
A Choice of words

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Oxford

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Preface

In a letter to a young clergyman in 1720, Swift defined style as well as anyone: “proper words in proper places”. This book concentrates the reader’s attention exclusively upon the first part of that succinct definition.

By “proper” we do not mean “polite” or “decorous”. Proper words are those “rightly assigned or suited”; that is, they are appropriate to what is being said, to the audience addressed, and to the author’s purpose. This definition is Aristotle’s. Formulated as a principle of rhetoric in the fourth century B.C., it remains a valid and useful guide for the critical reader and the apprentice writer. It informs the central method of *A Choice of Words*.

Now, to ignore “proper places” is to ignore a great deal – the structure of thought in sentence and paragraph upon which so many composition texts concentrate so much attention. We have assumed that the average student using this text is able to construct effective sentences and to organize paragraphs; what we have not assumed is that the student is careful to choose words for their precision and expressiveness, or that he reads prose accurately and with sensitivity. His effective reading and writing depend upon an understanding of words and a feeling for them, and *A Choice of Words* hopes to quicken that understanding and feeling.

As all such books are forced to do, *A Choice of Words* examines words under such predictable headings as Denotation, Connotation, Metaphor, and Irony. These distinctions, however, are not intended to suggest that a word has many component parts, each neatly divided and separated from the others. The word is both one and all. The degree of importance attached to its denotative or connotative character, to its literal or figurative character, is determined by its context. Thus, what a word means is the combination of what it has to offer and what its context invites it to present. This definition of meaning is the second important principle upon which this book is based.

Although the book assumes the presence somewhere nearby of an instructor, it proceeds as inductively as possible so that a student

will be able to read and to utilize much of the material by himself. If he finds the prose passages of Chapter I too difficult at first, he can study the chapters on denotation, connotation, metaphor, and irony and return to these passages later with greater confidence. The final chapter echoes the first in that it offers a similar range of prose styles for analysis. It assumes the reading of what went before. Throughout, questions have been presented to which there are no final answers; these questions are intended to spark thought and to lead the student into an exploration of the complexities of meaning.

In this age of mass media, of poster art, of psychedelia and total experience, when educators line up in the kingdom of Gutenberg behind their reluctant Moses with his cry of exodus, "The word is dead! Long live the image!", *A Choice of Words* comes on, as they say, a little quaint. But it makes no apology for that. It is written in full confidence that effective verbal communication is of the first importance.

This book will have fulfilled its aim if its owner understands with the cramp of his writer's hand and the strain of his reader's eye what Dylan Thomas meant when he said, "I fell in love . . . at once, and am still at the mercy of words."

D.K.

T.C.



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1 Meaning and Context

There is no easily-learned set of rules or directions that will help you to become an effective writer. As in the development of any skill, learning to write is a matter of diligent practice. It is useful to have a critic (most often an instructor or teacher) close at hand to point out where you are unclear or clumsy, where the organization of your ideas can be improved, and where your choice of words is inappropriate or misleading. But far more important is the development of the habit of self-criticism. A great deal of the labour of writing is editing – examining closely what you have written as if you were not the author but rather the reader to whom you are writing. In a sense, you put yourself in your reader's place to see if you have communicated your ideas successfully. As you carry out this process of self-criticism, you will see very often that your first choices were not always the best. You may want to revise some sentences in order to make them more emphatic; a whole paragraph may have to be shifted in order to make the logic of your thoughts more apparent; and words that had previously seemed adequate may no longer be found to say exactly what you meant. Changing, shifting, even erasing – these are all part of the work of editing. It is not easy, but it is essential if you want to develop your ability to write in a manner that is concise, lively, and clear.

One way to increase your capacity for self-criticism is to examine closely the work of other writers. In your daily and personal reading – newspapers, magazines, fiction, non-fiction – stop from time to time to ask these questions: What idea is the writer trying to convey in this paragraph? Has he made it clear? Why did he choose this word over other possibilities? Could I make the same point more effectively? Occasionally you will come upon a paragraph that strikes you because of its vividness and clarity; you instinctively recognize it as “good writing”. At such times you should stop and examine it with particular care to see how the writer has managed to make this impact upon you, the reader.

