

## Choosing Precise Words

To choose or not to choose the precise word: often that decision means the difference between funny and not funny.

Example 1: A man walks into a bar and says, “Ouch.”

Notice how the word *bar* here relies on two separate meanings. On first impression, the word *bar* refers to a place where one can purchase an alcoholic beverage. However, “ouch” shifts the meaning of *bar* to something similar to a pole. The play on the word *bar* makes this statement amusing.

With more precise word choice, this pun fails.

Example 2: A man walks into a pub and says, “Ouch.”

In this case, the pun no longer works because the word *pub* refers only to a place. This pun only functions as a joke if we choose the word *bar*, which has a double meaning. Now that a more precise word is used, the pun does not have the appropriately funny ending.

Imprecision is the source of many great jokes. However, not all writing aims for such humorous effects. Most often, choosing the precise words determines not only what your sentences say but also how your writing reads. Words have the ability to change the tone and feeling of writing as well as the bias of the audience. Fortunately, resources such as dictionaries and thesauri exist to help you find the words you need.

### Observing the Effects of Imprecision

In formal writing, imprecise words can alter the meaning of your points. For instance, using “can” instead of “will” completely changes the strength of your point and detracts from the possibility of success: “I can earn \$1 million if I work hard” is different from “I will earn \$1 million if I work hard” because in the first sentence, earning \$1 million is merely possible, but in the second sentence, it is definite. However, by planning ahead and thinking through your ideas and points, you can select strong words that describe your ideas and accurately indicate to your audience things on which they should focus.

### Selecting Precise Words

Selecting a precise word greatly improves the clarity of a sentence. Unfortunately, just like all writing, finding the “right” word is not a one-step process. Revising and editing your writing is a constant search for the exact word to convey your idea: you must consistently attend to the words

you are using. Indeed, each step in the writing process gives you another opportunity to clarify what you mean and hone your words.

Readers use words to identify who is doing the action and what action is happening. Nouns name characters. Verbs name actions. Together they control the core meaning of any sentence. When editing your work it pays to focus your attention on the nouns and verbs that control these focal elements of your sentences.

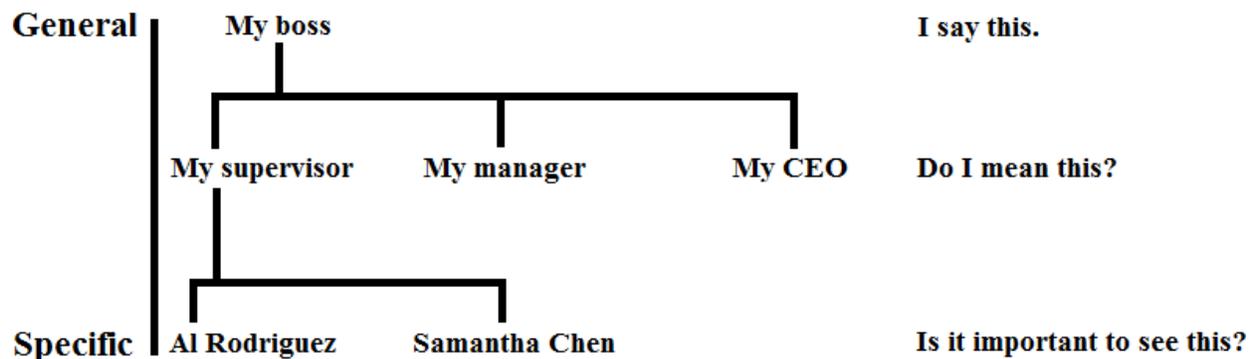
### Characters

You are writing your status report for your Business Management project. The people reading your work may know the general outlines of the project, but they will have less information than you do as they try to track who is doing what on the project. You will need to use precise, flesh-and-blood characters as subjects to describe the work completed. For instance, instead of referring to “my boss,” you might say “my manager” or “my supervisor.” *Manager* and *supervisor* are more specific than *boss*. Even more specific would be the name of your boss.

On the other hand, the difference between *manager* and *supervisor* could be irrelevant to your audience in this report. Part of selecting a precise word revolves around the detail your audience needs to know. Is the title of your superior relevant to the point you are trying to make? Does it change the understanding of your idea if you use a more general term? Would it help to use the name. Will the audience know your boss by name?

It would be simple if we could tell you to always use the most specific word. However, depending on the situation, selecting “my boss” could work just fine. For instance, if the main point of the sentence did not focus on your boss’s management or supervision, but on the relationship between the two of you in the general hierarchy, using “my boss” instead of a more specific title to indicate her role might work well. But if managing rather than supervising plays a crucial role in a paragraph or sentence, a more specific title would work better because it will locate for your audience the specific—precise—relationship on the organization chart in the business.

