

Six Traits Writing Workshop

WNY School Support Center UB Buffalo Public Schools

Jim Collins

Word Choice

Word Choice

Word Choice is the skillful use of language to create meaning. Careful writers seldom settle for the first word that comes to mind. They constantly search for the “just right” word or phrase. Consider the word ‘big.’ Just think of the many different meanings you could create if you wrote ... *massive, enormous, considerable, numerous, momentous, prominent, conspicuous, or self-important.* Notice that these words do NOT all have the same meaning. Yet each of them could mean big.

Teaching the Trait of Word Choice

- **Memorable moments**
- **Words and phrases I wish I'd thought of myself**
- **Word pictures**
- **Every word or phrase crystal clear—or defined for me**
- **Strong verbs**

Teaching the Trait of Word Choice, 2

- **Simple language used well**
- **Words used precisely**
- **Minimal redundancy**
- **Written to inform or entertain—
not to impress**

Word Choice Rubric



- 4 That's it! Fresh, original, precise. Every word counts.**
- a. I searched. I stretched. I found just the right words and phrases to make it clear.
 - b. Look at my energetic verbs: *leaped, raged, tumbled, flailed, quaked, moped.*
 - c. I've considered my reader, and used words that will be appealing, informative and understandable. You might even learn a new word or two reading this.
 - d. No cliches, no redundancy—except for effect. I rejected jargon in favor of language that speaks to readers. Every word carries its weight.

Word Choice Rubric



3 Almost there

- a. Some words or phrases will linger in your memory... “The pond was alive with frogs.” “I went headfirst into murky, shadowy waters.” “Not everything about chocolate covered marshmallows is sweet.”
- b. The words I’ve chosen will help my reader picture what I’m talking about, and understand my message.
- c. Not a word is misused.
- d. A few original phrases—“Freeze drying is a sort of mummification of the 90’s”—breathe life into the text.

Word Choice Rubric



2 On my way–Ready for serious revision

- a. These words get the general message across. But I don't see many "quotable moments."
- b. My reader will figure out what I mean, but I'm not stretching here.
- c. I'm settling for basic meaning. It's clear. But it could use imagination, flair, pizzazz.
- d. These words are too general and vague to paint pictures: "Something neat happened." "It was great." "She was special." "We had fun."
- e. I overdid it. My sentences are over-inflated.
- f. Instead of settling for "The sun set," I could have said "The sun sagged in to the outstretched arms of the trees."

Word Choice Rubric



1 Just Beginning

- a. I can just picture my reader saying, “What did you mean by this?”
- b. Some of my words are mistaken—oops, I mean misused.
- c. I used the same words over and over; it’s just those same words, over and over. They’re words, but they’re the same. And I use them over and over until my paper is over.

Focus on Word Choice

Introduction to Poetry

I asked them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

**I want them to water-ski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.**

**But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.**

**They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.**

–Billy Collins

Litany

*You are the bread and the knife,
The crystal goblet and the wine*

–Jacques Crickillon

**You are the bread and the knife,
The crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass,
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.**

**However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is no way you are the pine-scented air.**

**It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.**

**And a quick look in the mirror will show
that you are neither the boots in the corner
nor the boat asleep in the boathouse.**

**It might interest you to know,
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,
that I am the sound of rain on the roof**

**I also happen to be the shooting star,
the evening paper blowing down an alley,
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.**

**I am also the moon in the trees
and the blind woman's teacup.
But don't worry, I am not the bread and the knife.
You are still the bread and the knife.
You will always be the bread and the knife,
not to mention the crystal goblet and—somehow—
the wine.**

—Billy Collins

Word Choice--write in imitation of these lines:

You are the bread and the knife,
The crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass,
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is no way you are the pine-scented air.

Word Choice

Word Choice is the skillful selection of words to create meaning.

Abilities:

- **Identify weak words and find stronger ones**
- **Use words in appropriate contexts**

Word Choice

Key Strategies:

- **Evaluate use of everyday words in the writing**
- **Look for limited and dull words**
- **Select specific and precise words**
- **Match your word choices to your intended level of formality**
- **Use powerful words to provide energy**

