Developing your vocabulary

Resources for Professional Writing

If you are an aspiring professional writer, you will need to write in a variety of styles other than academic. Also, you will write with a range of aims including raising interest, entertaining or persuading. Different audiences require different levels of formality: the vocabulary you use in a news broadcast will not be effective if you are writing for a magazine targeting teenagers. Choosing words precisely and appropriately for your audience and purpose involves:

Exact denotation: words may be broadly similar in meaning but differ in important aspects of that meaning. Consider the difference between 'the *fragrance* of flowers' and 'the *odour* of rotten eggs.' Both words refer to the sense of smell, but one has a positive core meaning while the other has negative denotation.

Connotation: some words are attached to feelings which give them additional meanings. For example, you may write 'The freeway *snakes* through the town' or 'The freeway *meanders* through the town'. Which one indicates negative feelings about the freeway? Why?

Intensity: many adjectives which have similar meanings describe different degrees of the same quality. What is the difference between such words as, '*comical*', '*funny*', '*hilarious*' and '*side-splitting*'? Which one would you choose to describe the funniest movie you ever saw?

Formality: certain words or expressions are more formal, and therefore more appropriate, for business communication, academic texts and legal documents. Which of the following pairs would be more appropriate for reflective or creative writing?

- come up with / create
- at regular intervals / one after another
- considerable / huge
- enough / sufficient

Politeness/sensitivity: words which describe negative qualities or sensitive issues too directly can be offensive. Good writers consider the feelings of their readers. For example, when writing about childhood obesity, you may need to use euphemisms, such as '*children with weight problems*' or '*children of an unhealthy weight*', which are more acceptable than 'fat children'**.**

Collocation: some words are used more frequently in combination and therefore sound more natural. For example, we say '*fast train*' not '*quick train*', but '*quick shower*' not '*fast shower*'. Do we say '*deeply critical*' or '*highly critical*'?

Context: although they may describe the same object or process, different words may be used for different situations. For example, the words '*project*', '*mission*' and '*duty*' have a similar meaning, but which would be more suitable in a military, educational or religious context?

Strategies for developing your vocabulary

Read often: wide reading provides models of vocabulary usage (e.g. collocation and connotation). While copying sections from another writer's text is inappropriate, you can make a note of idioms and colourful expressions to use in your own work.

Read widely: do not limit your reading to academic texts but note stylistic features of a variety of genres such as advertising brochures, comic books and novels.

Write often: Ideas which seem clear in our minds often reveal gaps and inaccuracies when we first attempt to write them down. Writing often gives you opportunities to practise using new vocabulary items that reflect your meaning more accurately.

Try free writing: this is a technique to help you write more often and more fluently. In free writing, you write on any topic of interest without stopping for a fixed time (e.g. 10 minutes). During this time, you are only writing for *yourself*; you do not need to think about your reader. The goal is to get your thoughts on paper as quickly and completely as you can without editing. Read over your work and note your use of any new vocabulary items.

Also, note any words which you overuse. Can you find alternatives for these words? Use your free writing as a resource for more formal pieces that you write for others to read.

Find readers for your writing: The clarity of your writing is ultimately judged by readers. This is why it may be helpful to find others to read your draft.

- Can you write for a student newsletter or newspaper?
- Can you find a creative writing group to participate in?
- Can you find a friend or family member willing to read your draft?

Ask for feedback on your choice of vocabulary and expressions. Is it appropriate for this genre and for the audience? Do your words express an adequate degree of intensity?

Use a thesaurus effectively: a thesaurus is a reference book that provides a list of synonyms (i.e. words that have a similar meaning). It helps you choose a term that more precisely reflects the meaning you wish to convey or more closely matches the context of your usage.

While a thesaurus is an excellent tool, it only provides limited information about alternative vocabulary items. You need to do some further investigation to ensure that your usage of a synonym is appropriate for your purposes. Most provided synonyms will differ slightly in meaning, context of use or formality. Some synonyms may be rarely used or outdated, or may even be limited to a particular country or region.

