Word Choice

I do not choose the right word; I get rid of the wrong one.

--A.E. Houseman

As you read and listen to other people speak, you cultivate a rich vocabulary of precise and colorful words that let you say exactly what you want—not come close, but nail it right on the head. This is the essence of good word choice. Every new word increases your power.

"But there are so many words to learn; where do I begin?" you might ask. In his book, On Writing Well, William Zinsser says, "Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum...flail, poke, dazzle, squash, beguile, pamper, swagger, wheedle, vex. Probably no other language has such a vast supply of verbs so bright with color." Learn to develop a critical eye toward the verbs in your work. Are they active, powerful, full of energy and pizzazz?

Keep the vocabulary natural. Never write to impress or you’ll end up with sentences like this: "He cultivated his way into the kitchen," or "Our friendship was highly lucrative." See what happened? In an attempt to use words that were bigger, these writers forgot to make sure they made sense. A thesaurus can be a good friend to a writer, but only if used sparingly and with thought.

Your writing works best with specific words, carefully chosen to create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind. Play around with the words until they sound good. Don’t say, "The dog was big and mean." Say, "A hundred pounds of snarling yellow fur launched itself from the porch, straining at a rope thin as spaghetti." Now that’s something we can see happening!

The race in writing is not to the swift, but to the original.

--William Zinsser
Word Choice

5 Paper - Extremely Clear, Visual, and Accurate
I picked just the right words for just the right places.

- All the words in my paper fit. Each one seems just right.
- My words are colorful, snappy, vital, brisk and fresh. You won't find overdone, vague, or flowery language.
- Look at all my energetic verbs!
- Some of the words and phrases are so vivid that the reader won't be able to forget them.

3 Paper - Correct But Not Striking
The words in my paper get the message across, but don't capture anyone's imagination or attention.

- I used everyday words pretty well, but I didn't stretch for a new or better way to say things.
- Most of the time the reader will figure out what I mean even if a few words are goofed up.
- Occasionally, I may have gone a bit overboard with words that tried to impress the reader.
- My words aren't real specific. Instead of saying, 'The sun went down,' I should have said, 'The sun sagged into the treetops.' Better, juicier details were needed!
- There are as many tired old clichés ('Bright and early,' Quick as a wink) as there are new, fresh and original phrases: 'My mother made me feel more special than all her potted plants.'

1 Paper - Confusing, Misused Words, and Phrases Abound
My reader is often asking, 'What did you mean by this?'

- A lot of my words and phrases are vague: 'We liked to do things,' 'We were friends and stuff.'
- My words don't make pictures yet, 'Something neat happened,' 'It was awesome.'
- Some of my words are misapplication - 'Ooops, I mean abused.'
- Over and over I used the same words, over and over, and then over and over again until my paper was over.
WORD CHOICE

5 Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting and natural way.
   o Words are specific and accurate; it is easy to understand just what the writer means.
   o The language is natural and never overdone; phrasing is highly individual.
   o Lively verbs energize the writing. Precise nouns and modifiers create pictures in the reader's mind.
   o Striking words and phrases often catch the reader's eye—and linger in the reader's mind.
   o Clichés and jargon are used sparingly, only for effect.

3 The language is functional, even if it lacks punch; it is easy to figure out the writer's meaning on a general level.
   o Words are almost always correct and adequate; they simply lack flair.
   o Familiar words and phrases communicate, but rarely capture the reader's imagination. Still, the paper may have one or two fine moments.
   o Attempts at colorful language come close to the mark, but sometimes seem overdone.
   o Energetic verbs or picturesque phrases liven things up now and then; the reader longs for more.
The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words to convey meaning. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:

- Language is so vague (e.g., *It was a fun time, She was neat, It was nice, We did lots of stuff*) that only the most general message comes through.
- Persistent redundancy distracts the reader.
- Jargon or clichés serve as a crutch.
- Words are used incorrectly, sometimes making the message hard to decipher.
- Problems with language leave the reader wondering what the writer is trying to say.