When I was about eight years old, I spent some time with my Uncle Don and Aunt Betty in Santa Rosa, California. They had a rambling old house in the country. My two most vivid images of this warm and welcoming home were the collection of family memorabilia perched here and there, and the handmade bookcases. Lots of bookcases. They were in every room, some standing tall and sturdy, and others leaning a bit to one side or another. But all of them were crammed full with books, big and little, old and new. There were books on the floor, behind doors, in chairs, seemingly everywhere.
My Uncle Don, a well-respected and renowned poet, is a formidable man who influenced me as a reader and writer in every way. Perhaps it was because of his respect for language and the power of good writing. Or his love of ideas and the many ways authors express themselves. Whatever the reason, he was then, and remains, a powerful force in my life. He is the reason I love to read and, therefore, want to write.

On one particular morning, my two cousins, my uncle, and I were sitting down at the big, rough-hewed kitchen table, enjoying some of Aunt Betty’s pancakes. She made great pancakes, better than any I have ever tasted. So I decided to pipe up with something that was properly literate for the occasion and designed to impress my uncle: “Aunt Betty, these are very unique pancakes.”

With that, Uncle Don smacked his fist down on the table, sending small objects flying off in every direction. You would have thought I had uttered a string of curse words longer than the highway from my house to theirs. He shook his finger at me and said, “Young lady, things are either unique or they are not. They are never very unique.” And with his words, I realized three things immediately:

1. I had become the beneficiary of my uncle’s wrath.

2. I had failed to impress.

3. Words are too important to mess around with unless you know what you’re doing.

I shared this story with Don a few months ago and, of course, he doesn’t remember it. His entire life has been spent in the pursuit of just the right words, images, or phrases to connect with the reader. Don knows what it means to learn the lingo. He is a wordsmith. As a poet, the power of just the right word and image
has been clear to him from the beginning. As a youngster, in this wonderful old house built on a foundation of rich and beautiful language, I took my first step toward understanding that words should never ever be used carelessly or for effect. They should be used honestly, correctly, and naturally.

Most teachers feel comfortable teaching word choice. We help students with vocabulary-building activities, examine the role words play in sentences, and encourage students to develop skills to use new words. Still, our teaching doesn’t always translate into finely-crafted pieces. Students do not always take the time and risk to look closely at their work through the lens of word choice. The pure energy that the right word can bring to student writing is often missing. “Trite,” “mundane,” and “inaccurate” can describe the language we read in those never-ending stacks of papers. A student once defined this form of writing as “closed-captioned,” that is, writing that communicates in only the most basic, functional way.

Conversely, sometimes young writers do reach for new ways to say something, but miss because they say it incorrectly. For example, one of my students once wrote, “She imminented her eyes at night while she slept.” Whoa! What’s with that? At first glance it just looked like the wrong word. As I looked at the sentence more closely, I realized the student was trying to find a different way to say “closed her eyes.” It was a good effort, but “imminented” only created confusion for me as the reader. I suspected the student had consulted a thesaurus or The Synonym Finder by J.I. Rodale to look up the word “close,” meaning “shutting or closing.” Unfortunately, she chose a synonym for “close” meaning “approaching,” a pronunciation and vocabulary mismatch. She believed that with a quick swap of words she had spiffed up the word choice. Instead she created “homonym hell.”

As teachers, we’ve seen well-intentioned students do this many, many times. The use and abuse of words and phrases can create quirky little moments in student writing, presidential speeches, and everyday life. But these misadventures in language can help us learn the lingo. In her work about teaching writing, Nancie Atwell emphasizes that we must learn to look for the logic behind the errors. Each time we take a few minutes to see if there is logic there that can be understood and then steered correctly, we help a writer use language effectively for the long haul.

“'The 6+1 Traits is an epic learning instrument. It taught me how to span out my lofty vocabulary. I greatly appreciate this lofty opus!'”

—Megan, eighth grade
The Word Choice Trait

A Definition

Word choice is more than just about the use—or misuse—of words. It is also about beautiful language. It is about the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but also in a way that moves and enlightens the reader. In good descriptive writing, strong word choice clarifies and expands ideas. In persuasive writing, it moves you to a new vision of things. In narrative writing, it creates images in your mind that are so real, you feel like you are part of the story itself. As students learn the lingo, steer them away from exceptional, impressive vocabulary, and toward the skill to use everyday words well.

“A touch of class, a flash of elegance can mark the difference between unremarkable clarity and a thought so elegantly shaped that is not only fixes itself in the mind of our readers forever, but gives them a moment of pleasure when they recall it.”

—Joseph M. Williams

Why Students Struggle With Word Choice

Understanding word choice means understanding the critical role the right word or phrase plays in clear communications—oral and written. It means that, every day, we should be exposing students to the best written prose and poetry, filling their heads with images so real that they can reach out and touch them. Understanding word choice means learning to write clearly, powerfully, and beautifully. But that is often easier said than done. Here are a few reasons why.
Too Often, Language Is Used to Exclude

A teacher at a workshop once said, “Everywhere you go, there is a language to keep you out.” We educators are partly responsible for this. We use many words and phrases that have little or no meaning to parents or students. So do doctors, airline pilots, electricians, and lawyers. We develop specialized sets of vocabulary that have meaning only to people who are in our field and share a similar background. That’s great if it’s, say, one Web site developer talking to another. But what if the developer is trying to explain to a client what their Web site will look like? Surely the vocabulary will have to be adjusted to create clear communication.

At a meeting of state department educational specialists recently, I counted over 35 acronyms being carelessly slung around the room before someone had the courage to ask what the heck they were talking about. Among states, the same educational program can have completely different names and acronyms. We educators love acronyms. After that brave individual asked for clarification, I noticed all the participants, as they went on, were careful to define their acronyms. Things moved along much more effectively after that.

