

Write Your Life Story

Enhance the Factual and Emotional Truth by Understanding the Denotation and Connotation of Words

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Read through the paired sentences below. Notice your emotional reactions as you read each sentence:

I'm **determined**; you're **stubborn**.

I'm **curious**; you're **nosy**.

My clothes are **inexpensive**; yours are **cheap**.

Did you experience positive emotions related to determined, curious, and expensive, but more negative emotions related to stubborn, nosy, and cheap?

Many people do, because while the highlighted words in each pair of sentences are synonyms with similar denotations or dictionary definitions, they have different connotations. Connotations are the personal, social, and cultural associations a word acquires over time.

For example, inexpensive and cheap are synonyms. Both of their standard dictionary definitions indicate that they refer to something costing very little, something sold at a low price. However, over time these words have acquired other meanings and associations through common usage.

Associations to the word “cheap” include: someone who is stingy, a low price for something of poor quality; or something deemed to be worthless. Merriam-Webster’s online thesaurus lists the following synonyms for “cheap” that have negative associations: dirt cheap, chintzy, and cut-rate. By contrast, “inexpensive” communicates that something was acquired at a low price but doesn’t usually convey poor quality. It’s more likely to suggest that someone is an astute shopper able to recognize quality merchandise and purchase it at bargain prices.

Your aunt probably wouldn’t object to being written about as someone who was frugal and budget conscious, but always dressed in classic clothing styles of good quality because she was a master bargain hunter. She would, however, probably be hurt and angry if you wrote that she wore cheap clothes because she was always looking for a bargain. If the latter is actually true then you might have to think about whether incorporating that bit of information is essential to the story you want to share and if you’re willing to accept the consequences of including it.

When selecting words, in addition to considering whether a word is specific, concrete, and sensory; also consider its connotations. These connotations can be positive, neutral, or negative. They create shades of

meaning so that words with similar definitions often differ enormously in terms of the attitude or tone they convey about something or someone.

Using a Thesaurus to Understand the Connotations of a Word

A thesaurus is helpful in understanding the possible connotations of a word. In the chart below, I list a word followed by synonyms of the word from Merriam-Webster's online thesaurus. Notice how each of these words have synonyms with both positive and negative connotations:

| <i>Word List</i> | <i>Positive</i> | <i>Negative</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Decisive | Determined | Stubborn |
| Interested | Curious | Nosy |
| Frugal | Thrifty | Cheap |
| Individual | Unique | Strange |

It's important, though, not to use any of the synonyms or related words from a thesaurus without first consulting a dictionary for the standard definition, even if you think you know what the word means. Use of the thesaurus often results in a piece of writing with inaccurate or inappropriate words because the writer didn't take the time to check a dictionary.

When using a thesaurus, it's also important not to select synonyms that readers don't immediately recognize, such as words associated with an intellectual or scholarly tone. These words may not only be less familiar to some of your readers (think grandchildren), but also jarring. Readers expecting a story with informal, conversational language are disoriented when they encounter formal sentences and passages reminiscent of a textbook. Choose words that are familiar to you and most likely to your reader. You are telling your stories in your own voice. That is the voice and tone your reader wants to hear; that is the voice that fosters connection with your reader.

Next Steps

Now read over your latest story or theme and select a word that you find yourself questioning, a word that is almost right, but doesn't accurately or precisely convey your feelings or ideas. First look up the standard dictionary definition, the denotative meaning of the word, in the online American Heritage Dictionary (www.ahdictionary.com). Next check the synonyms for the word in the online thesaurus (www.merriam-webster.com) attending to both the positive and negative connotations of the word. Decide if one of the synonyms in the thesaurus is a better choice after you've consulted the dictionary. As you check a word or two each time you write a piece, you will

become adept at finding just the right word to convey the denotation and connotations of words so that readers will quickly and easily grasp your feelings and ideas.

Writing a life story can be a daunting task even with guidance and support. When you're feeling a bit tired and overwhelmed consider the quotations below:

It always seems impossible until it's done. ~Nelson Mandela

To get through the hardest journey we need to take only one step at a time, but we must keep on stepping. ~Chinese proverb