describing a physical location. Here, “if” or “when” is better than “where,” or stating “in locations employing more workers” is more clear.

Once a client begins recognizing phrasal verbs and general verbs, you should help them find replacements. Visit the following resources together; use the words “control,” or “show” as examples if your client does not have a current draft.

Thesaurus.com: For a writer building vocabulary, this resource is both daunting and necessary. I think some professors, tutors, and clients dismiss this resource because clients cannot simply replace words with those listed; instead, they must carefully select appropriate replacements. However, when you can only think of the verb “show,” a thesaurus is invaluable. Help clients navigate this site by explaining:

- 1) The most common synonyms are listed first.
- 2) When applicable, there are “antonyms” which can help check their understanding of the word or offer alternate expressions for variety.

- 3) They can scroll down to find word lists organized by particular definition.
- 4) There are example sentences showing common ways to use the word grammatically on the lower right-hand side.
- 5) There is a definition link at the top, which they can use to check their understanding at any time.

Oxforddictionaries.com: When clients type in a word without pressing “Enter,” this resource lists various related word forms and expressions. Sometimes, seeing this list helps clients find correct prepositions or spellings. Explore a typical page with them:

- 1) When applicable, the word’s popularity is stated at the top (“Top 1000 Frequently Used Words”). For an international student, this can be a clue for whether a word is appropriate or never used.
- 2) There are synonyms beneath different definitions. Sometimes, these synonyms are labeled “informal,” which helps non-native speakers improve academic tone.
- 3) There are examples sentences for each term.
- 4) On the lower right-hand side, there are “nearby words,” which might be the word a client originally intended to type.

Finding academic synonyms is one way to improve word choice. Another is finding possible verbs in existing sentences. Consider this sentence:

*The sculpture **is** a **symbol** of the sun, moon, and stars and **has** **meaning** because it **has** a Greek **origin**.*

List the existing verbs: “is,” “has,” “meaning,” and “has.”
Two other words also have verb forms: “symbol” and “origin.”
Use these possible verbs to revise. Now the sentence can be:

*The sculpture **symbolizes** the sun, moon, and stars and **originated** in Greece.*

This sentence is stronger and more concise. The client could add a clause explaining the “meaning” its Greek origin adds or expand on this “meaning” in a subsequent sentence.

So, how can someone learn to find possible verbs independently? Vocabulary.com is a good place to start.

Vocabulary.com: This website has similar features to thesaurus.com and oxforddictionaries.com, such as a “synonyms” link and example sentences. However, two features in particular may significantly aid in developing vocabulary:

- 1) On the lower right hand side, there is a Word Family graphic that lists other forms of the word. Clients can highlight each section of the top line to learn how common the word is and what other forms are possible. They can click on the form they think is needed and find example sentences.

- 2) There is an interactive quiz on the top right hand side. When clients test themselves, they build on previous knowledge. They also spend time and energy thinking about the right answer. Both of these actions help clients remember a word more easily than just reading it in a dictionary.

A final way to facilitate independent verb choice is to review common endings of different word forms. While not all words follow these spellings, recognizing the general rules aids a non-native speaker. For a quick example, see the brief chart below; for a comprehensive, truly helpful chart, type “highline.edu English Word Forms” in Google and download the first option.

Part of Speech	Word Endings	Examples
Noun	-tion, -ment	Example, representation, difference
Verb	-ify, -ize, -ate	Exemplify, represent, differentiate
Adjective	-ed, -ive, -ary	Exemplary, representative
Adverb	-y, -ly	Differently

Conventional Usage

Sometimes, guidelines regarding informal speech and precise verbs do not address a client’s question. For example, international students may know the above rules and routinely use a dictionary or thesaurus and still be stymied by the usage or connotation of an individual term. In these cases, visit the collocation dictionary ozdic.com.

Ozdic.com: Explain that many words are part of “collocations,” phrases that have become convention through repetition. They are “words that go with other words” simply because the language has developed that way. Encourage students to use ozdic.com or another collocation dictionary in the following situations:

- 1) When they need to use the same word in multiple ways throughout a paper
- 2) When they are unsure of how to modify a word (adjectives/adverbs)
- 3) When they do not know which preposition to use
- 4) When they want to use a new word but are unsure how
- 5) When they receive professor feedback in the form of “?” “awkward,” or “maybe [a suggestion] instead,” etc.

In each of the following sentences, the professor marked a usage error that confused the client:

1. According to the movie *The Railway Man*, Eric Lomax **hardly** forgives Nagase, who was one of Japanese torturers and Lomax was haunted by his terrible nightmares and flashbacks.

The student wrote “hardly” because Lomax had a hard time forgiving Nagase, so she added “-ly” to create an adverb form that could modify “forgives.” Her professor had underlined it and written a question mark by it. After trying to explain the possible meanings of “hardly” in this context, I looked up “forgive” on ozdic.com. The client could see that “hardly” was not listed as a collocation with “forgive,” and we do not use it in this sense.

2. People can understand each suffering **due to** forgiving each other, and they can make deep relationships.

Unfortunately, ozdic.com does not cover transition words or subordinating conjunctions in depth. When a term is not covered on ozdic.com, review example sentences on oxforddictionaries.com or similar site that model grammar and usage. To explain why “due to” had been marked “awkward,” the client needed to see several examples of the word in action. Only after seeing multiple examples did she see that a measurable, countable incident or process must follow “due to.”

