Specific and Memorable Word Choice

So many words, so little time. If you're writing in English, you get a bonus that can't be found in most other languages: an extra 300,000 words or so. At just over 490,000 words (and still growing strong), the English language is the largest in the world. So, when it comes to deciding which word to use where, you've got plenty of choices.

Strong verbs that tell how an actions are performed. Verbs are words that describe the action in a sentence. Some verbs are said to be stronger than others, and these are the ones that tend to make your writing more effective. Here's how it works: take a verb like "run" and another verb with a similar meaning like "sprint." Now, compare these two sentences: **(1)** "I was running."; **(2)** "I was sprinting." They seem more or less the same, but they're not. In the first sentence, you learn that I was running but in the second sentence you also learn *how* I was running. The word "sprint" means "to run at top speed for a brief moment." So, when I say "sprinting," I get all the meaning of the verb "run," plus the additional meaning that explains *how* I was running. This is like getting an adverb for free; the action and a description of the action are packed into one tiny word. That's what makes it stronger: it's a single word that contains the meaning of an entire group of words! So, how does the author of *Chores* do when it comes to using strong verbs? Not so great. I do see one strong verb: "scrub." When she uses the words "scrubbing" or "scrubbed" instead of "cleaning" or "cleaned," she gets the benefit of a stronger verb. To "scrub" means "to clean something by rubbing hard." Other than that, I don't find any other strong verbs. But at least she got one.

Adjectives and adverbs that make things more specific. Say I'm in one of those huge underground parking lots. You know, the ones with all the floors that look exactly the same. Say I come back from several hours of shopping and I can't remember where I parked. After searching frantically for an hour or so, I'll probably give up and try to find a parking attendant to help me. The first question he's going to ask me is, "What kind of car do you have?" And I'll say "Oh, you know, it's just a car." And then he'll look at me like I'm an even bigger idiot than I already am. Why? Because I'm not being specific enough for him to help me. Writing is like that, too. You have to be specific in order to help your readers understand you. If you write, "The man drove away in his car," that's not nearly as helpful to your readers as, "The anxious, young man drove away nervously in the shiny new car his parents had just bought for him." What's the difference? Adjectives and adverbs. Adjectives and adverbs modify the nouns and verbs they work with to make them more specific. Adjectives modify nouns and answer the question "What kind?" What kind of man? An "anxious" "young" man. What kind of car? A "shiny" "new" car. Adverbs modify verbs and answer the question "How?" How did he drive away? He drove away "nervously." In *Chores,* the writing is not very specific in this regard. We know that toilets are sometimes "stinky," that cleaning a sink is "easy," and that all chores are "boring," but this doesn't do that much for us. The language is generic throughout; the writer uses few effective adjectives and adverbs. We know about bathtubs, sinks, and toilets but we don't know anything very specific about them.

Memorable, Accurate, Appropriate

Words and phrases you remember long after you've finished reading. One way you can tell that you've read a good piece of writing is when you remember some of the words long after you've finished it. After all, if writing is first and foremost the communication of ideas, it would be nice if people actually remembered what you wrote. No one can remember all the words in a piece, but sometimes a few words here and there are so interesting or unusual we can't forget them. As we've already discussed, much of the language in *Chores* is very generic, the writer uses simple everyday words and phrases. However, there is one part that I always remember even though it has been more than four years since I first read it: "Dusting is the worst: dust, set down, pick up, dust, set down." To me, this way of describing the tedious, repetitive nature of dusting seemed so interesting and original that I've never forgotten it.

Words and phrases used accurately and effectively. Good word choice doesn't mean using big, fancy, unusual words. It means using the right words to say the right thing in just the right way. Here's an example I came across recently in the beginning of an essay about a jogging accident: "Having already stretched and run a fourth of my distance, I arrived at my favorite spot and halted." At first glance, the word "halted" seems like a good choice. It's a word we don't use that often and it's very specific, a good strong verb. But it may not be exactly the right word in this situation. To my ear (though you may disagree), the word "halted" suggests that he was caused to stop by someone or some thing. (I hear the old war movie phrase in my head: "Halt! Who goes there?") But nothing caused him to stop. He just stopped all by himself. And that's the word I think he should have used: "stopped." Use simple words to describe simple things. Don't rush off to a thesaurus and sprinkle synonyms all over your piece the way an overzealous chef adds spices to his cooking. (And don't use a word like "overzealous" when a simpler one like "enthusiastic" will do.) Use words that mean exactly what you mean to say, and no others. In *Chores,* the writer uses very simple words. And for me, this works because the writer is expressing simple ideas.

