

*A College
Handbook of Composition*

英语写作手册

外语教学与研究出版社

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丁往道 吴 冰 主编
张中载 张泰金
陈德彰 郭建生 编写

外语教学与研究出版社

0161929

(京)新登字155号

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YINGYU XIEZUO SHOUCHE

丁往道 吴 冻 主编

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外语教学与研究出版社出版

(北京市西三环北路19号)

新华书店总店北京发行所发行

北京怀柔燕东印刷厂印刷

开本850×1168 1/32 7.75印张 132千字

1984年10月第1版 1992年6月北京第6次印刷

印数：261001—281000册

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ISBN7—5600—0182—3/G·131

定价：2.95元

前 言

最近几年，为了加强本科学生英语写作能力的训练，我们开设了比较系统的写作课，并编写了一些教材。现在经过整理和补充，编成这本教材。

手册的各部分是按照由小到大，即由词、句到段、篇的次序排列的，但这并不就是实际教学中所应该采取的次序。我们一般在二年级教段落和摘要的写法，在三年级教各类作文和书信的写法，在四年级教论文的写法。关于词、句及标点等的讨论则在需要时穿插进行。

手册中的材料虽已经过使用，但还是很不成熟的，希望读者指出它的缺点和错误之处，以便今后修订时改进。

英籍教师迈考尔·萧特 (Michael H. Short) 先生曾阅读原稿，提出许多改进意见，在此向他表示谢意

编 者

一九八三年九月

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Part One

Diction

Diction is the choice and use of words. A student who has studied English for a few years may have a vocabulary of thousands of words. He should learn to make choices from his vocabulary to express himself. Sometimes he may choose the wrong words, but more often the words he chooses are not entirely wrong, but inappropriate, ~~un~~inexact, unidiomatic, or too stale to be interesting. It is therefore necessary for him to have a basic knowledge of diction, of the principles that guide the choice of words.

A student can attain good diction by wide and careful reading and by consulting dictionaries. While reading a well-written book, he should pay attention to the writer's choice of words, especially to his way of using those familiar words that people use every day. When in doubt about the meaning and use of a word, or about the distinction between related words, he should try to find guidance and information in dictionaries, which are handy and efficient tools for improving one's diction.

I. The Appropriate Word

Appropriateness is essential to good diction. Swift's definition of style was 'proper words in proper places.' A few decades ago, the Fowler brothers set down their five basic rules of good diction in *The King's English*, they are:

- Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.
- Prefer the concrete word to the abstract.
- Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
- Prefer the short word to the long.
- Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.

Later writers objected to these rules as being too absolute. According to them, whether the words used are appropriate depends to a large extent on the subject, audience, and purpose of the writer. For example, a highly colloquial vocabulary, non-standard English, and slang might be quite appropriate in a novel or a play dealing with the problems of juvenile delinquents, but the same vocabulary would be quite inappropriate in a formal lecture on the same subject. Similarly, when writing an article for a popular science journal, one would try to avoid highly technical language.

This new view on appropriateness is, no doubt, sensible and correct. However, for a beginner, some of the old rules are still good and sound. It is our suggestion that when a student learns to write in English, he start with Standard English, paying special attention to the core of English vocabulary, use colloquial English in informal situations, and avoid slang in formal writing.

1. Standard and Nonstandard English

Standard English is the English recognized and used by educated speakers of English. All words in a dictionary that are not labelled to the contrary are, in the judgment of the editors, Standard English and acceptable for general use.

Those words that are labelled as *slang*, *obsolete*, and *archaic* should be used with care, if at all, in serious writing. Words labelled as *nonstandard*, in particular, should be shunned, for they are not usually found in the speech or writing of educated people. Such words as *nowheres*, *irregardless*, *ain't* and *hain't* are nonstandard. Double negative constructions like *I don't want nothing*, and combinations like *he don't*, are also nonstandard English.

2. The Core of English Vocabulary

English vocabulary contains tens of thousands of words, of which a few thousand are most frequently used,

These words may be regarded as the core of the language. Some of them are literary or formal, some of them are colloquial, but the great majority are used in both literary and more colloquial contexts. Thus the core of English is made up of three layers of words, with the learned at the top, the colloquial at the bottom, and the common in the middle.

Learned words appear in formal speech and writing, such as formal lectures and addresses, scholarly and scientific articles, official documents, and business letters. Colloquial words, on the other hand, are mostly used in conversation and writings with a conversational style, like plays, the dialogue in novels, and personal letters. Common words appear in all types of speech and writing.

It follows that a student should first try to learn to use the words that form the core, especially those common words. At the same time, he should learn to distinguish the colloquial from the formal. It may be more difficult to tell the common from the other two layers of words, because often there is no clear dividing line between them.

3. Formal, Unmarked, and Colloquial English

Between formal and colloquial English there is unmarked English, which is neither so literary and serious as formal English, nor so casual and free as colloquial English. As with the three layers of vocabulary, a sharp dividing line cannot be easily drawn between formal and unmarked English, or between unmarked and colloquial English.