During analysis of the work of other writers, you will notice that the most successful writers are the most careful ones. First of all,

they are sure of their facts; they know that no amount of decoration will disguise a skimpy knowledge of their subject. Secondly, they have a clear sense of structure; their ideas follow a logical and consistent pattern from beginning to end. Finally, they use the words of our language with a sense of authority; they know what words will be the most effective for the purpose they have in mind. It is this last aspect of writing with which we are concerned in this book — the selection of the appropriate word to suit the writer's purpose.

The sense of "appropriateness" is perhaps one of the clearest marks of the careful writer. As your knowledge of the language grows, you will find that for every situation that you wish to describe or for every argument that you wish to present a wide variety of choices is open to you. The English language contains a remarkably large number of synonyms. But of these similar words, only one or two will be appropriate for the purpose you have in mind. A further complication is that the English language is not a simple uniform language in which all the words are understandable to all those who use the language. Scholars who make a specialty of language study now draw distinctions between several kinds of English: standard language, colloquial language or slang, regional dialects, and those special forms of English associated with various areas of human knowledge. Each of these "sub-languages" has a vocabulary that may not be understood universally. A Cockney listening to a Texan may be baffled by the word "dogie"; a father listening to his son may completely misunderstand the meaning of the word "cool"; and a physicist talking to a painter may find that such terms as "chiaroscuro" are completely outside his frame of reference. But the foundation for all these sub-languages is a language we call "standard English", which permits all members of the English-speaking world, no matter what their origin, age, or occupation, to communicate with each other.

Every writer, in choosing the kind of vocabulary he is to use, must take into account three factors: his subject, his anticipated readers, and his purpose in writing. For example, a highly colloquial vocabulary might be quite appropriate in a novel dealing with the emotional problems of an adolescent boy, but the same vocabulary would be quite inappropriate (except in quotations) in a formal lecture on the same subject. Similarly, the writer of an article for a popular newsmagazine on recent anthropological discoveries in New Guinea would try to avoid, as far as possible, the highly technical language associated with anthropology which he might otherwise use if he were writing a university text.

The subject matter and the anticipated reader, then, determine to a great extent the vocabulary which any writer uses. A final and

more difficult factor in word choice is the author's purpose in writing, for here he must consider carefully his own feelings and attitudes towards both his subject and his anticipated audience. In conversation it is very easy to indicate how you feel about something. You can vary the pitch and intensity of your voice, and perhaps add a gesture or two to indicate how you feel. To discover what simple voice stress can do to indicate meaning, read aloud the following sentence four times, stressing a different word each time:

"What can I do?"

What do these four words communicate – a desire for direction, a sense of futility, a feeling of desperation, or a need for an excuse? The question can reveal all of these, depending on which word is given the special stress:

"*What* can I do?"

"What *can* I do?"

"What can *I* do?"

"What can I *do*?"

The addition of gestures can create even more subtle variations in meaning. But in writing you cannot resort to gesture and voice stress to indicate your feelings and attitudes (except for the very general and often overused devices of italics and exclamation marks). You must choose your words with the idea firmly in mind that your vocabulary reveals as much about you as it does about your subject. Cool detachment, passionate involvement, deep sincerity, or bitter sarcasm – whatever effect you want to convey can be accomplished only by keeping a watch over your words and the associations clustered around them.

To illustrate the close relationship between word choice and these three factors – subject, audience, and author's purpose – seven samples of prose are presented for your analysis. The writers of all these passages are concerned with describing some aspect of a certain town or city; but in the variety of their respective vocabularies they indicate something of the number of options that are open to you in your own writing. Read the following passages carefully, and with the help of the questions that follow each passage begin the process of critical analysis which is essential in the development of your capacity for self-criticism.

The Commentaries that follow the samples and questions should be referred to at any stage in your analysis as a guide in your thinking. As has been pointed out in the Introduction, there are no right or wrong answers – the questions are meant to act as points of stimulus.