Vocabulary Is Usually Taught in Isolation

A word of caution: No matter how handy, predictable, and parent-friendly those vocabulary lists in English texts and content-area books are, memorization of isolated words will not create a rich vocabulary. Students who work with language outside the context of meaning may develop an aversion to words and be hesitant to see this as a powerful way to make their writing stronger. For students fed a steady diet of prefabricated lists, learning words is nothing more than another assignment to be completed on time. These students are denied exploring the real role of words in writing—to create meaning, and to attract and satisfy the reader.

“I am surrounded by repetitive redundancies. In fact, I am completely surrounded. Even more than that, I am completely surrounded on all sides.”

—Richard Lederer
As you continue to read this chapter, look for things that you already do to help students discover new ideas to develop powerful word choice skills and build upon them. Also, look for ways to demonstrate to students that word choice is about more than finding the right word. It’s about placing the right word in just the right spot to create the emphasis you intend. (I’ll talk more about this topic as we explore sentence fluency in the next chapter.)

**Reason #3**

**Students Get “Word Drunk”**
When student writers first discover the power of words and phrases to create strong writing, they often go overboard and start using big words, made-up words, and—in most cases—words that just don’t work.

And so, as teachers, we traverse the word choice minefield daily with our students. We nudge them forward, ask them to try new things, take risks, and experiment. This means missteps along the way, but that’s fine as long as you view missteps as instructive, as opportunities to teach how to use words and phrases with energy and precision. Our classrooms should be places where students can try out new techniques and learn from failed attempts at creating meaning with words. If students don’t feel free to try new ways of saying things, we’ll be stuck forever reading papers reminiscent of “Redwoods,” the not-so-memorable piece on page 26. Only through trial and error will students find the middle ground between word choice that is wildly out of control and word choice that is trite, mundane, and inaccurate. We want students to give us papers like “Fox” on page 27, with words that are perfectly placed, remarkable, and alive.

“Young writers often become word drunk on their way to becoming good writers. They dance to the sound of their own voice. They try to substitute style for substance, tricks for content, ruffles and flourishes for information. It doesn’t work.”

—Donald Murray
Assessing Student Work for Word Choice

Let’s explore word choice in more depth. We’ll use the scoring guide to respond to samples of student work, some by very skilled writers, some by writers who are on their way, and some by writers who haven’t yet discovered their way of approaching the use of language. Remember, the more papers you read and assess, the better you will understand the trait. Word choice may seem like an easy trait to assess, but put some pressure on yourself to look past the words themselves and see how they are used—their level of specificity, correctness, and originality.

Third grader Chelcey’s illustration about the word choice trait. “I adore the trait of better word choice because you get to experiment with the new words that you have never used before.”
Step 1: Gather the student papers that you want to assess for word choice.

Step 2: Photocopy the word choice scoring guide which appears on page 147, since you’ll probably want to take notes on it and highlight helpful passages.

Step 3: Read the guide from the highest level of performance, 5, to the lowest, 1. Each performance level (5, 3, and 1) has a clear description of what writing “looks like” at that level. It also has specific descriptors (A to F) that you can use to pinpoint a paper’s score. Notice that the descriptors parallel one another from level to level. For example, descriptor A deals with how well the writer handles the topic, in this case “word choice.” So look at descriptor A for each of the performance levels and determine the one that most closely matches how successful the student is in narrowing and focusing on word choice. Keep in mind, the more familiar you become with each trait and each performance level within each trait, the more accurate you become as an assessor. Scoring papers will be easier and faster.

Step 4: Read one of the student papers carefully. Avoid skimming and scanning. Even experienced assessors who think they have seen it all get fooled now and again.

Step 5: Assess the paper for the trait of word choice, assigning a score of 1 to 5.

Step 6: After you’ve assessed the student’s paper using the scoring guide, consider using the Analytic Writing Assessment Continuum on page 265 in Appendix A to verify your conclusions. The continuum is designed to work hand in hand with all the scoring guides in this book to provide a more general sense of student progress.
Scoring Guide: Word Choice

5. Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. The words are powerful and engaging.
   A. Words are specific and accurate. It is easy to understand just what the writer means.
   B. Striking words and phrases often catch the reader’s eye and linger in the reader’s mind.
   C. Language and phrasing is natural, effective, and appropriate for the audience.
   D. Lively verbs add energy while specific nouns and modifiers add depth.
   E. Choices in language enhance the meaning and clarify understanding.
   F. Precision is obvious. The writer has taken care to put just the right word or phrase in just the right spot.

3. The language is functional, even if it lacks much energy. It is easy to figure out the writer’s meaning on a general level.
   A. Words are adequate and correct in a general sense, and they support the meaning by not getting in the way.
   B. Familiar words and phrases communicate but rarely capture the reader’s imagination.
   C. Attempts at colorful language show a willingness to stretch and grow, but sometimes reach beyond the audience (thesaurus overload!).
   D. Despite a few successes, the writing is marked by passive verbs, everyday nouns, and mundane modifiers.
   E. The words and phrases are functional with only one or two fine moments.
   F. The words may be refined in a couple of places, but the language looks more like the first thing that popped into the writer’s mind.

