

MINI-LESSON



WORD CHOICE

Choosing the right words is one of the best ways to make your writing a lot more interesting. Look at this sentence:

I walked into the room and saw some food.

It's a pretty plain sentence, using vague words like "room" and "food," so we don't get a very vivid picture of what's happening. If we replace some of those words with more precise ones, we might end up with a sentence like this:

I **crept** into the **kitchen** and **spotted a chocolate cake on the counter**.

Now we see things much more clearly, and the sentence just got a lot more interesting. If we change the words again, we get a completely different idea:

I **rushed** into the **classroom** and found **seven grilled-cheese sandwiches waiting on my desk**.

The following guidelines will help you make more powerful word choices.

1. Choose Precise Nouns and Vivid Verbs

Nouns can be very general or very precise:

I have a **pet**. (general and vague)

I have a **dog**. (more precise)

I have a **Chihuahua**. (even more precise, and more interesting)

The same is true for verbs:

I **went** to school. (pretty drab)

I **hurried** to school. (more vivid)

If you find that your writing is a bit boring, look for ways to make your nouns more specific and your verbs more vivid.

2. Use Fewer Adjectives and Adverbs

An **adjective** describes a noun. The sentence below uses three adjectives: *small*, *timid*, and *orange*:

The **small, timid, orange** cat looked out from behind the couch.

Listing adjectives like this is an easy way to give details, but it can interrupt the rhythm of the story, and there are better ways to do it. Since most cats are around the same size, “small” can be left out, or we could describe the cat as a kitten instead, if it’s very small. “Timid” can be shown by using a better verb; instead of “looked,” we could say “peered.” If we want to keep “orange” just to add some interest, that’s okay, but if it doesn’t have any impact on the story, that could be left out, too. Now we have a tighter sentence with fewer adjectives and stronger nouns and verbs:

The orange kitten peered out from behind the couch.

An **adverb** describes a verb. Below, the adverb “slowly” describes the verb “walked.”

She walked **slowly** across the field.

This is an okay way to give your reader more detail about how she walked, but it would be better if you could use a precise verb and get rid of the adverb completely. Each of these three examples uses a different verb, and each one means something slightly different:

She **limped** across the field.

She **shuffled** across the field.

She **tiptoed** across the field.

3. Try Not to Repeat

In this passage, the word “jump” is used three times very close together:

I **jumped** forward in one swift motion, but I must have flinched, because that little sucker **jumped** away just in time. In four gross little **jumps**, he got halfway to the living room...

This is repetitive. The best way to notice this problem is by reading your work out loud—then you can “hear” the repetition and find places where you need more variety.

Now, if we replace two of those “jump” words with other words, we get a richer, more interesting sentence:

I **jerked** forward in one swift motion, but I must have flinched, because that little sucker jumped away just in time. In four gross little **hops**, he got halfway to the living room...

Keep this in mind when you’re writing. It’s fine to use the same word many times in a story—and with small words like “the” or “and,” it’s not a problem at all—but with bigger words that come close together, it’s better to give your readers some variety.

4. Write Like People Talk

In your search for more interesting words, it’s easy to go overboard and end up with a sentence like this:

Disconcerted, she felt her countenance flush a deep crimson.

Most people don’t really talk like that, and if you use too many fancy words, your readers will have a hard time getting into your story. This sentence still keeps things interesting, but it uses mostly words readers will be familiar with.

Embarrassed, she felt her face flush a deep red.

What to Do Now

- Read your story out loud. Do this slowly, so you really hear it.
- Find places where you can use more specific nouns and verbs. If you are using a lot of adjectives and adverbs, try to cut some of these out and replace them with good nouns and verbs instead.
- Look for places where you are repeating the same word and try to replace some of these with different ones.