SAMPLE 1

Winnipeg (wī'nīpĕg), city (pop. 265,429; metropolitan pop. 474,374), provincial capital, SE Man., Canada, on the Red River at the mouth of the Assiniboine, S of Lake Winnipeg and SE of Lake Manitoba. It is the largest city of the Prairie Provs. and one of the world's largest wheat markets. A railroad, commercial, industrial, and distribution center, it has an airport, railroad shops, grain elevators, stockyards, meat-packing plants, flour mills, automobile assembly plants, and varied manufactures. Hydroelectric power is brought to the city from a hydroelectric station on the Winnipeg river. The city's history reflects the history of early French and British explorers and fur traders. Vérendrye here built (1738) Fort Rouge, and other posts were built in the Red River region, which was fiercely contested later by the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. The conflict reached its height in the struggle over the RED RIVER SETTLEMENT. The two companies were merged in 1821, and Fort Gibraltar, an old post of the North West Company on the site of Winnipeg, became the Hudson's Bay Company post, FORT GARRY, which was important in traffic on the Red River, connecting with the settlements in present North Dakota. Settlement grew up around the post, and Winnipeg came into being in the 1860s and grew rapidly after the arrival (1881) of the railroad. The Univ. of Manitoba (see MANITOBA, UNIVERSITY OF) is here, as are the provincial government buildings, a civic auditorium, and the ruins of Fort Garry. St. Boniface, just opposite, is connected by bridges over the Red River.

- 1 (a) What can you discover either of the author's personality or of his attitude towards the city in this description?
 (b) Examine carefully the words "rapidly" and "fiercely". Can you detect any difference between the two with regard to (i) the information they convey, and (ii) their emotional overtones? Can you think of other words that might be more effective substitutes for either of them?
- 2 (a) From what kind of book has this passage been taken?
 (b) Judging from this passage, what is the general purpose of the book?
 (c) Would more evidence of the author's personality and attitudes increase or decrease the value of the book?
- 3 Imagine that one or other of the following passages were added to the original:

It is true that, to the traveller arriving from the east, Winnipeg,

netted in poles and wires, looms on the horizon like a disaster, but there is nothing average or ugly about the life of the people here. The city has been from its foundation one of the most interesting in Canada.

And at Winnipeg meet two extremes of weather – Arctic cold and desert heat – sometimes so abruptly in spring that the rivers, unable to carry the resulting run-off, inundate the city. In 1950 was the worst recent example: after a cold spring, following a winter in which prairie temperatures averaged twenty-five degrees below their normal, a sudden thaw, combined with heavy precipitation, flooded the city and drove thousands of people from their homes. The January isotherm (line of mean temperature for an area), which runs by Winnipeg, stretches through the Arctic to the Pole. It is the coldest major city in Canada. The January mean is zero, and it has been as low as fifty-four below in the city. The winter temperature often stays at zero or less for four to six weeks. Yet in July the heat has been as high as a hundred and eight degrees, and temperatures of a hundred or more have been recorded in every month from May to the end of September.

- (a) To what extent does either of these passages “belong” with the original?
 - (b) What do the words “loom”, “disaster”, and “ugly” tell you about the city? About the author?
 - (c) From each of the following groups of words, choose the one that is most in keeping with the purpose of the original sample.
 inundate, flood, overwhelm
 precipitation, rainfall, showers
- 4 Extract the factual information contained in the passages in 3 and incorporate this into one or two sentences that might be fittingly added to the original sample.

SAMPLE II (a)

A PORTRAIT OF THE TOWN

Banbury lies in a country of regularly undulating hill and dale. The hills are level broad-backed ridges, so level that you may look across from one ridge to the next and see the trees on the one beyond that again. A fine day in late February is the time to see this country, for then the clutter and profusion of the last harvest have disappeared and the land has been cleared and tidied for the coming season. The trees stand naked in the newly layered hedgerows; the grass has shed its old growth but

has not yet begun to put on new, so that the fields at the bottom of the slopes are like pale lawns about the winding streams; higher up, the ploughland glistens and thin sunlight draws out the mellow warmth of golden stone in the thatched villages which cling, tight-clustered, round the shoulders of the hills. It is a countryside of soft colours and firm but gentle contours, without dramatic feature. In this it matches the climate which, though fickle, is rarely violent; it may bring grumbles, but never mourning for catastrophe.