1. The writer demonstrates a limited vocabulary or has not searched for words to convey specific meaning.
   A. Words are so nonspecific and distracting that only a very limited meaning comes through.
   B. Problems with language leave the reader wondering. Many of the words just don’t work in this piece.
   C. Audience has not been considered. Language is used incorrectly, making the message secondary to the misfires with the words.
   D. Limited vocabulary and/or misused parts of speech seriously impair understanding.
   E. Words and phrases are so unimaginative and lifeless that they detract from the meaning.
   F. Jargon or clichés distract or mislead. Redundancy may distract the reader.
Scoring Sample Student Papers

Here are some papers for you to practice assessing for word choice. Remember to look for evidence of students stretching to find just the right word or phrase that creates a vivid picture in your mind. Score each of the following papers from 1 to 5 using the scoring guide followed by the continuum in Appendix A to help you pinpoint the score that is the most defensible.
My mother is a really nice person. Her hair is so nice. Her clothes are really nice. She is a fun person, too. When we go out, we have a really fun time.

My mother is real nice to me. She smiles at me and says nice things. We have fun together because she is so fun and nice.

She is really special to me.
Although we know that the author cares about his mother, we get that information in only the most general of terms. The writer leaves many questions unanswered. If we only knew specifically WHY Mother is nice and fun.

Using the same general scoring practice we have used with the other traits, begin by asking yourself if this piece is on the strong side or the weak side when it comes to word choice. Most people agree that it leans toward the weaker side, even though the general message comes through. So, let’s begin at the lower end of the scoring guide and see if there is a match.

The writer demonstrates a limited vocabulary or has not searched for words to convey specific meaning.

**A:** Words are so nonspecific and distracting that only a very limited meaning comes through.

_The key to agreeing with this statement as it applies to the paper “Mother is Nice” is the phrase, “very limited meaning.” A definite yes here._

**B:** Problems with language leave the reader wondering. Many of the words just don’t work in this piece.

_We are left wondering, but we can’t really say that the “words just don’t work.” The student work fits part of this scoring guide, but not completely._

**C:** Audience has not been considered. Language is used incorrectly, making the message secondary to the misfires with the words.

_This is a match to the paper. Who is the audience? And if the writer knows, there is no appreciation for the reader’s understanding of this piece through word choice. The words, though not used incorrectly, do not reveal an intent by the writer to help the reader understand._
**D:** Limited vocabulary and/or misused parts of speech seriously impair understanding.


**E:** Words and phrases are so unimaginative and lifeless that they detract from the meaning.

Unfortunately, this is a dead-on description of how the words are functioning in this paper. It’s not terminal; the student could easily use this piece as a work sample to show growth in word choice, but much work needs to be done to be able to score it higher on the continuum.

**F:** Jargon or clichés distract or mislead. Redundancy may distract the reader.

These words are redundant and, therefore, distracting. You find yourself reading to see how many more times Mother can be nice and fun. Unimaginative, lifeless—a good description of the effect of the words used in this piece.

It would be appropriate to assign a score of 1. Although we get it—the mother is nice—the piece lacks any punch and pizzazz. The descriptors at score level 3 are way above the language used in this piece. There are no striking moments or phrases that communicate clearly. However, the words are “adequate in a general sense.” This is about the only clear match at the 3 level, so a score of 1 is defensible.

One of the purposes of the scoring guides is to communicate clearly to the writer what is working well and what needs attention in a second or third draft. In this case, a score of 1 says to the writer that he needs to roll up his sleeves and work with language to convey more clearly why his mother is nice.
My Most Rewarding Moment

My most rewarding moment started out on August 7th. “Wake up!” deplored Mom at 6 a.m. “You should get ready to go!” So I woke up and got dressed.

“Time to get on the bus!” impeached Dad. We were off—that is, off to Oregon. My softball team was traveling to the National Tournament in Salem. We were riding on a massive bus that would drive two days straight. Michelle brought a movie and we all scanned it with pleasure.

“How fortunate we are!” I disputed.
“Hey, Lisa, do you have any idea what this place is going to be like?”
“Yeh, I wish I did. Then I wouldn’t be so jittery!”
“Hey, I’m hungry! When are we stopping to eat?”
“Hey, I’m hungry! When are we stopping to eat?”
“Hey, I’m hungry! When are we stopping to eat?”
“We’ll be stopping in five minutes,” lamented the driver of the bus.
“I’m getting very fatigued sitting in these consolidated seats!” replied Amy.
“Did anyone bring any propitious music tapes?”
“I did.” indicated Lisa. “Here’s one with a lot of desirable songs on it. Let’s play it.”

Later, there we were, stopping to eat at McDonald’s. We weren’t even out of Colorado yet:

“Look!” said Lisa, “You can see the mountain covered with brushy fir trees and below I can see a brine blue river.”
Two hours later, our bus impelled into a nice looking hotel.
“We’re here!” beseeched Amy.

The next morning, my coach replied to me that he wanted me to hold the flag for our state flag. That was my most rewarding moment.
If you aren’t smiling after you read this piece, then take a break. This is an example of what happens when a student moves from the dry and flat words in “Mother is Nice” to thesaurus overload. Don’t panic—the student is telling us loud and clear that she is aware that words make a difference. I’d so much rather have the thesaurus problem than the problem of students who don’t give a thought to using words in interesting and different ways. However, the words here still don’t work, do they? You find yourself reading for the next example of a word used incorrectly. That’s not a good thing. So, even though it is at least a full step above the first piece we assessed, this one would still fall in the low/middle range—a 2.

The language is functional, even if it lacks energy. It is easy to figure out the writer’s meaning on a general level.

A: Words are adequate and correct in a general sense, and they support the meaning by not getting in the way.

No. The words are often quite incorrect and do not support the meaning of the piece at all. No points for the entertainment quality are given here—too bad. A piece like this can really liven up a teacher’s day.

B: Familiar words and phrases communicate but rarely capture the reader’s imagination.

Nope. These words definitely capture our imagination, but not in a relevant way to the overall meaning of the piece.

C: Attempts at colorful language show a willingness to stretch and grow, but sometimes reach beyond the audience (thesaurus overload!).

