Word Choice for Non-Native English Speakers

When it comes to writing in any context, choosing the right word can be challenging. Although academic writing is more selective because it avoids certain groups of words and phrases (i.e. slang, clichés, euphemisms, redundancies, and colloquialisms), word choice still depends on your ability to judge your words based on tone, context, connotation and concision.

Tone

Tone refers to the words a writer uses to convey a certain attitude. For example, a writer can choose words that convey a **negative, positive** or **neutral** tone.

For example, let's say you have a friend who dresses differently. You might describe your friend's sense of style as *extraordinary* (positive), *unique* (neutral), or *abnormal* (negative) depending on whether you think dressing differently is good, bad, or neither.

Academic writing favours neutral language, although argumentative and persuasive papers may use some positive or negative language as well. If you are writing to persuade or argue, you may want to choose words that reinforce your position on the topic; however, these words do not take the place of the evidence you must provide in order to support your position.

Ex. My friend has an extraordinary sense of style. (Does not explain *why* the style is extraordinary)

Ex. My friend has an extraordinary sense of style combining formal business suits with Feiyue sneakers for a classic casual look.

Context

Every discipline uses words that convey technical knowledge or particular meaning. Words can have different meanings depending on context so it is vital that you understand a word's meaning within the context of your discipline and use it accordingly.

For example, in linguistics the word *gender* refers to the classification of nouns in relation to other words; in biology, *gender* may refer to the biological sex of an organism; and in the social sciences, *gender* may refer to the social constructs of gender, such as social roles.

Never use technical words without fully understanding their meaning. Using large or unfamiliar words will not make your writing sound "academic." While you will become more adept at using your discipline's technical language as you advance through your studies, it is better to use common words, whose meaning you *do* understand, than technical words whose meaning you do not. It is also a good idea to not overuse technical words for the sake of clarity.

Ex. **Dr. Jones engages the dichotomy embodied in the dialogue postulating the hegemony of the pedagogical role as a deterrent to heuristic autonomy.** (Too many technical words)

Ex. **Dr. Jones believes that teachers' authority impedes independent student learning.**

Connotation

Whereas denotation refers to a word's primary meaning, connotation refers to all the associated meanings a word has. These associated meanings form the basis for why a writer would choose a particular word over its synonyms. Like tone, connotative differences can reflect a range, such as from strong to weak (intensity), precise to general (specificity), or a little to a lot (quantity).

For example, *talkative* expresses the connotation of 'speaking appropriately within a social context,' but it can also express 'using too many words' or 'sharing information that should be kept private.' While all these connotations can be expressed through *talkative*, it would be better to use synonyms of *talkative* that express these different meanings. For example, substitute *conversational* for 'speaking appropriately within a social context,' *wordy* for 'using too many words,' and *gossipy* for 'sharing information that should be kept private.'

To determine word choice based on connotative differences, try using the following steps.

Steps	Examples
Try giving a word to what it is you wish to express	The action of thinking
Determine possible word choices for 'the action of thinking'	ponder, reflect, deliberate, consider, meditate, contemplate, muse, ruminate, reason, brood; concentrate, brainstorm, obsess, cogitate
Limit word choices based on the specific meaning you want to convey.	I want to convey 'thinking about something too much' Best word choice: *obsess*
Confirm word choice by placing the word in context.	The whole country was *obsessed* with football during the FIFA World Cup.

Concision

Express meaning in as few words as possible. Thus, instead of using a phrase to convey a meaning, find a *single* word that could be used to convey the same meaning.

For example, if a study on cancer research was *very significant* it would be more concise to describe the study as *vital*. Similarly, if a convict who *looked like* El Chapo were to *break out* of prison, it would be more concise to say a convict who *resembled* El Chapo *escaped* prison.

Writing concisely depends on the strength of your vocabulary. The more words you know, the greater your ability to replace a phrase or group of words with a single, precise word. Since there are no shortcuts to improving your vocabulary, find a method of improvement that is either convenient or enjoyable so you are encouraged to use it. Some writers may use word games (such as those available online through Merriam-Webster) to increase their vocabulary, while others may use journaling, conversation, or simply consult their dictionary and thesaurus often as they read.