The hills, about 400 to 500 feet above sea-level, are a part of that chain which runs from west to east across England and which may be said to divide the Midlands from the south. In this neighbourhood they are about twenty miles across with Banbury lying in their midst. Some ten miles to the north of the town is an escarpment from whose crest you can see far out over the Midland plain as though into another country, while from points ten miles to the south of the town the land slopes gently away into the upper Thames valley. Through the hills, connecting the plain on the north with the one on the south, runs the small river Cherwell. Its valley forms a corridor which is now shared by railway and canal. Banbury lies in this corridor.

Lying thus between two plains this hill district, though far from being remote or inaccessible, is somewhat isolated in the sense that it does not clearly belong to any wider region.

- 1 (a) What is the author's attitude towards the town of Banbury?
 (b) In what words or phrases is this attitude made apparent?
 (c) For what reason, do you think, has the author introduced "you" in the first paragraph?
- 2 (a) The following list of words has been taken from the passage, with synonyms added in parentheses. For each group decide whether you prefer the synonym or the original.
 clutter and profusion (mess)
 bare (nude)
 glistens (sparkles)
 cling (clasp, hug)
 tight clustered (bunched)
 fickle (unfaithful)
 corridor (hallway)
 grumbles (complains, whines)
 inaccessible (unreachable, aloof)
 (b) What would be the effect on your reaction to the passage if the italicized words in the following phrases were eliminated?

like *pale* lawns
thin sunlight
mellow warmth of *golden* stone

- (c) What impression about the weather in Banbury is the author expressing in the following statement: "... it may bring grumbles, but never mourning for catastrophe."
- 3 (a) What changes can you see in the frequency and kind of descriptive words and phrases used by the author when you compare the first paragraph with the second?
- (b) What does this indicate to you about the nature and purpose of the remainder of the book?
- 4 From what sort of book is this passage taken?

SAMPLE II (b)

BANBURY

It is from the higher occupational status groups that the traditional leadership of the town is drawn. Since the more mobile non-traditional members of these status groups play little part in the town's affairs, this leadership is left to those with roots in the town; to people who, for the most part, are less widely travelled, less cosmopolitan, less highly educated and trained. A number of them are Banburians. The immigrants among them are those who have been prepared to adopt the town as their own, to accept its values and attitudes, and to play a part in its social and political life. They are traditionally minded immigrants.

This traditional leadership is now being challenged by the leaders of the non-traditional workers through the trade-union and Labour movements. At the same time economic power is passing to non-traditional managements; the traditional sector is narrowing.

- 5 (a) In the first Banbury sample you were told something of the geography and climate of the town. What information about the town is contained in this passage?
- (b) What do you understand the terms "traditional" and "non-traditional" to mean?
- (c) At any point in the passage does the author seem to be making a judgement on either the "traditional" or the "non-traditional" residents of Banbury?
- (d) Judging by the second passage, what seems to be the purpose of the book from which both Samples II(a) and II(b) were

taken? If your answer differs from your answer to question 4, explain why you have been led to change your mind.

- 6 (a) The following list of words and phrases has been taken from the passage, with synonyms added in parentheses. For each group decide which word is the most appropriate in the context.

higher occupational status groups (bigwigs, wealthy upper class)

mobile (movable, shift)

cosmopolitan (well-travelled, citified, urbane)

immigrants (new citizens, upstarts)

sector (group, segment)

challenged (dared, flaunted)

- (b) Write an account of the conflict in Banbury as if you were
i a member of the "traditional" group,
ii a member of the "non-traditional" group.

Before you begin writing you should define carefully the purpose your account will serve in each case, and accordingly what kind of vocabulary will dominate.

- 7 (a) Do you find any discrepancy between Samples II(a) and II(b) in either the author's attitude towards the subject or the author's purpose in writing?

(b) In the first Banbury sample, how has the author prepared you for the shift to the more technical discussion that follows? (Sample II(b) is taken from a later chapter in the book.)

(c) What explanation can you give for the shift in tone after the first paragraph in Sample II(a)? Is this shift justified in view of the overall purpose of the book?