Aha! This is it: thesaurus overload. Although we greatly appreciate the writer’s willingness to take a risk and stretch, there has to be some degree of accuracy represented, and in this case, it just isn’t there. There are a couple of accidental matches, “lamented the driver” and “consolidated...
seats,” but those are not representative of the piece as a whole.

D: Despite a few successes, the writing is marked by passive verbs, everyday nouns, and mundane modifiers.

The word choice in this piece goes back and forth between the ridiculous and the obvious. It is a mix of stretching and falling back on the easiest way to say something. There aren’t many successes here.

E: The words and phrases are functional with only one or two fine moments.

This is one of my favorite descriptors for word choice. I look for those one or two fine moments that allow me to assign a score of 3. If there are more, then I can look up to the 4 or 5 range. In this piece, most of the words work, though some don’t work at all and create distractions for the reader. There are a few nice moments, such as “lamented the driver of the bus,” which seems to capture exactly how a bus driver would feel on a field trip like this.

F: The words may be refined in a couple of places, but the language looks more like the first thing that popped into the writer’s mind.

In this example, there are some very quirky things going on, which means the correct score is more a 2 leaning toward a 3. If you are still unsure about the score on this piece, look back at the level 1 descriptors and you’ll find that some of them fit this piece as well. The combination of traits descriptors between 3 and 1 is what makes the most accurate score a 2. But I’d make sure the writer feels complimented and encouraged for trying something new and that her piece leans up in the 2 range, not down toward the 1.

Ask yourself, “What sticks out in my mind about this piece? Is it the bold idea, the creative organization, the honest voice, the beauty of well-used language?” No? For me, it is the misuse of the words, but also the writer’s sincere attempt to take a pass at word choice and change a few of the words to make them more interesting. The words are interesting, all right, but not precise. This is an excellent sample to show students why the thesaurus is a tool, not the answer to every word choice option.
A & W

My mouth was watering and my stomach was growling when I got to A&W’s. As soon as I went inside, I could smell the greasy but delicious tasting food. I lined up in the noisy and crowded line. I ordered a Coney Dog and a medium french fries. The Coney Dog at A&W are hot dogs smothered with a tomato meat sauce in a hot dog bun. The Coney Dog was a bit soggy because of the meat sauce. My first bit was worth the wait! I could taste the salty, spicy, and tangy hot dog as it slipped down my throat. It was yummy! The fries were long and string and smelled greasy. It was crispy but had an oily taste and was too salty. I also ate some of my mom’s fried chicken. The chicken skin was crispy and the meat was tender and juicy. There were lots of people crunching and munching their food and slurping their drinks. I wish I could eat at A&W every day.
Time to Assess

Paper #3, 4th Grade

After reading this piece, my mouth waters. “A&W” conjures sights and smells and even tastes of food I know is bad for me, but I crave anyway. Is this piece stronger or weaker in word choice? I say it’s stronger. Let’s take a look at the high end of the guide and see if it matches.

Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. The words are powerful and engaging.

A: Words are specific and accurate. It is easy to understand just what the writer means.

The words “...salty, spicy, and tangy...crispy, tender, juicy” all work to create a mental picture that stays with you.

B: Striking words and phrases often catch the reader’s eye and linger in the reader’s mind.

A resounding “YES.” Phrases such as “stomach was growling,” “delicious but greasy tasting food,” and “crunching and munching” are but a few examples you can point to in this piece.

C: Language and phrasing is natural, effective, and appropriate for the audience.

There is nothing pretentious here, just careful choice of everyday words that work well to create a powerful piece in the trait of word choice.

D: Lively verbs add energy while specific nouns and modifiers add depth.

This piece is filled with specificity and a generous sprinkling of verbs with verve.
E: Choices in language enhance the meaning and clarify understanding. 
I experience this piece right along with the writer because of the care taken to create just the right images. It works for word choice and, of course, creates power in the voice trait, too.

F: Precision is obvious. The writer has taken care to put just the right word or phrase in just the right spot.

Even one or two more descriptive words might have been too many in this piece, but as it stands, it conveys the meaning in a manner that shows great care with words.

Responses to Give Students
When a student writer is using word choice well, tell him or her:

- Very vivid use of language!
- Many great action verbs.
- Inventive and risky—thanks for making me pay attention to your words.
- I can picture this!
- I have a favorite phrase in your piece, do you?
- Great word!
- Evocative choice!
- Nice variety of key words and phrases!
- Really drew a picture in my mind.
- Your words sparkle!
- Your words paint a picture.
- You chose your words carefully—and they work!
- ______—what a perfect word for this image.
- The way you used verbs to add action really helped me as I read.
- You’ve taken some risks with words and it paid off.

Many people find word choice a concrete trait to teach and gain confidence by scoring for it first. However, there is no right way to begin. You need to find what works best for you. It is important to score a couple of dozen papers for practice as you learn each new trait. See if you can separate the way the writer uses language from the way he incorporates other traits. Try scoring the practice papers in
Appendix D for the trait of word choice and compare your scores to those listed there. If you are within one point of the recommended score, you are well on your way to assessing accurately and reliably. The next step is to take what you have learned about this trait through practice scoring and use it to create and implement meaningful, practical, and successful teaching activities to help students write with confidence.

Teaching the Word Choice Trait

Assessment helps you and your students look critically at writing for places that need work and places that don’t, so you can celebrate and repeat successful practice. It also provides the information you need to build appropriate and effective writing lesson plans. Why spend time teaching students things they already know and do well? Let’s use the precious time we have to help students fill gaps that will improve their writing overall.

As your time with students passes, stop to notice how much better each one is writing from the beginning of the year to where you are now. Noticing growth provides the positive reinforcement necessary to keep working at things that are hard for us, and the traits provide the language to communicate progress to students.