Language that is appropriate to purpose and audience. Let me just say this right up front: there are many words you should probably never use in writing and you know what most of those words are. But there's more to appropriateness than avoiding bad language. Your first and highest priority when considering word choice is to choose words that your audience will understand. I can show off and use a whole bunch of big words. Or, I can say the same thing as simply as possible, using little words that I know just about everyone can understand. Using big words may make me feel smart and superior, but it won't help me be understood. And that's the most important thing. It doesn't matter how large your vocabulary is if knowing all those words means that you consistently choose ones your readers cannot read. Similarly, you can have a relatively small vocabulary and still be an effective writer. There are two things you have to know to be good at word choice: You have to know what words mean and you have to know what your readers think they mean. In *Chores,* the writer is writing to kids her own age; she's using very simple words because those are the kinds of words she and her friends know.

Smooth, Expressive Sentence Fluency

Go with the flow. When we write, we write in sentences. Beginning with a capital letter we wind our way over words and phrases until we've expressed a complete thought, and then we mark the endpoint with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark. Readers read the same way: they follow the shape of each sentence from beginning to end trying to understand the single, complete thought the writer is expressing. In order for readers to do that, your writing needs to flow smoothly from word to word, phrase to phrase, and sentence to sentence. The term "sentence fluency" refers to the way individual words and phrases sound together within a sentence and how groups of sentences sound when read one after the other.

Variety in sentence beginnings. We can't start every sentence the same way. We can't expect people to read our writing if we do. We can't keep using the same words over and over at the beginning. We can't do this because it drives readers crazy! It also makes the writing hard to understand. Why? Because readers start paying more attention to the pattern of repetition than they do to the words themselves. In *Chores,* the writer does a good job of varying the beginnings of her sentences. Almost every sentence begins differently than the one before it.

Variety in sentence length and structure. Just as using sentences with different beginnings helps make your writing easier to read and understand, using sentences of different lengths and different structures helps, too. Take a look at the fourth paragraph of *Chores:* "Bathtubs, ever washed one? They are big, they are deep, and it is hard to get up around the sides. The bathtub is the hardest, I think, to wash in the bathroom." The first sentence is short. It consists of two tiny parts separated by a comma. The second sentence is longer and is made of three parts that add to the meaning one right after another like a list. The last sentence has three parts, too, but it is constructed differently than the previous sentence because the second part interrupts the first and third parts instead of adding to them; to me, it sounds like a one-part sentence with a break in the middle. So, the writer varies the lengths of her sentences by starting with a short one and finishing with two longer ones. And she uses three different sentence constructions. That's good sentence fluency.

You can measure the length of a sentence simply by counting the words. Short sentences tend to have 3-6 words in them. The average sentence has approximately 8-14 words. Long sentences may be as long as 20 words or more. Most of the sentences in *Chores* are of average length, but occasionally we find a long or a short one and this is what makes it work.

You can analyze the structure of a sentence by looking at how many parts it contains and what kinds of parts those are. Most of the sentences in *Chores* have two parts but here and there you'll find a sentence with one part or three. As with sentence length, the writer doesn't vary her sentence structures very much but she does it just enough to be successful.

14 A Note About Sentence Structure

A difficult subject to talk about. Sentence structure is incredibly important. But it's also incredibly hard to understand and analyze. Most of us don't think about the structure of our sentences when we speak and write; we construct them unconsciously. But if we want to improve our sentence structure and learn from other writers, we have to become conscious of how sentences are put together. Unfortunately, the traditional pedagogy of sentential analysis is fraught with arcane terminology, abstruse constructs, and preternatural techniques. In other words, it's about as easy to understand as that last sentence.

So, to make it possible for everyone to study sentence structure, I came up with an easy way of describing sentences. This is not an "official" approach. As far as I know, I invented it. But I have found that it is simple enough that it works for just about anyone. (It's especially good for people like me who never understood traditional grammar in school and still don't!)

These are the rules of *Mr. Peha's Stunningly Simple Sentence Structure System:* **(1)** Sentences are made of parts. **(2)** Those parts have names. **(3)** We can describe the structure of a sentence by the number and types of parts it contains.

Take a look at this sentence: "On a bitter cold winter morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of simple means but good intentions, left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised, and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life."

You can see that it is made up of several different parts. There are four kinds of sentence parts to watch for: **(1)** *Main Parts.* These parts usually contain the main action of the sentence: "Malcolm Maxwell,… left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised,…." **(2)** *Lead-In Parts.* These parts often lead into other parts, especially main parts: "On a bitter cold winter morning,…" **(3)** *In-Between Parts.* As the name implies, these parts go in between other parts. They feel like a slight interruption: "…a young man of simple means but good intentions,…" **(4)** *Add-On Parts.* These are extra parts that convey additional information about any of the other parts: "…and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life."

