

# **Things to Eliminate in Your Writing:**

**Using Words You Don't Understand**

# Part I: What is it?



Generally, writing of this type is created by misusing a thesaurus (or the virtual thesaurus on a word processing program) to randomly substitute clear language for language choices that are less appropriate.

Let me show you what I mean. Here's a body paragraph from a pretty decent example of student writing, taken from an essay for the 2010 AP exam (it scored a 7 on the 9 point scale) concerning Marilyn Nelson Waniek's poem "The Century Quilt":

Waniek's main source of imagery is the use of colors. She describes falling asleep under "army green" (3), a boring, common color, and contrasts it with Meema's Indian blanket, exciting and full of life. Even in describing her own Century Quilt, she illustrates the "Six Van Dyke brown squares/two white ones, and one square/the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks" (15-17). She begins to associate the colors with family, and love. In questioning what she would dream of sleeping under it, she imagines the quilt would evoke memories of her "father's burnt umber pride" (39), and of her "mother's ochre gentleness" (40). The quilt evidently symbolizes the races and ethnicities in her family, but not in a derogatory way. She describes Meema's "yellow sisters" (25) and their grandfather's "white family" (26), living in harmony and love, what the quilt has come to mean for her. With this use of color often comes other imagery. She imagines the sweet gum leaves in each square of the quilt as having fingers that "would caress me into the silence" (20) when she is to die.



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Here's a bad revision of the same text, created by substituting in synonyms and near synonyms using a thesaurus:

Waniek's **focal** source of imagery is the use of **tints**. She describes falling asleep under "army green" (3), a **lackluster**, **customary** color, and contrasts it with Meema's Indian blanket, **electrifying** and **perky**. Even in describing her own Century Quilt, she **elucidates** the "Six Van Dyke brown squares/two white ones, and one square/the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks" (15-17). She **initiates** to **subordinate** the colors with family, and **adoration**. In questioning what she would dream of sleeping under it, she **conceives** the quilt would **arouse** memories of her "father's burnt umber pride" (39), and of her "mother's ochre gentleness" (40). The quilt evidently **embodies** the races and ethnicities in her family, but not in a derogatory way. She describes Meema's "yellow sisters" (25) and their grandfather's "white family" (26), living in **accord** and **ardor**, what the **culpability** has come to mean for her. With this use of **hue** often comes other imagery. She **envisages** the sweet gum leaves in each **quadrangular portion** of the quilt as **devising** fingers that "would caress me into the silence" (20) when she is to **expire**.

**Part II:**  
**Why is this a problem?**



Waniek's focal source of imagery is the use of tints. She describes falling asleep under "army green" (3), a lackluster, customary color, and contrasts it with Meema's Indian blanket, electrifying and perky. Even in describing her own Century Quilt, she elucidates the "Six Van Dyke brown squares/two white ones, and one square/the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks" (15-17). She initiates to subordinate the colors with family, and adoration. In questioning what she would dream of sleeping under it, she conceives the quilt would arouse memories of her "father's burnt umber pride" (39), and of her "mother's ochre gentleness" (40). The quilt evidently embodies the races and ethnicities in her family, but not in a derogatory way. She describes Meema's "yellow sisters" (25) and their grandfather's "white family" (26), living in accord and ardor, what the culpability has come to mean for her. With this use of hue often comes other imagery. She envisages the sweet gum leaves in each quadrangular portion of the quilt as devising fingers that "would caress me into the silence" (20) when she is to expire.

If you think the revision sounds "smarter" than the original text, you're exemplifying the problem.

By randomly inserting synonyms (and near-synonyms) for random words: clarity is lost; words are misused; and clear language choices are replaced by pretentious alternatives. In a moment, I will discuss each of these problems in turn.

At its root, though, what's happening is the revision is substituting appropriate language choices for less appropriate ones because the reviser does not really understand the words being used. As a result, the revision is actually much harder to follow, since the revisions end up being confusing-- reading not as more academic sounding, but like the words of someone who has an incomplete grasp of the English language.

## Why do students do this?

I get it. I really do.

You want to sound smart and academic, and when you read actual academic writing or one of my models, you encounter words you don't know. Since these are written by people who know what they're doing (though it's an open question in my case), you assume that you need to step up your vocabulary game in order to compete.

The basic problem with "thesaurus writing," though, is that when you start making these kinds of random substitutions, you are inevitably going to make errors. Any given entry in a thesaurus is more likely to be a *near* synonym than a *true* synonym, so unless you really know what the substituting word means and under what circumstances it is correctly used, chances are you are misusing it.

Slightly misusing words only draws attention to a weak vocabulary. It does not solve the problem.