What’s the secret to helping students make progress? It’s mostly hard work—with a liberal dash of fun thrown in from time to time. The word choice trait has easy connections to classroom instruction. Teachers have many fine ways of making words come alive. As with all good teaching, we learn to borrow the good stuff, put our own personal spin on it, and use it with students. What follows are four categories of language that are directly related to word choice and ways to teach them.

1. Striking Language: Sharpening students’ descriptive powers
2. Exact Language: Using lively verbs, precise nouns, and accurate modifiers
3. Natural Language: Making it sound authentic
4. Beautiful Language: Choosing colorful words and phrases
Striking Language
Sharpening Students’ Descriptive Powers

Descriptive writing makes an event, place, person, or situation spring to life in the reader’s mind through innovative use of the right word at the right moment. At its most successful, such writing gives the reader the strong sense of being there, living it. Good descriptive writing reinvents reality in the reader’s mind with an intensity that rivals memory.

**Painting a Picture With Words**

**WHAT TO DO**

1. Ask students to write a short, bare-bones description of a person, place, or object. For this sample lesson, I’ll use “a room at home.” Give students an example: “My room is in the front right corner of the house. It’s a converted bedroom with a window and a closet. I use it for my office.”

2. Walk students through the following series of steps, which are designed to stretch their thinking. Model this activity for student by writing your own ongoing example at each stage.

   **Start with connections.** Focus on what you are describing. At the overhead or chalkboard, think aloud all your associations with the person, place, or object—the pictures in your mind. For about five minutes, tell students what you are thinking and write the associations out for all to see.

   My Example:
   
   *Quiet, peaceful, radio playing, cats come in and out, cold, window and sun at my back, far from the kitchen (that’s good), new telephone, lots of pictures of things I love, books everywhere, needs paint, cluttered table.*
Make a picture in your mind. Close your eyes and picture the person, place, or object. If you’re describing feelings, try to relive the time you remember. Really tune in. Try to be there. If you’re describing an object, try to reach out and touch it. Think of how it looked and felt. If it’s a place, remember how it smelled and what you heard there. If it’s a person, see his/her eyes, the way that person moves, walks, speaks, breathes. Notice things you missed before.

My Example:
The cold is keeping my fingers from typing smoothly. The quiet feels isolating—it’s better when the neighbors are outside, and I can hear their voices talking about the weeds in the garden. It’s small, and there’s a lot of stuff in the small space, but I can find everything. It’s my space—it feels like me, I feel alone and safe here. The clock doesn’t make any noise, but the second hand jerks its way through the minute. Time to change the calendar; another month has passed.

Focus on details. Pay attention to the little things. Don’t shut things out. Your memory is smarter than you think. There are interesting bits and pieces in there. Let them come to the surface.

My Example:
Grandpa’s old calendar has come apart in the middle again. It’s old, the brass finish has worn smooth from hands over the years. Better glue it. I can just slide the days across to align with the number under the day of the week and no matter what day it is, what month, what year, the same calendar works. I remember when Grandpa gave it to me. It was the one thing I wanted from his office when he got too old to keep one anymore. I remember, also, how it looked in his old, spotted hands as he gave it to me. Now it sits on my bookcase—I like that.

Look for the unusual. See it your way. Remember. Look closer...closer still. Choose the most interesting details. Don’t say, “The clouds were fluffy white.” A million other writers have already said that. Find a new way. Look closer and see the real colors: oyster shell gray and pink, elephant-tusk white, swan silver, stone gray. Look and listen for the little things other people miss.
My Example:

My computer desk is green glass with chrome legs, while the rest of the office is wood, mostly oak. I like the contrast of old and new. The warmth of the wood coupled with the function and clean line of the desk is a pleasing look and feel.

Paint a picture. Use words to make it all come alive for the reader. Be specific. Don’t say, “The big tree was tall and nice.” That’s too vague. No one can picture anything but a lot of leaves with a trunk. Say “The giant oak shot up more than eighty feet and cast a shadow so huge, our whole fifth-grade class could picnic inside it.”

My Example:

This room is so filled with my working valuables, that I could spend a whole day describing the significance of each to people on a house tour. Imagine telling others how I gathered all the Walter Hook pictures of cats—flat cats and fat cats, cats with oranges, cats with eggs—and got them framed so they fit in just the one open space on the wall by the light switch. Each picture was found separately; each has a story to tell of its own.

3. Revise your original descriptions, but this time weave in some of the images and details you brainstormed. Show students how to start this revision process by asking, “What do you see now in your mind as you picture this room?” Show students how to add new images or rework phrases to make the description visual. Focus on making your description as real as possible in this rewrite. If what you remember was good and happy, make it feel that way for the reader. But be realistic. Ants visit picnics. Brides sometimes trip going down the aisle. Things aren’t perfect. Remind students that if they want the reader to believe what they say, they should tell it the way it really is. In this activity you aren’t striving for a polished, finished piece of writing, but rather one that is more descriptive with interesting layers of details. Write this sample with the class and ask for their help as you go.

My Example:

This is my room. I go there to work, but I am surrounded by things old and new that I love, especially the pictures of Walter Hook’s cats—all different and yet so very much his style, his voice. And on the oak bookcase that fills the wall from floor to ceiling sits my
grandpa’s old calendar. It’s seen the best and the worst of my life. With a quick slide of the button on the back, it can be any day, any month, any year. There’s comfort knowing that in this space where I’ve gathered my working tools and my favorite things, time stands still until I’m ready to leave this place of mine and reenter the world.

4. Compare the your original and final versions. Which has the best word choice? Discuss.

5. Have students revise their own bare-bones descriptions. Remind them to consider the processes you went through together as they work on their own papers.