Shown below is an easy way to map out your *rhetorical* choices for words as they map onto a “ladder of abstraction” from general to specific. You choose the best word for the actual audience and context of the writing you are doing.



Notice how the bottom of the diagram asks, “Is it important to see this?” If this is the only time we hear about your boss, or if we are unfamiliar with her name, it will likely suffice to say “my boss.” In contrast, if your audience knows people by name on this project, it might make sense to use her name so that readers can name the specific actor they will recognize in the role. Similarly, using a more specific title could have the benefit, in context, of showing the importance of the encounter: your CEO recognizing your work is probably more significant to the status of the project than your supervisor doing the same.

**Actions**

The actions you choose dictate the tone and feeling of your writing because they control the images we create in our minds. Consider the differences in these sentences.

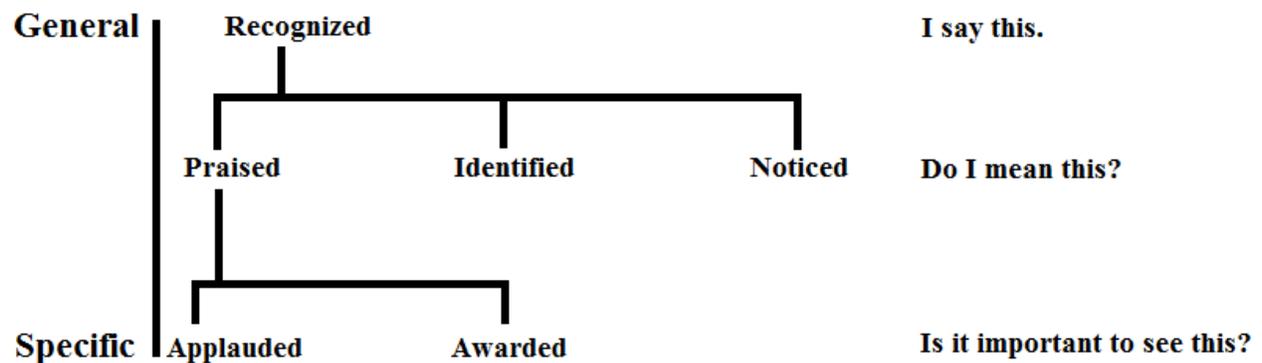
I *got* an award last night.  
 I *won* an award last night.  
 I *found* an award last night.

Notice how changing the action word completely changes the meaning of the sentence and conjures a completely different image. “Got” is not a specific action, so it is not easy to picture exactly what happened: reading *got*, I could easily picture either “won” or “found,” for instance—two incredibly different images.

Let’s return to the sentence “My boss recognized my work during the meeting.” Notice that each of the more specific verbs creates a different picture in your mind. That is one of the effects of choosing precise words—nouns or verbs. The more specific the words, the more concrete the image. What image do you see in each of these options?

My boss <i>praised</i> my work.	My boss <i>awarded</i> my work.
My boss <i>identified</i> my work.	My boss <i>applauded</i> my work.
My boss <i>noticed</i> my work.	

Given these options, the question becomes: what do you want me to see when I read the word *recognized*? There are several possibilities. “Recognized” is not a clear verb; however, as you will notice in the diagram, attempting to make the verb too specific could result in an entirely different meaning than you originally intended.



In this case, “praised” would most likely be the best choice. Going beyond “praised” could be too much information for your audience or even make your sentence incorrect: “awarded” is an entirely different concept from “praised,” but “awarded” appears in a thesaurus as a synonym for “praised.”

### Using a Dictionary and Thesaurus

A thesaurus and dictionary are meant to work together. Although a thesaurus can offer many excellent options for better or more precise words, the thesaurus only names synonyms and related words; it does not provide lists of words with the exact same meaning. You have to choose precisely to maintain your original meaning, so you must check each synonym in the dictionary. It may be tempting to skip checking, but you can never be sure of your choice until you check.

For instance, thesaurus.com lists *trip* as a synonym for *flight*, which is defined as “the act, manner, or power of flying.” The word *trip*, though, means “a journey or voyage.” Clearly, these two words are not interchangeable in many situations. Fortunately, online thesauri and dictionaries make the process of checking definitions easy.

### Activity

Rewrite the following sentences with more precise words by replacing vague words with specific words to create two different but specific and unambiguous scenes. Map your choices onto a “ladder of abstraction” Use a thesaurus and a dictionary to help you build a rich set of choices. Discuss the results with your tutor.

Sample:

The man touched me.

- a. The comedian made the blood rush to my cheeks and moved me to teary laughter.
- b. My dad pinched my cheek.

1. My boss had me to go to the store to get stuff for our work.

a.

b.

2. Yesterday, I got some interesting candies from a guy.

a.

b.

3. Something about that day was enough to make me scream.

a.

b.

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