



PROPER USAGE OF A THESAURUS

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” –Mark Twain

Many people run into moments when they have the word they want on the tip of their tongue, but they can't seem to recall it. A thesaurus can be a useful tool in this situation. It can also be used to add variety to your diction, but when doing this, you must be careful to maintain your flow and meaning. Here are some tips to accomplish this:

1. Know the minor differences between synonyms

Every word has a connotation and a denotation, and it is important to take both into account before adding a new word to your paper. A denotation is the literal definition of the word. A connotation is an idea or feeling that a word evokes aside from its literal definition.

Example: The thesaurus.com search for “good” yields the following results: Acceptable, excellent and satisfying. All of these have very different connotations. For instance, “the meal was excellent” and “the meal was satisfying” are both very different statements, due to the words’ connotation. “Excellent” connotes the idea that the meal was far better than expected, while “satisfying” connotes more of a feeling of fullness after the meal.

It is a good idea to have a dictionary on hand when using a thesaurus. Then you can be sure you have the word you're looking for!

2. Avoid using a thesaurus to simply find an interchangeable word. Use it to build your vocabulary!

According to thesaurus.com, very few words are actually interchangeable. You should ideally reach for a thesaurus when you have a word in mind but can't seem to recall it or when you're thinking of a word with an accurate denotation but are seeking a synonym that connotes something different. That being said, a thesaurus is still a great tool for varying up your diction. As long as you take the nuances of each word into account, you will likely be able to find a better word than the one you chose.

3. Pay attention to the part of speech of each word.

Many words have a few different meanings, and a thesaurus search yields results for all of them. It is important to look at the part of speech (adjective, verb, noun etc.) of the word you choose before adding it to your paper. The part of speech will often give you a clue as to whether or not the synonym matches your use of the word.

Example: Thesaurus.com provides the example of the word “abandoned,” which means both “deserted” and, less often, “bad.” This distinction is very important when choosing an appropriate substitution, because “deserted” can be used as both a verb and an adjective, whereas “bad” can only be used as an adjective.

Using a wide variety of words to get your point across will make your paper much more readable and interesting. It will also help you communicate with your audience more clearly. A thesaurus, when properly used, can be a great resource for accomplishing this!

Additional Resources:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/help/faq/language/t03.html>

“Word FAQs.” *Dictionary.com*. n.p., 2014. Web. 19 October, 2014.

<http://www.thesaurus.com/features/howtousesthesaurus.html>

“How to use a thesaurus.” *Thesaurus.com*. n.p., 2014. Web. 19 October, 2014.

<https://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/research/thesaurus.html>

“How to use a thesaurus.” *Butte.edu*. Butte College, n.d. Web. 19 October, 2014.

Works Cited

"Synonyms and Antonyms of Words." *www.thesaurus.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 18 Oct. 2014.