We could describe the structure of this sentence like this:

- Part 1: "On a bitter cold winter morning," *Lead-In Part.*
- Part 2: "Malcolm Maxwell," *Main Part.*
- Part 3: "a young man of simple means but good intentions," *In-Between Part.*
- Part 4: "left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised," *Main Part,* continued.
- Part 5: "and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life." *Add-On Part.*

And that's all there is to it! (Well, actually there *is* more to it. But we'll cover that another time.)

Expression, Effects, Understanding

Easy to read expressively; sounds great when read aloud. To understand and enjoy your writing, people need to read it expressively. Expressive reading involves reading a text with the appropriate changes in pitch, rhythm, volume, and tone that we hear in normal speech. Good readers do this because it improves their comprehension. Reading expressively is also fun because it adds to the feelings we have about the text. When writing flows smoothly from word to word, phrase to phrase, and sentence to sentence, we can easily match our expression to the writer's meaning. This is very satisfying because it makes us feel like we're understanding things well.

When I read *Chores,* I find it fairly easy to read expressively. The sentences are relatively smooth and simple, and as I read I feel that I have no problem matching my expression to the writer's feelings which come through loud and clear.

Rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and other "sound" effects. In certain situations, sequences of speech sounds sometimes surprise us. Depending on how you count them, the English language has 43 or 44 sounds, and you can't help noticing sometimes how writers put them together. In the first sentence of this paragraph, I'm using two techniques: **(1)** *Alliteration.* This is when several words in a sentence begin with the same sound. **(2)** *Consonance.* This involves using the same consonant sound in several words, usually at the ends. Used sparingly, these kinds of "sound" effects make writing fun to read. But don't overdo it — like I did in the first sentence — sentences with many similar sounding words are hard to understand.

Chores doesn't really take advantage of any specific sound effects. However, the writer doesn't make any mistakes in this category either. These types of effects are used quite sparingly in most prose writing. They come up more frequently in poetry and song.

Sentences are structured so they're easy to understand. One of the interesting properties of sentences in most languages is that their parts can often be rearranged without their meaning being changed. In most languages, one of the interesting properties of sentences is that they can often be rearranged without changing their meaning. Without changing their meaning, sentences, in most languages, can often be rearranged — an interesting property. I've just said the same thing three times, three different ways; the only difference was the sentence structure. You can tell that the first and second sentences have a fairly simple structure. The third sentence is especially complicated and, therefore, much harder to understand. It's fine to have long, complex sentences. But they must be structured in ways that make them easy for the reader to deal with.

As I've noted before, the sentences in *Chores* are fairly simple and that makes them easy to understand. If this piece were significantly longer, the simple constructions the writer uses might become tiresome. But in a very short essay, they are not a problem.

A Note About Expressive Reading

Something I always knew was important but never quite understood. When I was in school, most of us read like little robots, droning on one word after another. I don't know which was more embarrassing: reading out loud myself or having to listen to everyone else. I knew that expressive reading was what my teachers did when they read to us. But I didn't know how to do it myself because I didn't know the four things good readers do to read expressively: **(1) They** *change pitch.* Expressive readers make their voices go up and down. They go up at the beginning of a sentence and down at the end (up slightly if it ends with a question mark). They also go up and down to differentiate the words of a speaker (often high in pitch) from those of the narrator (usually lower). **(2)** *They change rhythm.* Expressive readers speed up and slow down when they read. They also take appropriate pauses—big ones at the end of a sentence, smaller ones in between, after commas, and also between the logical parts of phrases. **(3)** *They change volume.* Expressive readers say some words louder than others. In general, little words are said softer than more important words. **(4)** *They change tone.* Sometimes readers use a soft, warm voice; sometimes their voice is cold and hard. They do this to communicate different feelings— soft and warm usually means nice, calm, or even sad; hard and cold can mean scary, angry, or excited.

Why is expression so important? With all the effort it takes to read expressively, it's reasonable to wonder why readers bother to do it at all. The reason is that expression is closely related to meaning, and getting meaning from a text is the whole point of reading.

Let's take a look at how pitch level corresponds to meaning and the four types of sentence parts. *Main Parts* are usually read at a middle pitch level. This pitch level cues readers to the fact that this is the main action in a sentence. *Lead-In Parts* are often read at a higher pitch level. *In-Between Parts* are usually read at a level lower than the parts they are in between. And *Add-On Parts* should be spoken at a level lower than the part they follow. Finally, as we near the end of a sentence, our voice drops down to its lowest point as we reach the period. Here's an example to show you exactly how this works:

On a bitter cold winter morning,
    Lead-In Part
     Higher

     Malcolm Maxwell,   left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised,
      Main Part   **Main Part**
       Middle   **Middle**

   a young man of simple means but good intentions,   and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life.
      In-Between Part   **Add-On Part**
       Lower   **Lower**

The different pitch levels help us distinguish between the different sentence parts, and the end of the sentence, which in turn helps us to understand it.