

Lesson 4.1

The Right Shade of Meaning

Synonyms are words with similar meaning—but they are not identical. If they were identical, we wouldn't need them. We have them because each expresses its own shade of meaning. Take a word like *big*. It has numerous synonyms: *huge, gargantuan, enormous, bulky, towering, spacious, expansive, vast, and whopping*—to name just a few. These are not interchangeable. You can have a spacious living room, for example, but not a bulky one. Your appetite might be huge, but you wouldn't call it towering. Get the idea? Grab your thesaurus and dictionary, and let's explore more shades of meaning.

Sharing an Example: *Great Expectations*

In addition to *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens wrote this bildungsroman (a coming-of-age story) about an orphan named Pip's journey from boyhood to adulthood. In the following excerpt, Pip has been invited to the gloomy home of Miss Havisham to play cards with her adopted daughter Estella. Left at the altar in her youth, old Miss Havisham still wears the wedding dress from years before. As you read this passage, pay particular attention to the word *splendid*—a word on which Dickens puts particular emphasis.

In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see.

She was dressed in rich materials—satins, and lace, and silks—all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil hanging from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about.

I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white had been white long ago, and had lost its luster, and was faded and yellow.

Great Expectations
by Charles Dickens

Reflect

From the author's use of the word *splendid* and the context in which it is used, what do you think the word means?

Splendid probably means _____.

Check It Out

First go to your **dictionary** and look up the word *splendid*. Compare your definition with the dictionary's. Add anything to your definition to make it clear and memorable.

Now look up the same word in your **thesaurus**. Write down three or four **synonyms** (words with similar meaning). Put a star by the synonym that you feel best fits the author's intended meaning. Then write one **antonym** (word with opposite meaning).

Synonyms for *splendid* (used as an adjective):

1. _____ 2. _____

3. _____ 4. _____

One antonym for *splendid* is _____.

The Just-Right Shade of Meaning

Artists mix colors like forest green, moss green, or lime green, for example, to paint what they want viewers to see. As you already know, synonyms have slightly different shades of meaning, too. Read the following three sentences aloud:

- He was angry about the broken window.
- He was fuming about the broken window.
- He was annoyed about the broken window.

The underlined words are synonyms, but does each reveal the same level of feeling about the broken window? Imagine these words as colors and place them on the chart on the following page. Put the strongest, most-intense word on the top and the mildest, least-intense word on the bottom. See if you can add one synonym for each of the words and write it in the second blank.

Word	Synonym	Antonym
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Opposites

Use your thesaurus to find antonyms for *angry*, *fuming*, and *annoyed*. Make sure each choice has the right level of intensity. Add these antonyms to the third column of the shade chart.

Share and Compare

Meet with your writing circles to discuss your shade charts. Did you place the synonyms at the same intensity level? Did you come up with the same synonyms and antonyms? If the words you chose were significantly different—so different that you disagree about them—use a dictionary to help you make a final choice.

The Right Shade

Following is another example passage. Notice that some words appear in blue—and are underlined. Some of those underlined words are the original words the author used. Others are not. Working with a partner or in a writing circle, follow these five steps:

1. Read the piece aloud as written. (Ignore the blanks for now.)
2. Figure out the part of speech for each underlined word.
3. Check out several synonyms—and if it helps, an antonym, too.
4. Choose the word you think has the right shade of meaning, and write it in the blank. (It may or may not match the underlined word.)
5. Read the result aloud to make sure you like the sound of it.

Every 4th of July, my family and I go _____ to the fairgrounds to watch the pretty _____ fireworks show. We bring a big _____ blanket to lay on. The loud _____ music starts the show as the pretty _____ fireworks flash _____ in the night sky. The show always ends with a large _____ finale that's really great _____.

When you finish, your teacher will share the author's original. Compare your choices to his. Do you agree with the author's word choices?

Playing with Opposites

Let's experiment with antonyms. Again, work with a partner or in a writing circle. Only this time, use your thesaurus to replace the author's words (in parentheses) with antonyms. Write those antonyms on the blank lines. Choose words that are totally opposite in meaning and intensity from the originals. **Hint:** Remember to keep the part of speech—noun, verb, adjective, adverb—the same as the word in blue so that each sentence makes sense. **Note:** If the noun *storm* in the last line no longer makes sense for your draft, feel free to change it.

The night sky was _____ (**tempestuous**).
 _____ (**Fierce**) winds _____ (**howled**)
 _____ (**violently**) around the windows and roof,
 _____ (**threatening**) us as we _____
 (**huddled**) inside, _____ (**terrified**). At last, like a
 _____ (**disgruntled**) _____ (**tyrant**), the
 storm _____ (**thundered**) away over the hills.

When you finish, read your new draft aloud. What happened to the mood and voice of the piece when you replaced each word with an antonym? What happened to the images you created in a reader's mind?



Using What You Know

During the introduction to this unit, you identified a piece of your own writing to work on. Pull out that piece of writing now. Using your dictionary and thesaurus, replace two or three of the words you underlined with synonyms or phrases that have just the right shade of meaning. Read the result aloud. Do you like what you hear?



A Writer's Questions

In this lesson you have been using a dictionary and thesaurus to expand the word bank in your brain. What other strategies can a writer use to stretch his or her vocabulary? Is it a good idea to combine strategies?



Putting It to the Test

In the very last part of this lesson, you revised a piece of writing by changing just two or three words. How long did it take you to do that? How could this strategy help you in an on-demand writing situation?