

Word Choice

Key Words:

Synonym: a word which has, more or less, the same meaning as another word

Antonym: a word which has, more or less, the opposite meaning of another word

Major: A stronger, or superlative word for another word

Minor: A diminutive, or lesser word for another word

Word choice is a fundamental characteristic of critical reading and writing. Use of words can indicate whether or not a particular piece of writing is biased or accurate, exaggerated or understated.

Consider the difference between the following:

“The weather in Jasper during our camping trip was **appalling**.”

“The weather in Jasper during our camping trip was **challenging**.”

“The weather in Jasper during our camping trip was **unpredictable**.”

Notice that none of the selected words actually explain what the weather was like (it may have been too hot, too wet, too humid, etc). But each of the words indicate some attitude to the weather during the camping trip: “Appalling” expresses strong displeasure; “challenging” expresses a response, but does not indicate an emotional attitude one way or another (“challenging” things can also be fun!); and “unpredictable” simply expresses the epistemological characteristic of the weather.

Often, writers will de-emphasize something by using a minor synonym for a word; for example, “irritated” instead of “angry”; or a major (superlative) synonym for a word; for example, “delighted” instead of “pleased”.

Poor journalism in particular is often marked by the use of major or minor versions of a word in order to convince the reader that a situation is either less serious or more serious than it actually is.

Good critical readers will always try in the first instance to evaluate the words being used by a writer to determine whether or not the writing is accurate, exaggerated, or downplayed.