The only ones to whom such writing sounds "smarter" are people with the exact problem as you: a limited vocabulary who don't have an ear for when words are being idiomatically used. However, these are not the people evaluating your work, so impressing them is pointless.



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## Problem One: You Lose Clarity

Only six of the twenty-one substitutions are true synonyms. The rest are words that *could* be synonymous in certain circumstances-- but are not in this particular case. Either their definitions are slightly different, or their connotation does not match the intended usage in the revision. As a result, the second paragraph reads like the work of someone who hasn't mastered the nuances of the English language-- which is the problem the revision was trying to "solve" in the first place. Instead of fixing the issue, these kind of fake revisions draw attention to it.

In order to understand the argument, reading student writing of this sort forces me to mentally translate the substitutions back into a more basic form, defeating your purpose and increasing the chances that I misunderstand your point.

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## Problem Two: Words are Misused

If you don't really know what a word means, don't try it out in your writing. This includes understanding its connotation and under what circumstances it is appropriate to use it. If you don't do this, you risk using a word that doesn't fit.

To illustrate the problem, look at the revision to this sentence: "She describes Meema's "yellow sisters" (25) and their grandfather's "white family" (26), living in **harmony** and **love**." Changing *harmony* to *accord* gives the sentence an odd connotation, since *accord* is word usually used in more technical contexts (such as nations coming together to sign treaties). Changing *love* to *ardor* is just erroneous, since *ardor* only means *love* when used in the sense of an "enthusiasm" or "passion" for something-- not in the sense of familial love, as the writer intended here.

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## Problem Three: Your Writing Reads as Pretentious

To be pretentious is to attempt to impress by affecting greater importance, talent, culture, etc., than is actually possessed.

Slightly misusing words (like on the previous slide), unnecessarily substituting common words with much rarer alternatives (as in changing *colors* to either *tints* or *hues*), and wordy replacements for everyday terms (such as changing *square* to *quadrangular portion*) make your writing seem pseudo-intellectual, not intellectual.

Dealing with someone who is not smart can be irritating, but someone who *thinks* s/he is smart when s/he really isn't is a thousand times worse. Pretending to know more than you do creates the latter impression, and that is obviously a bad thing.

# **Part III: What to do Instead**

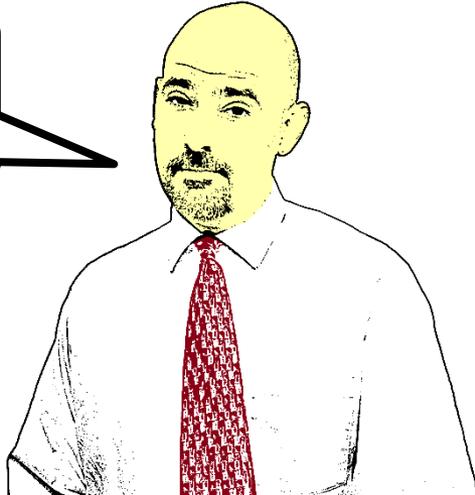


## Solution One: Correctly Use the Thesaurus

The take-away should *not* be to never use the thesaurus. Rather, the take-away should be to correctly use the thesaurus.

The thesaurus is there to remind you of words you can't quite recall off the top of your head when you want to vary your diction choices. However, when you don't really understand a word and its shades of meaning, a random substitution is much more likely to be incorrect than correct.

If you see a word you'd like to include but aren't 100% you're using it correctly: look it up in the dictionary. Pay extra attention to the sample sentences that give you context and show you how it looks when used correctly.



Do you *really*  
understand  
that word?  
*Really?*

## **Solution Two: Don't Overdo It**

Even if every single one of your substitutions is a proper one, you *still* risk sounding wordy and pretentious if every other word is a less common variant of a common word or phrase. This is especially true if you're using diction that sounds more at home in an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century novel than in 21<sup>st</sup> century prose.

As you mature as a writer, you will gain a better ear for this-- particularly as you read more and more academic prose in a university setting. For right now, though, unless your writing is already mature beyond its years, you're better off erring on the side of restraint.

## **Solution Three: Know What You're Talking About**

There really is no substitute for competence-- not in this, not in anything.

If you want to develop your vocabulary, you have to read more than you probably do now. Studies show that learning vocabulary words in isolation does not appreciably improve your working vocabulary. Only reading does this, as you internalize the connotations of words and contexts in which their use is appropriate.

# Part IV: Conclusions



## Conclusions

Do not randomly substitute for words that you find in a thesaurus.

Do not randomly substitute less common words for more common alternatives.

Use a thesaurus to remind of words you already know.

If you're thinking about using a word in a thesaurus, and you're not sure you understand its connotations and appropriate usage, look it up in a dictionary to double check that you're doing it right.

There are no short cuts to developing your vocabulary. You have to read more if you want it to improve.