- 8 Imagine that you are writing a survey of your own town or neighbourhood. Write a suitable introduction to the survey, keeping as closely as possible to the tone of the paragraphs of Sample II(a)

SAMPLE III

NEW YORK CITY

Meanwhile, [in the latter half of the nineteenth century] the city as a whole became progressively more foul. In the late seventies the new model tenement design, that for the so-called dumbbell apartment, standardized the habitations of the workers on the lowest possible level, encouraging for twenty years the erection of tenements in which only two rooms in six or seven got direct sunlight or a modicum of air. Even the best residences were grim, dreary, genteelly fusty. If something

better was at last achieved for the rich in the 1890's, on Riverside Drive and West End Avenue, it remained in existence scarcely twenty years and was replaced by mass congestion.

During the period we are looking at . . . we are confronted with a city bent on its own annihilation. For New York used its intense energy and its taut, over-quickened life to produce meaner habitations, a more constricted environment, a duller daily routine, in short, smaller joys, than it had produced during the modest provincial period. By denying itself the essentials of a fine human existence, the city was able to concentrate more intently upon its paper figments. It threw open its doors to the Irish of the forties, to the Germans of the fifties and sixties, later to the Italians, and to the Russians and Jews of eastern Europe: the outside world, contemptuous but hopeful, sneering but credulous, sent many of its finest children to New York. Some of them pushed on, to the cornlands, the wheatlands, the woodlands, the vinelands, to the iron mines, the coal mines, the copper mines; while those that remained were forced to huddle in utmost squalor. But the congested East Side, for all its poverty and dirt, was not the poorest part of the city: it still had its open markets with their color, its narrow streets with their sociability and their vivid common life and neighborly help, its synagogues with at least the dried remnants of a common vision.

- 1 (a) What information about the city of New York can you derive from this passage?
- (b) i What is meant by the term "modicum of air"?
 ii Can you think of another phrase that would express the same idea?
- (c) The following list of words and phrases has been taken from the passage, with synonyms added in parentheses.
 habitations (residences, hovels, dwellings)
 erection (construction, building)
 tenement (slum, substandard housing)
 mass congestion (overcrowding, cramped quarters)
 credulous (trusting, gullible)
 sociability (social intercourse, socializing)
 annihilation (destruction, eradication)
 - i What emotional associations or overtones are attached to each of the original words?
 - ii Examine in each group the words in parentheses and decide whether they would be just as appropriate in the context as the original word.

- iii For each of the original words, think of a synonym that is richer in its emotional impact (e.g. substitute “hovel” for “habitation”), and decide what effect the changes create in the passage as a whole.
- (d) i Keeping in mind that the author is describing the growth of a large city in the New World, describe what is meant by the term “common vision” in the last sentence.
- ii What effect has the author achieved by speaking of the “dried remnants” of the vision?
- (e) Earlier the author describes “paper figments” as *the ledger, the prospectus, the advertisement and the yellow journal, the world of paper lusts . . .* [which obliterated] *under its flimsy tissues all the realities of life that were not exploitable as either profit or news, on paper . . .*
 - i Look up the word “paper” in a dictionary and decide if its definition carries the same power of emotional expression that this author gives to the word.
 - ii Discuss “flimsy dreams” and “artificial promises” as possible substitutes for “paper figments”.
- 2 (a) i What effect does the word “foul” have on you, occurring as it does at the beginning of the passage?
- ii “Unpleasant”, “disgusting” or “corrupt” are possible substitutes. Consider in each case what your emotional reaction is to each of these substitutes and whether they seem to accomplish the author’s purpose just as effectively.
- (b) Make a list of other words in the passage that either support or develop the reaction initiated by the word “foul”.
- (c) Can you find other words in the passage that either oppose or blunt this emotional reaction? For what purpose has the author brought them in?
- (d) Describe as fully as you can what you imagine to be the interior of an apartment that is “grim, dreary, genteelly fusty.”
- 3 (a) What seems to be the author’s principal aim in his account of New York?
- (b) *To build intelligently today is to lay the foundations for a new civilization.*
 - i With reference to the passage you are analysing, how accurate in this later statement as a summation of the author’s purpose in writing the book in question?
 - ii Where in the passage was this purpose directly stated or implied?
- (c) Compare your reaction to this account of New York with your reactions to the descriptions of Winnipeg and Banbury.