**Shades of Meaning: Choosing the Best Word**

“The ‘right’ word contributes accuracy and precision to your meaning. The ‘wrong’ word, it follows, is inaccurate or imprecise. The most reliable guide to choosing the right word and avoiding the wrong word is a dictionary that includes not only concise definitions but also the origin of words.” A dicey alternative are online dictionaries like *www.dict.cc*: they can offer you a host of choices, but you run a fairly high risk of choosing an inappropriate word. If you go the online route, check the word you select in the dictionary!

Many of the most common diction errors are caused by ignorance. The writer has not learned the difference between similar words that actually have different meanings. If you confuse “recognize”, “notice” and “realize”, e.g., or “first” and “at first”, you will not convey the meaning that you intend, and you will probably confuse your readers and invite them to question your control of language.

**What’s bad about “good” and “bad” (and other broad, judgmental terms)?**

Vague evaluative terms like “good”, “bad”, “interesting”, “important” etc. can seduce you into stopping your thinking while it is still too general and ill-defined. If you train yourself to use more precise words whenever you encounter “good”, “bad”, etc. in your drafts, not only will your prose become clearer but also the search for new words will probably start you thinking again, sharpening your ideas.

**Replacing abstract assertions with concrete details**

“Concrete diction brings things to life by offering your readers words they can use their senses upon.” Rewrite the sentences listed below, substituting more concrete language.

*It was a great party; everybody had fun.*

*It was a lousy party; everybody disliked it.*

*The book was really boring.*

*The film was quite interesting.*

*He became very angry.*

**GUIDELINES FOR CHOOSING WORDS AND SHAPING SENTENCES**

1. Remember that revision is not merely cosmetic: to change the word is to change the meaning.
2. There are always shades of meaning. Strive to choose the best – the most accurate and appropriate – word for the situation. When in doubt consult a dictionary (if possible).
3. Avoid *good, bad, real, interesting, important*, and other broad judgmental terms.
4. Are tone and register appropriate to the task?
5. Revise sentences to clarify their meaning by revealing the organization of thought.
6. Cut the fat. Don’t use five words (“due to the fact that”) when one will do (“because”). Avoid redundancy.
7. Tighten the syntax of your sentences by energizing the verbs. The active voice generally achieves directness and economy; it will promote clarity and will cut the fat.
8. Be aware of passives that blur or submerge the action, omit its performers, and generally lack momentum.

Source: David Rosenwasser and Jill Steven, *Writing Analytically*, Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006. 265.