

# **CONTROLLING DICTION**

Diction is the choice and use of words. Controlling diction means selecting words that convey your meaning as precisely and concisely as possible.

## **Choosing the Appropriate Word**

The words you use in any piece of writing depend on who your audience is and on what kind of impression you want to create. For most nonfiction writing in and after college, the appropriate vocabulary is the standard English commonly used and understood by educated writers and readers.

### **1) Avoiding slang**

Slang, the special conversational vocabulary of a particular group of people, should be avoided in formal writing. All readers may not understand it, and it is often imprecise. The slang adjective straight, for instance, may mean “honest,” “not homosexual,” “inclined to wear a vest and tie,” or “not on drugs,” among other things.

### **2) Avoiding regional words and expressions**

Colloquial language is the informal vocabulary of conversation: He stayed loose; He gave her a hard time. Like slang, colloquialisms are often imprecise and are generally not appropriate in college, business, or professional writing. In dictionaries, colloquialisms are often labeled colloquial or informal.

### **3) Avoiding regional words and expressions**

In writing, for a general audience, avoid expressions that carry their intended meaning only in certain regions or that vary in meaning from one part of the country to another. Examples of the first type are redd up (to tidy or prepare) and wheel (a bicycle); an example of the second type is poke (sack in some areas, sum of money in others). Dictionaries use labels such as regional or dialect for such expressions.

### **4) Avoiding nonstandard language**

Variant words and expressions that are not usually acceptable in conversation – ain’t got no, hadn’t ought to, theirselves – should be avoided in writing as well. Dictionaries use nonstandard or substandard to label such usages.

### **5) Avoiding obsolete or archaic words and neologisms**

Words the dictionary labels obsolete or archaic should be avoided because they are no longer part of the current American vocabulary (like “mome” and “dispensator”). Neologisms are recently invented words that are not yet (and may never be) part of the common vocabulary; they too are inappropriate in most writing (like “prioritize”).

**6) Use technical words with care**

In every academic or technical field, practitioners use certain terms, either newly invented or adapted from the general vocabulary, to convey special and highly specific meanings. Botanists speak of an etiolated leaf, sociologists of the ethos of a culture, psychologists of reinforcing a behavior. In writing for a general audience, avoid such terms if possible because not all readers will understand them. Explain any specialized terms that you must use.

**7) Avoiding euphemisms and pretentious writing**

A euphemism is an inoffensive substitute for a word deemed potentially offensive or blunt. An example is the dread disease as a substitute for cancer. Since euphemisms may be vague or misleading, use them only when direct, truthful words would needlessly offend members of your audience. Never use more or longer words than you need to convey what you mean. For example, “She obtruded her presence into my realm of awareness” can be restated simply as “I noticed her.”