Other Activities for Sharpening Descriptive Powers

The More Detail, the Better. Have all students study the same object to see who can observe the most details—and the most unusual details. If possible, use a live (and lively!) subject for this activity—a chameleon or tarantula, for instance. Give students one minute to study the object you have selected, then put it away. Now allow one minute for students to write down everything they can remember about the object. Share ideas as a group and make one big list of details for the object. Repeat this activity several times until students begin seeing details easily and are able to record quite a few in the time allowed.

Is More Always Better? If your students have discovered descriptive language and are trying just a little too hard to make sure every sentence is chock full of it, you might show them the other side of the coin. We want students to try new ways of saying things—even if, at first, it isn’t very successful. But we don’t want them to think that more is necessarily better all the time. Try rewriting common signs such as road signs, warning signs, business signs, and so forth, using flowery and highly descriptive language. Compare the original to the rewrite and challenge students to be specific about why one is more effective than the other. For example: “Caution: Children Crossing” could be overwritten to: “You better slow down a little. There are some pretty nice kids who go to school here and they often walk or ride their bikes along here. Sometimes they aren’t listening and looking for traffic, and it
could be dangerous for them if you didn’t slow down.” That would be quite a road sign, wouldn’t it? Sometimes one or two words work more effectively than longer, more descriptive sentences.

**Describe it, Then Build it.** Create two identical collections of building materials—blocks, sticks, cardboard, paper, pipe cleaners, corks, buttons, paper clips, and so forth. Then have students work in teams of three. One student builds something from the collection while a second student waits in another room or behind a barrier with the same collection of building materials. The third student observes the first construction, then describes it in detail to the second builder, who tries to replicate the creation of the first builder. The second builder must work only from the description without looking at the first builder’s creation. After about fifteen minutes, tell the teams to stop and get together to observe their constructions. As a class, discuss the role of specific and accurate details, particularly when giving directions or instructions.

**Descriptive Limits.** Sometimes students need a gentle nudge to experiment with language. Old writing habits are hard to break, but this activity will help all students—even your more accomplished writers—push their comfort zones.

1. Write this topic where all students can see it: “A moment when you have been unbelievably scared.”

2. As a class, discuss all the possible ways you could approach the topic. This will help all students get their creative juices flowing.

3. Just when it feels like everyone knows what to write about, let them know that there will be some limits to the words they can use in their pieces. *Scare, frighten, fright, fear, fearful, afraid, alarm, spook, startle, terror, terrorize, terrify, petrify, panic, cold sweat, shock, surprise, dread, turn pale, flesh creep, hair stand on end, blood run cold,* and *teeth chatter* are all off limits. Write the list of outlawed words where all can see.

4. After students have had some time to write, allow plenty of time for class discussion. What did students learn from this experience? How does this sort of activity help or hinder them to be more creative in their word choices?

—I shut my eyes in order to see. —Paul Gauguin
Exact Language
Using Lively Verbs, Precise Nouns, and Accurate Modifiers

The Game of Connotations
Adapted from Writing! Magazine, January 2001

Think about all the different ways to express yourself. As you choose the word you feel is best, you are probably using connotations, positive or negative, that shape your audience’s attitude. For example, people use connotations in conversation that shade the meaning, depending on who or what is being discussed. While talking about ourselves, we tend to choose words or phrases with good connotations. While talking about someone directly, we might use more neutral words. While talking about a third person, words with bad connotations often show up.

Example:

I am selective.
You are choosy.
She is fussy.

I am energetic.
You are jumpy.
He is unable to sit still.

I am confident.
You are cocky.
He is conceited.

Share these examples with students and practice coming up with more as a class. Then have students try it in small groups. Make sure the connotations change but not the denotations. We want students to see what a difference a word makes!
MORE PRACTICE WITH CONNOTATIONS:

1. Choose a familiar place: the school gym, the lunchroom, your hall locker, the local mall or any store in it, a park or playground, your bedroom.

2. Write two paragraphs: one from the point of view of someone who loves this place, the other from the perspective of someone who hates it.

3. Use words with good connotations in one paragraph ("lived-in," for example, to describe your bedroom), and ones with bad connotations in the other ("messy").

4. Share examples as a class. Select the best and create a connotations bulletin board.

Perhaps you have already asked students to write pieces from different points of view as a way to develop voice. Now is a great time to revisit those pieces and look at the words and phrases that help a reader to distinguish the viewpoints. By linking work done for multiple traits, we save time setting up lessons, while making that all-important point that good writing incorporates all the traits, all the time.

Other Activities for Using Exact Language

Active and Passive Verbs. Nothing works harder in a sentence than the verb. Pound for pound, students get their money’s worth by paying attention to the power that verbs bring to the piece. Other word forms carry a great deal of impact, such as precise nouns and modifiers. But in my book, it’s the verbs that earn the most respect. And the use of active verbs over passive verbs makes the writing more vigorous. Consider the following:

While running, Frankie passed Johnny (active voice).

While running, Johnny was passed by Frankie (passive voice).
Tip: If the subject is the doer, the verb is in the active voice. If the subject is the receiver, the verb is in the passive voice.

**Practice changing passive verbs to active verbs:**

1. Write a letter of application, a memo, or another piece of standard business transaction. Tell students to add punch by using powerful, active verbs.

   *Active examples:*
   - The student completed the application.
   - The student wrote his résumé.
   - The prospective employee provided job references.

2. Write a more traditionally-phrased and worded piece containing more passive verbs.

   *Passive examples:*
   - The application was completed by the student.
   - The resume was written by the student.
   - Job references were provided by the prospective employee.

3. Compare the two documents. Which would get attention right away? Which is the most credible? Which tells the reader more about who you are and what you care about? How important was the use of active verbs in delivering a strong written message?

