

## Choosing the Right Words

Sometimes we don't choose the right words. Led astray by a thesaurus or Microsoft's "Synonym Feature," we pick words that are similar in meaning but don't quite convey our ideas. We might be so determined to flaunt our vocabularies that we bore our readers with ostentatious erudition, or we might forget that we're writing for an academic audience and slip into the casual language we usually reserve for friends and family. While your readers should recognize your ability to express yourself well, it's far more important that they understand your ideas. You must use language that is clear, precise, and appropriate for your audience and writing's subject matter.

### Use Words Correctly

First, make sure to use each word correctly. If you aren't sure of a word's exact meaning, consult a print or online dictionary (I highly recommend [The Free Dictionary](#) for accessibility and usability) to verify how the word can and should be used.

- **Misused word:** Mrs. Thomas's soothing words ameliorated our concerns. (The word "ameliorate" generally means "to make better or improve." But I don't want to say that her words improved our concerns. I want to say that her words relieved our concerns.)
- **Improved:** Mrs. Thomas's soothing words alleviated our concerns. (The word "alleviated" more accurately conveys my intended meaning.)

### Avoid Colloquial Expressions and Slang

Colloquial expressions and slang often confuse readers who aren't familiar with them, so when you're reviewing your writing, ask yourself, "Would someone who's never heard this expression before understand what I'm saying?" If you think a word or phrase might be misread by your readers, replace it with a word or phrase that better conveys your intended meaning.

- **Colloquial Expression/Slang:** I kept tabs on what the kids did. ("Kids" is slang for "children," but it also means "young goat." In our American culture, the phrase "kept tabs on" generally means "watched closely" or "monitored," but a nonnative speaker might not recognize or understand the expression.)
- **Improved:** I monitored the children's behavior.

### Use More Formal Language

Sometimes a word may express our intended meaning but is too informal or conversational for academic writing. Replace casual-sounding words and phrases with more formal language.



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- **Too casual:** This is the dumbest flick I've ever seen. (Words like “dumbest” and “flick” might be appropriate for casual conversation, but they are too casual for academic writing.)
- **Improved:** This is one of the most puerile films I have ever viewed.

### Eliminate Pretentious Language

Finally, eliminate words and phrases that sound puffy or pretentious. While you certainly shouldn't limit yourself to four- and five-letter words, you shouldn't be consulting the thesaurus every thirty seconds for a longer and fancier-sounding word.

- **Puffy Language:** The film's producers' endeavoring to educe community sustention for their opus was abortive. (The writer's language has all but obscured her intended meaning.)
- **Improved:** The film's producers' efforts to garner public support for their film failed.