A thesaurus will also provide basic grammatical information such as the part of speech of a word. For example, the word 'book' will be listed as noun (n.) or verb (v.). As a noun, 'book' will have synonyms such as, '*volume*', '*manuscript*' or '*tome*'; as a verb, it will have synonyms like '*reserve*', '*order*' or '*register*'. It is important that you know what part of speech you are looking for: A 'book' may be a '*manuscript*', but you cannot '*manuscript* a room in a hotel'!

There are several good online thesauruses that you can consult as well as the Thesaurus function in Microsoft Word (which can be accessed by right clicking on a word and then selecting 'Synonyms'). These usually provide an instant long list of synonyms; however, you would need to be a highly competent user of English to select from this list without investigating the precise meaning of the synonym. Refer to dictionaries (print or online) to check the grammatical information of the word as well as its use and meaning. A good guide to the use of online thesauruses can be found at:

http://www.ncistudent.net/StudySkills/WritingSkills/Thesaurus.htm

Use a good dictionary: before you use a new word which you have learned or chosen from a thesaurus list of synonyms, you should look it up in a good dictionary. It should include extra detail about the *exact* meaning of a synonym. For example, 1) a 'manuscript' is a kind of 'book' but not all 'books' are 'manuscripts'; and 2) a 'manuscript' is often an 'original copy of a book before printing' or 'a very ancient book'.

A good dictionary also provides example sentences to illustrate the full meaning of the word, and grammatical features, such as accompanying collocations. Many dictionaries also provide information about the usage of a word: whether it is slang, colloquial or nonstandard English, and the discipline which usually uses the term. The Macquarie Dictionary includes details of Australian words and is an excellent resource for Australian idioms.

Other dictionary resources and references

University and public libraries keep an extensive range of dictionaries which cover different language styles (e.g. slang, idioms, Australian English) or disciplines (e.g. politics, visual arts, architecture).

Dictionaries of collocations: provide information on words that conventionally occur in combination.

The information ranges from accompanying intensifiers or adjectives (e.g. '*highly* critical' not 'absolutely critical'), nouns, verbs and prepositions, to the varying uses of a word in different contexts.

Dictionaries of idioms: idioms are commonly used word combinations or expressions. These have very specific meanings that are not obvious from the words they contain, e.g. '*a piece of cake*', '*get the hang of it*', '*an Indian summer*', '*after a fashion*'.

Using idioms appropriately can help add style to your writing or tailor it to a particular audience Many good dictionaries list and define idioms if you look up the component words (e.g. if you look up 'Indian' or 'summer' in a good dictionary, you will find 'Indian summer' listed and defined) One example is:

Siefring, J. (Ed.) (2005). *The Oxford dictionary of idioms*. **Oxford: Oxford University Press.**

Dictionaries of euphemisms: Selecting appropriate euphemisms when writing about sensitive issues can make your writing appear more restrained and objective. Most dictionaries of euphemisms are organised by topic or theme, but individual terms can be looked up in the index by alphabetical order. One such dictionary is:

Holder, R. W. (2004). *A dictionary of euphemisms: How not to say what you mean*. **Oxford: Oxford University Press.**

Dictionaries of foreign words and phrases: the English language has large number of foreign words and phrases, which can often be found in a standard monolingual dictionary. Specialist dictionaries may be needed for such areas as diplomacy and politics.

Subject-specific dictionaries: To check use of terms within a discipline (e.g. business, psychology)

Reference books: these types of books deal with common problems faced by advanced learners of English. These range from explanations of common learner problems and finer points of advanced grammar, to unusual vocabulary and usage of less standard language styles. Topics, terms and grammar points can generally be found through the index. These types of references are effective tools for helping your English expression to be more natural, accurate and appropriate to the situation you are writing on.

Practical English Usage by Michael Swan is an example of a good reference book. Published by Oxford University, it is very useful for learning about grammar and usage, and is written and organised in a clear, very reader-friendly style.

Further References

Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English Usage.* (3rd ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.