**Words, Words Everywhere.** One year I was assigned to a classroom that had no windows. It was truly awful. The students and I missed seeing the first snow, the brilliant blue sky, the bursts of rain that would soak you to the skin in just a minute or two—all the beauty of the outside world. During these couple of long, sensory-deprived years, I discovered a way to help students with words. Much has been written about the benefit of displaying words around the room so students can refer to them easily as they work. Here’s my version.
1. On 4” x 6” strips of bright neon paper that doesn’t fade over time (you can buy it at an office supply store), print in bold the words you are discovering during reading and writing activities. I had several hundred by the new year: precise nouns, descriptive adjectives, and energetic verbs.

2. Write each word on a slip of paper that is color coded according to part of speech: for example, red for verbs, green for nouns, and blue for adjectives. With the help of the students, pin the slips to the ceiling and add to them throughout the year. Everyone needs to tune out and daydream now and again, and since my students had no window to gaze out, I gave them words to stare at. I was surprised at how many of those words found their way into student writing. They were bright, colorful, and useful. It helped.

3. As you read and find new words to add, have students look them up and write them on the color-coded slips of paper. Not only will they get practice spotting new and interesting words, determining their parts of speech, and building a collection, they will use the words in their writing. I noticed students staring at the words as they wrote, scanning the ceiling looking for a word or pointing out a word to a fellow writer during a conference.

Here’s to Adverbs—or Not! Want to have some fun with parts of speech? Try this. Divide the class into two groups: pros and cons. Review the list of parts of speech students should know, and ask them to debate the pros and cons—to use it or not, how to use it well in writing, how to abuse it. If you have a large class (and most of you do) you might need to create smaller groups. Make sure there is a pro and a con to each part of speech—one group that’s for using it, another that’s against using it. Use these jewels of examples from Mem Fox and Stephen King to get students started.

**Pro:** In the same way that weak nouns require adjectives to pep them up, weak verbs scream out for adverbs to help them along.

—Mem Fox

**Con:** I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs...they’re like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day...fifty the day after that...

—Stephen King
Natural Language
Making It Sound Authentic

Focus Lesson
Your Personal Top Ten

What to Do

1. Ask pairs of students to create lists of at least 50 words they like. (PG-rated words only, please.) They may be words that sound delicious, are tricky to read, or are just old favorites.

2. Challenge each pair to pare down its list to the top ten personal favorites. Share the lists with the class.

3. Then, have students create their personal top ten lists of words they like—words that are interesting, textured, and tasty. Words a reader might enjoy reading. They should write their lists at the front of a notebook, on paper taped to their desk, or in another handy place so they can refer to the words easily and use them in writing.

4. Invite students to change their lists regularly. However, if they add a word, they must remove one. Holding the list to ten keeps it succinct and interesting. It also keeps students’ eyes and ears tuned in to the language. Since they must exchange words rather than add them, students will pay attention to the language around them, looking for potential candidates.

5. Keep your own ongoing list so students can see your favorites. Here’s my current list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pizzazz</th>
<th>y’all</th>
<th>staccato</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>frumpy</td>
<td>Enshallah</td>
<td>baseball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exigent</td>
<td>Yazoo River</td>
<td>bulbous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>egg</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Activities for Making It Sound Authentic

**The Bad Writing Contest.** Challenge students to find bad examples of writing in the classroom or from the outside world. Share copies and discuss why the writing in general and word choice in particular are so poor, and then invite students to rewrite it. Here’s a piece on elevators to get you started:

“The DOWN button, when depressed, will remain DOWN but will not stay UP unless the UP button has been pressed DOWN.

The UP button, on the other hand, will not remain DOWN, and may return UP when pressed DOWN.

Should the UP button stick DOWN, pressing the DOWN button may possibly cause the UP button to release from DOWN and return to UP.”

Here’s an example of a rewrite:

“The elevator button may not remain up or down when you push it.
Take the stairs if this worries you.”

**Remember When?** When you hear old songs on the radio, do they take you back? I can picture events in my mind so vividly when a particular song plays that it’s hard to imagine they happened so long ago. For example, every time I hear the song “Under the Boardwalk,” by The Drifters, I am carried right back to eighth grade, when I spent a carefree week at the beach with my best friend, lying out in the sand, smearing my skin with cocoa butter, and singing to the songs on radio station KRLA. But this song was special. Whenever it came on, my friend Janet and I got up and danced. We’d giggle and dance and hope that all the boys nearby would notice us. But even if they didn’t, we would just keep on dancing in that hot August sand on the beach at Corona del Mar. “Under the boardwalk, down by the sea . . . .” It was a magical time.

We want students to create these same kinds of images when they write—memorable, unique, and fascinating images. So invite students to bring in their favorite music and share some of it with classmates. Then ask them to talk about images that the music conjures up for them—the place, time of year, time of day, or other meaningful details. Discuss how personal details like these can enhance their writing.
What’s in a Word? Choose a word that everyone uses when things are going well or to describe a good situation, such as cool. Ask students to write a list of other everyday words and phrases that mean the same thing—things they might hear in conversation or find in stories. Also, have students go home and interview one or two people from an earlier generation for more synonyms for cool. Gather as many examples as possible as a class. Here are some starters to seed the list if necessary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>bad</th>
<th>outta sight</th>
<th>terrific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>super duper</td>
<td>rad</td>
<td>hip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awesome</td>
<td>groovy</td>
<td>happenin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fantabulous</td>
<td>excellent</td>
<td>hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tight</td>
<td>far out</td>
<td>phat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sort the words into three categories: 1) the way I say it, 2) the way my parents say it, and 3) the way my grandparents say it. Make a chart to hang in the room. As students hear new ways to express the idea, invite them to add those words to the list. By examining contemporary language use, students find that every generation develops its own way to express itself, even when the expressions themselves wind up being similar. Cool, dude.

