Word Choice

Why is word choice important?
When writing an essay, your goal is to clearly, cohesively, and concisely communicate your ideas to your audience. Proper word choice helps you achieve this goal by maintaining clarity and an academic tone. It is important to keep in mind four specific aspects of word choice: audience and tone, level of diction (appropriateness), specificity, and meaning (both connotative and denotative).

Audience and Tone
While writing and editing, ask yourself who your paper is for, and then ask yourself what tone, technical language, and layout would best communicate your argument. Formality is an important aspect of writing. Deciding on the level of formality and expected etiquette depends on two factors: how familiar and close the author is with their audience and the setting in which the author is speaking to the audience.

- A formal tone is used in cover letters, correspondences to prospective employers and professors, and academic papers.
- An informal tone is the exception rather than the rule in academic writing. Making decisions on a case-by-case basis or asking your professor for their recommendation is best here. It is also used for personal correspondences.
  - Example: If you are writing for an audience of esteemed biology professors, you would not write as though addressing your friend. You would use a more formal tone, more technical language, and more submissive and agreeable language.
  - Example: “Dear Professor Wright, I am writing to inform you that I am unable to attend class today.” is more formal, while “Hey John, I can’t do dinner tonight. Sorry.” is more informal.

Level of Diction (Appropriateness)

- **Jargon**: Although some papers within academic disciplines require the use of jargon (e.g. the specialized language, the names of specific theories, theorists, methodologies, tools, etc.), avoid using that jargon outside of discipline-specific settings.
  - Example: “Jane Eyre’s progression through the stages of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is characteristic of a coming of age novel.” vs. “Jane Eyre’s moral growth is characteristic of a coming of age novel.”

- **Colloquialisms**: This is defined as regional-specific vocabulary and refers to words or phrases used in specific places (“Bless your heart” in the American South). Colloquial language is usually used in more informal settings, and, as with jargon, it’s necessary to ask yourself if your audience will understand the meaning of the colloquialisms you are using.

- **Slang**: This is considered group-specific vocabulary, refers to words or phrases that often change over time and are used in a specific social group (“gg” which stands for “good game” is used in online gaming communities). Slang is considered very informal, and therefore, when using it you should think about the formality your writing assignment requires and the likelihood that your audience will know what the slang means.
Specificity
Vague words, repetition, and wordy phrases bury your ideas and distract your reader.

- **Vague Words and Pronouns**: When your paper discusses multiple subjects (e.g., everyone and their dog Fido), it can be easy for your readers to become confused about who or what a sentence is referring to. To prevent this confusion, use concrete and specific words, and names whenever pronouns aren’t specific enough.
  - **Example**: “The young boy hugged Fido, and he licked his face” (vague) vs. “The young boy hugged Fido, and Fido licked the boy’s face” (correct).

- **Redundancy**: Repetition in sentence subject or redundancies in wording can bog down your essay in unnecessarily lengthy discussions of simple ideas. Occasionally, using repetition in writing can create a desired rhetorical effect, such as emphasizing an important point. Think about what effect you want to create when you use repetition; be intentional in your writing.
  - **Example**: “My past memories were foggy. When I thought about my past, I felt confused and frightened.” vs. “My foggy memories confused and frightened me.”
  - **Example (of appropriate repetition for emphasis)**: “He could not eat. He could not sleep. He could not even breathe without thinking of her.”

- **Using filler**: Filler phrases are often used to shift to a new idea or counterargument. While transitions are helpful - they assist your reader in moving from one topic to another - filler phrases distract from more important statements in your writing.
  - **Example**: “In spite of the fact that the reason for why I chose to filibuster the committee was valid, the committee members decided that it was a subject that needed no further discussing.” vs. “Despite my valid reason for filibustering the committee, its members decided to move on without further discussion.”
  - **Wordy Phrases**: Wordy phrases refer, simply put, to phrases that can be simplified. Here is a list of common expressions and how to convert them:

  At all times; In all cases → Always
  At that point in time → Then
  At the present time → Now
  Prior to → Before
  Due to the fact that → Because

  In spite of the fact that; Regardless of the → Although
  During the course of; In the process of → During; While
  In order to → To
  For the purpose of → For
  In the event that → If

**Meaning: Connotative and Denotative**
Denotation refers to the dictionary definition of a word, while connotation refers to associations that word has with other ideas. In academic writing, it’s important to be as clear and precise as possible. Sometimes words have certain connotations that can undermine those goals.

- **Example**: In “The model was bony,” and “The model was slender,” the italicized words have the same denotation of skinny or small, but the connotation of “bony” implies an unhealthy weight while “slender” does not.

To avoid confusing readers, think about how the word would be used in conversation. What shades of meaning does it have? Would you need to explain yourself to justify your word use? If the answer to the second question is yes, consider looking for synonyms.

Works Consulted:
UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/); Azusa Pacific University Writing Center (http://www.apu.edu/writingcenter/resources/); *The Everyday Writer*, 4th ed. (Lunsford)