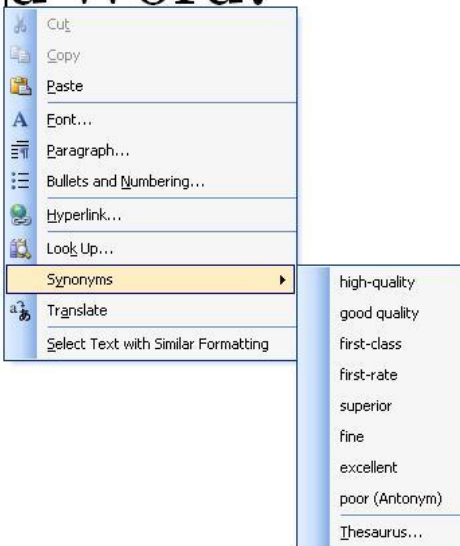


# What's a Good Word?

*thinking about word choice*



Many writers, in the search for a good word, right-click their way into Microsoft Word's "Synonyms" tool and choose a word more or less at random, without considering the important shades of meaning that come with each word. In order to truly improve a sentence or a paper, and become a better writer, it is important to not only choose a *different* word, but a truly **good** word. But what's a good word? A good word is: more **accurate**, more **specific**, more **meaningful**, and more **appropriate**.

We'll consider these four things later, but first a quick lesson on the difference between the **denotation** of a word and its **connotation**. English teachers love to remind students of this difference, so here's a refresher:

- **Denotation** is the strict dictionary meaning of a word
- **Connotation** is the emotional and imaginative association surrounding a word<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate the importance of this, consider the difference between "childish" and "childlike." If someone called you "childish," you would likely take this as an insult, since it comes with a negative connotation of being stubborn and temperamental. "Childlike" has a positive connotation, of being innocent and pure. However, the dictionary definition of these words is identical: "like or befitting a child." Same denotation, different connotation.

Keep this in mind as you work on the following paragraph. How can you improve it by choosing a better word to replace the underlined words?

In the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine verbosely and intensely considers one the remaining questions that has encouraged the hearts and minds of people since time began: what is a sin, and where does evil come from? After tussling with these questions for years, Saint Augustine stumbled upon a very good definition of what sin is. The concepts of sin and evil are all over the *Confessions*. Sin was not created by God, conversely, sin is nothingness.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Dowling's Literature Terms. < <http://www.dowlingcentral.com/MrsD/area/literature/Terms/Connotation.html>>. 14 Nov 2008.

Choosing good words can be difficult, but by keeping these four things in mind, you can learn to make the better choice.

### 1. The good word is more **ACCURATE**

First consider the definition (denotation) of a word. The good word will *describe with accuracy*. In the paragraph above, three words are used inaccurately:

- verbose means “using more words than is necessary.” Augustine uses a lot of words in the *Confessions*, but he is not unnecessarily wordy
- it is incorrect to say that the questions of sin and evil have encouraged hearts and minds—these are not particularly encouraging things to think about, right?
- conversely is a little more tricky: it means “with the terms of the relation reversed.” When dealing with complex ideas like Augustine’s definition of sin, it is particularly important to choose words accurately. A better word, which would more accurately capture Augustine’s idea, would be “therefore”

### 2. The good word is more **SPECIFIC**

A good word is precise, never vague or weak. In some cases, a word is close to being the right word, but a better one exists. For example:

- saying Augustine’s question about the origin of sin and evil is a remaining one is a bit fuzzy. The definition of remaining shows that is correct: “to endure or persist,” but the word is not strong enough. Both “persistent” or “enduring” would be better
- commonplace adjectives like very (also “really”) should be avoided, for they have a vague, empty meaning. Combined with good, the description of Augustine’s definition of sin as very good is lacking in specificity

### 3. The good word is more **MEANINGFUL**

Similar to being more specific, the good word is also one that is full of meaning that not been drained by years of use and misuse. Avoid words that are trite, and avoid clichés. In the paragraph above:

- intense is a trite word, that has been overused to the point that it lacks meaning. How about “deeply” or “carefully”? When you find yourself using a tired word, try to choose one with more life in it
- stumbled upon is a cliché, and as such it does not truly convey what happened to Augustine. After spending years carefully considering the problem of sin and evil, he “developed” or “formed” a concept. When clichés creep into your writing, it can lead to a lack of accuracy and specificity

### 4. The good word is more **APPROPRIATE**

When writing academic papers, it is important to avoid slang or words that sound too informal. Also, consider carefully the connotation of words, and whether they are appropriate for an academic paper.

- academic writers often say that a thinker or writer is “wrestling” with a concept or idea, but never that they were tussling with one. Even though “wrestling” and “tussling” are similar, one is appropriate and the other is not
- saying that the concepts of sin and evil are all over the *Confessions* is inappropriate—the word is too informal and sounds like slang. Try rewriting the sentence around the word “throughout”