Is THAT English? The Internet and e-mail are resources we could only dream of years back. Find a classroom in another English-speaking country (England, Scotland, Wales, New Zealand, or Australia, to name a few) made up of students who want to have some fun with words, right along with your students. Together, create lists of the different ways to say the same thing. In New Zealand, for example, “tucker” is “dinner” or “supper.” An “elevator” in America is a “lift” in England. The list goes on and on. Make a chart of all the words you can find in English that are used in different ways depending on the country or region.
Beautiful Language
Choosing Colorful Words and Phrases

Finding Key Words and Phrases in Captivating Texts

What to Do

Use any story with excellent words that is available in picture book and audiotape or CD form. The audio version should be read by the author. A favorite of mine is *Feathers and Fools* from “Mem Fox Reads.” It’s about a serious and thought-provoking subject: war.

1. Read the book to students so they can appreciate the story and language. Then talk about what the author might want them to understand through the story.

2. Make sure everyone has paper and pencils. Tell students they are going to hear the story again, but this time read by the author. Mem Fox has lived in many places, but her English/Australian accent comes through loud and clear.

3. Play the audio version and ask students to jot down any words, phrases, or images that stick in their minds. After the reading is over, have students talk about why they chose particular words and why they worked so well in creating mind pictures. Some favorites from past lessons include “magnificent peacocks,” “heart raced,” “haunted by the sun,” and “Should we be friends?”

4. Give students fresh paper and ask them to select their favorite observation and illustrate it.

5. Take all the illustrated observations, put them in order, and bind them as a book of fine word-choice examples from *Feathers and Fools* or whichever book you choose to share.
Other Activities for Choosing Colorful Words and Phrases

Expanding Small Phrases to Bigger Ones. You can’t support an elephant on a step ladder. Notice the differences in these sentence pairs:

“Kendra was ten minutes late for breakfast” or “Kendra huffed to the breakfast table ten minutes late, flung herself into her chair, and snagged the Cheerios.”

“The wind was strong” or “The wind fumed and shrieked about the house, yanking at the loose shingles.”

Give pairs of students the following sentences and see if they can enhance meaning by punching up the verbs and throwing in a few colorful adjective and precise nouns.

1. The dog was hungry.
2. The house was empty.
3. My sister got mad.
4. The rain came down.
5. My shoes were tight.

Rice Cakes or Salsa? As students discover some of the less interesting words in their work, teach them to ask, “Is this a ‘rice cake’ word or a ‘salsa’ word?” Every paper should have salsa words! Use this analogy frequently, and students will begin to use it every day. One teacher shared that at the end of the day, as she was dismissing class, she said, “Have a nice afternoon and evening.” To which a few students replied, “Nice is a rice cake word!”

Yummy Words. Make a list of all the words that show how we eat—nibble, gobble, munch, snarf, pick at, and so forth. Give students a healthy treat, such as an apple or big pretzel, and have them eat it in the manner you call from the list. Try this activity with other words, such as walk. Make a list of all the words related to it, for example amble, race, gallop, stride, and hop. Then ask students to act it out, to actually do the motion as the word is called. This is a fun and quick activity. Not only
does it gives students a chance to move around, it reminds them of all the words out there that they can use in their writing.

**Shaping Up.** Gather art supplies such as large white paper, crayons, watercolors, markers, colored pencils, and chalk. Brainstorm a list of favorite words with the students that they feel they can depict visually. Share ideas about the word meanings and then set students free to create their visual representations of each word. Here is a bulletin board filled with examples from one fifth-grade class.

A word bulletin board from a fifth-grade Saudi Aramco School’s classroom in Saudi Arabia
Teaching the Word Choice Trait
What Not to Do

So far I’ve talked about interesting ways to build students’ vocabulary and their ability to work effectively with words. But there are a few things you can do that will cut short any progress in this area. One is giving students canned vocabulary drills. Another is taking a set of words, maybe the spelling words for the week, and forcing students to write a paragraph using those words. Think about this. How can building a paragraph around a preset group of words promote original thinking and, therefore, a well-written paragraph? It just won’t happen. Instead, students will get the idea that words are not tools to help them get somewhere important and significant; they are instruments of lackluster assignments and a waste of time.

Please don’t think poorly of yourself if you teach or have taught vocabulary this way. It’s a time-honored tradition. We can do better, though. Let’s consider carefully how we are using our students’ time and, therefore, our own. We must make sure we know where we are trying to go with our students and whether the tasks we’re giving them are the best ways to get them there. Teaching students to hate words is not going to help anyone. We want to encourage a love of language, a curiosity about words, and a willingness to try new and better things, even if mistakes are made along the way.
Wrapping Up the Trait of Word Choice

As you reflect on, assess, and teach word choice, remember that careful writers seldom settle for the first word or phrase that comes to mind. They constantly search for the “just right” choice that will help a reader get the point. As Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

You can create an energy-charged writing classroom by swinging the word choice door wide open and inviting students in. This is a trait where students will excel if they are allowed to experiment, try out new words and phrases, and take risks as they improve their skill using the language. They will stumble, as I did and still do. My uncle Don’s criticisms were often harsh, but truthful. I’ve learned the value of using the English language accurately and precisely, and I keep working to make every word count. I’ve learned never, ever, under penalty of certain death, to say “very unique.” With this demand for excellence, my uncle taught me a curiosity about words that is a part of who I am as a reader, writer, and learner. He encouraged me to be a voracious reader and lover of fine language. When we have a passion for language, we are willing to accept the failures along with the successes. Demand excellence from your students; they will be better writers for it.