

7 DENOTATION—CONNOTATION

You may already know that denotation is the dictionary definition of a word while connotation is its emotional meaning, but you may not realize the crucial role these concepts play in writing. Mark Twain wrote, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” Be sure to weigh the appropriateness and accuracy of each word so that your language fits your purpose and audience. Some qualities to consider when choosing the right words are **language level**, **emotional content**, and the use of **jargon and clichés**.

LANGUAGE LEVEL

The English language offers synonyms that are *formal*, *informal*, and *colloquial*. Some examples of formal and informal terms include *concur* and *agree*, *commence* and *begin*, *verbose* and *wordy*, respectively. Some colloquial terms are *guy*, *hassle*, and *awesome*. Using overly formal diction inappropriately is just as incorrect as using colloquial language where formal or informal language is called for. Note the difference in tone among these three passages. They demonstrate that different language is appropriate for different audiences.

- Formal:** I am confident that my experience in data analysis will benefit your company in assessing marketing potential. I appreciate having had the opportunity to meet the members of your executive board and look forward to hearing from you when you arrive at a decision regarding my application. (to an executive)
- Informal:** I believe that my work in data analysis will help me get the job with the Dharma Initiative, Mr. Linus. I appreciate your letter of recommendation. (to an acquaintance or business associate)
- Colloquial:** I know I’m right for the job at the Dharma Initiative, Jack. If they have a clue, they’ll hire me. (to a friend)



EMOTIONAL CONTENT

A general concept may be evoked by an array of different words, each of which carries a different emotional meaning. Consider the words *store*, *shop*, and *boutique*. A shop is smaller than a store and sells more specialized merchandise. A boutique is a small shop that specializes in fashionable items. Or consider the words *plus-sized*, *fat*, and *curvy*. *Plus-sized* is fairly neutral, a term retailers use to indicate clothing size. *Curvy* is complimentary and sensual. *Fat* is usually pejorative and negative. If we like a shirt, we say it's *colorful*; if we don't, we call it *loud*.

Ex: Can you pick up a pack of socks when you go to the store?

Ex: George purchased a beautiful set of bowls at a tourist shop in St. Augustine.

Ex: I bought a gorgeous leather blazer from a little boutique in Brooklyn.

JARGON AND CLICHÉS

Jargon is a specialized language that appears in nonspecialized context. Many people use jargon to impress the reader or to hide unpleasant truths, but the effect is that it confuses and clouds the meaning of the writing.

For example, the sentence, “**Heterogeneity seems to have taken hold in the tablet market, as the dominant lead iOS once had now appears to have eroded despite taking market share back from Android and Windows,**” (taken from an actual press release), could probably be more clearly stated, “**There are many types of tablets on the market now. Though the Apple operating system has regained some business from Android and Windows, it is no longer the only prominent option.**”



Translation: "You have a bruised rib."