Verb + Preposition Dictionary (on englishpage.com): Another common usage challenge for non-native speakers is prepositions. Explain that prepositions show temporal and spatial relationships. Suggest that actively memorizing standard prepositions, conventional expressions that include prepositions, and preposition-verb collocations can help. Learning to consider “concepts” as abstract “temporal and spatial relationships” can also clear some confusion. For examples of these four ideas, read the Writing Center’s *Prepositions* handout on the International/Bilingual Student Resources page and complete the practice sentences together. Then, encourage clients to consult the Verb + Preposition Dictionary, Ozdic.com, or example sentences on Oxforddictionaries.com in the following situations:

- 1) When they do not know which preposition to use
- 2) When they need to use the same word in multiple ways throughout a paper
- 3) When they want to use a new word but are unsure how
- 4) When they receive professor feedback about prepositions

Again, for non-native speakers, usage will always be challenging; however, by using ozdic.com, englishpage.com, and analyzing example sentences, they can find clues about connotation and usage without a native speaker sitting beside them.

Sentence-to-Sentence Transitioning

So far, the resources listed have been to support finding target words, mainly alternative subjects and verbs. However, joining clauses that include these target words can be equally challenging. Here are four ways to help clients begin selecting words to craft more sophisticated, academic transitions:

A Pocket Style Manual: Online resources either do not include transition words or present only informal or uncommon usages. Thus, *A Pocket Style Manual* is often the clearest, most helpful resource when explaining how to connect clauses.

On **p. 298**, the “Glossary of grammatical terms” begins. Show clients four kinds of conjunctions: conjunctive adverbs, coordinating conjunctions, correlative conjunctions, and subordinating conjunctions. Review these with clients; actively refer to these lists with them during sessions. This way, they can begin to see common usage and ways to vary sentence structure. The icing on the cake of word choice skills is being able to say the same thing in multiple grammatical constructions. Conjunctions are a logical starting point.

On **p. 35**, section 12b, “Pronoun reference,” begins. Make sure clients know how to use “this” and “these” to refer to previous written ideas while warning them against the pitfalls of relying on “this” and “it.” Teach them how to skillfully “label” or “explain” previous ideas. Emphasize that they will sound academic by referring to previous concepts in ways that are not repetitive but still show some kind of relationship.

Let’s look at a cause/effect example:

The Irish-Catholic immigrants needed to work close to where they lived. They worked in their neighborhoods and added businesses to them so they grew large.

More skillful transitions might look like this:

1. The Irish-Catholic immigrants needed to work close to where they lived. This need resulted in adding businesses to communities, which resulted in large neighborhoods.
2. The Irish-Catholic immigrants needed to work close to where they lived. Because of this need, they added businesses to their neighborhoods, which continued to grow.

Without the word “need” after “this,” the pronoun is vague and sounds like a shortcut. Help clients follow the verb in the previous sentence by labeling it. Brainstorm words like “need,” “desire,” “goal,” or “wish.” Let them make the final selection. Show them how to ask questions like, “Who does what? (the immigrants *need* so they add) Who has what? (the immigrants have *a need*) What does what? (their neighborhoods *grow*)” Answering these questions can lead to effective “labels” or revision focus points.

Transition skills in analysis statements are particularly important because analysis is a major part of grading rubrics. Consider making a list of analysis statement templates that emphasize complete articulation of a point with those clients that need help achieving academic tone and deeper analysis.

Here is an example of an abbreviated, incomplete analysis statement:

The environment that teen grows up in is making them “vulnerable to dangerous behaviors and serious mental disorders” (34). Many mental health problems start here.

Transitioning to the analysis with one of the following templates should result in smoother style and deeper analysis:

- 1) Repeat a key word or idea from the quote to emphasize the quote’s relevance (“X” results in/means/does Y.): Their “vulnerability” means mental health problems could begin in the teenage years.
- 2) Begin analysis statements with “by” or “because” and then refer to part of the quote (By/Because X, something happens/is true/must be done.): By recognizing negative affects, parents and teachers can try to prevent or address mental health problems before the teens grow older.
- 3) Label the evidence (This X does Y.): This risk/weakness/threat intensifies the need to educate families about how to help teens build confidence while they are still teens.

With a set of templates, clients can slowly build transition skills while staying focused on the content of their paper.

Independent Proofreading for Word Choice Issues

When clients are familiar with the above resources and skills, they can progress if they give themselves time to systematically check for informal language, imprecise verbs, unfamiliar words, and vague pronouns. During an editing session, show them how to:

- 1) Circle prepositions and ask: Is this a phrasal verb? Is this the right preposition?
- 2) Underline any words or verbs on the shortcut list (“very,” “didn’t,” “make,” “do,” etc.) and ask: What do I mean by this word? Which verb best captures that meaning?
- 3) Highlight words that need to be repeated or new words they decided to try using and ask: Have I found this term in example sentences? Are there any related collocations?
- 4) Scan for “it” and “this” and ask: What is “it”? What is “this”? How can I clarify?

Resources List

A Pocket Style Manual

- Informal language
- Sentence-to-Sentence Transitioning

Interactive Grammar Quizzes

- Phrasal verbs

Thesaurus.com

- Precise verbs
- Informal language test

Vocabulary.com

- Precise verbs
- Word families/forms
- Informal language test
- Word lists

Cambridge Dictionary

- Informal language test

Oxforddictionaries.com

- Precise verbs
- Common usage in example sentences

Ozdic.com

- Common usage

Verb + Preposition Dictionary

- Common usage

One Look Thesaurus

- Informal to formal language

Academic Word List sublist families

- Formal language
- Sentence-to-Sentence Transitioning

Module Comprehension Check:

1. How do vocabulary resources foster client ownership and independence?
2. How do vocabulary resources help the tutor?
3. How might a tutor give vocabulary options to a client without telling the client which word to use?
4. Explore three vocabulary resources. Then, choose one and describe the kind of session work during which it could benefit a client.