Here is a paragraph from a scholarly paper which contains some of the features of formal English:

There is nothing new in the recognition, within a given language, of a distinction between common usage and uses of the language for more restricted purposes and often enough, perhaps characteristically, more

elevated purposes. The monolithic nature of English is not questioned when literary essayists like Emerson contrast poetry and common speech. The latter is recognized in America to be the proper subject for the investigation of linguists who, however, now show some incipient inclination to investigate poetry, too, and other noncasual utterances in a given language.

— C.F. Voegelin

The first thing we notice is perhaps the complex and involved sentence structure: there are only three sentences in the paragraph. Then we may find that there are in it some words which are seldom used in conversation, words like *recognition*, *characteristically*, *elevated*, *monolithic*, *investigation*, *noncasual*, and *utterances*. These are more likely to be literary or formal words than common words; they are definitely not colloquial words. However, there are far more words that may be called common. In the first sentence, for instance, all the words except the few mentioned above are common words. Other things that deserve attention are the absence of very colloquial words or expressions and the use of the passive.

When I was a kid, and reading every science fiction book in the local library, I used to wonder exactly how the future would happen. By that I don't mean what the future would be *like* — science fiction already told me that — but rather how we'd actually get there. Science fiction books seemed to agree, for example, that in the future there would be no money — all transactions would be made via identity cards and centralized computers. But that seemed dubious to me: how, I wondered, are you going to get everybody to give up money in the first place?

— Michael Rogers

In this paragraph, except one or two words that are very colloquial, like *kid*, and one or two that are a little formal, like *transactions* and *dubious*, all the words are commonly used words. The sentences are also shorter and simpler than those in the first paragraph. The language of this paragraph is on the whole neutral.

What follows is an example of colloquial English, from a talk given by a Chicago bus driver:

You have your tension. Sometimes you come close to having an accident, that upsets you. You just escape maybe by a hair or so. Sometimes maybe you get a disgruntled passenger on there, and starts a big argument. Traffic. You have someone who cuts you off or stops in front of the bus. There's a lot of tension behind that. You got to watch all the time. You're watchin' the drivers, you're watchin' other cars. Most of the time you have to drive for the other drivers, to avoid hitting them. So you take the tension home with you. And most of the runs are long runs. From one end of the line to the other would be about an hour and twenty minutes. Most of the drivers, they'll suffer from hemorrhoids, kidney trouble, and such as that. I had a case of ulcers behind it.

— Studs Terkel

The bus driver uses common words mingled with a lot of colloquial expressions, such as *by a hair or so*, *on there*, *cuts you off*, *you got to*, and *such as that*. Most of his sentences are very short and simple in structure.

As far as diction is concerned, these paragraphs show that, while common words are good for all the three levels of writing, very colloquial words and expressions and contractions (like *don't*, *we'd*, *there's*, and *you're*) are, as a rule, not used in formal writing, and very formal words and expressions are not used in colloquial writing, unless for some special purpose or effect. To this, however, we

must also add that things are in general becoming less formal.

4. Slang

Slang expressions are used by special groups for special effect. Such words are transitory: some of them (like *sheik* for a romantically alluring man) are dying out; others (like *cop* for policeman and *buck* for dollar) are accepted as Standard English.

Slang words may be vivid and interesting, but they may, when used inappropriately, make the writer or speaker sound offensive or funny:

On hearing that his father had *kicked the bucket*, we wrote him a letter to express our deep sympathies.

The big banquet held in honour of the distinguished state guests was really *neat*.

Because of the slang expressions, the first sentence does not really sound sympathetic, and the second is not serious in tone.

5. Archaisms, Obsolete Words, and Anachronisms

Words or meanings of words which are no longer in common use but still occur in special texts (e.g. religious works) and poetry are called archaic. For example, *thou* (you) and *forsooth* (indeed) are archaic words. Words or meanings which have gone out of use altogether are called obsolete. Although they are occasionally used by certain writers, students should, on the whole, avoid them.

Words that are inappropriate for the time about which one is writing are called anachronisms. We all know that Confucius travelled a great deal, but if we say that Confucius was a *tourist*, we are using an anachronism, because there was no tourism or tourists in his day.

II. The Exact Word

1. Connotation and Denotation

The meaning of a word has two aspects, denotative and connotative. A word's denotation is what it literally means, as defined by the dictionary; its connotation is the feeling or idea suggested by the word.

For instance, *country*, *nation*, *state*, and *land* have more or less the same denotation and may all be translated into *guojia* (国家) in Chinese. But their connotations are quite different: *country* emphasizes the territory (of a nation or a state); *nation* emphasizes the people (of a territory united under a single government); *state* emphasizes political (governmental) organization; and *land*, a less precise geographical term than *country*, is often used to connote certain feelings.

an island *country*; neighbouring *countries*

China is the third largest *country* in the world.

a peace-loving *nation*; the awakening *nations* of Africa

The modernization programme has won the support of the whole *nation*.

state organs; *state*-owned enterprises

Our *state* system is the people's democratic dictatorship.

a far-away/foreign *land*; a *land* of liberty/opportunity

Tears rolled down the old man's cheeks when from the plane he caught sight of his native *land*, which he had left 50 years before.

Another example would be *resolute* and *stubborn*, which both mean unyielding. However, one likes to work with a *resolute* person, who is firm and determined in face of hardship and opposition, rather than with a *stubborn* person, who may be unreasonable and, therefore, very difficult to deal with.