How to Choose Words with Power and Pizzazz

4 Wordy Rules
for Captivating Your Audience

Henneke Duistermaat

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Imagine readers hippety-hopping through your content.

You notice a twinkle in their eye.

Sound good, doesn't it?

Now, picture the sun hiding behind an ink black cloud.

Your readers start to trudge. *Squelch. Sploosh. Squelch. Sploosh.*

Not the kind of experience you want to create, eh?

Still, it happens all the time.

Lazy editing makes readers trudge. They get tired of reading, and they start skimming your content, or worse: they click away from your blog post or put down your book.

To captivate your audience, choose words with more power and pizzazz.

How?

Start by following these 4 rules for word choice:

1. Pick the words your readers use
2. Appeal to the senses
3. Beef up your verbs
4. Sprinkle -ly adverbs sparingly

Let me explain …

Rule 1: Pick the words your readers use

Want to make a good impression with your words?

Perhaps even show off a little?

Think again.

Fancy and complicated words can muddle the meaning of our content.

Readers are left stumbling over your text, having to re-read your sentences to try and understand your message.

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Not ideal, eh?

If you want to engage your reader, your first task is to make your writing easy to read. And the best way to do that? Cut gobbledygook and scrap posh words. Instead, use the same words your readers use so your writing feels like a conversation rather than a lecture or marketing pitch.

Here's an example of gobbledygook-filled writing:

> Pioneering software from the market leader. Schedule your social media updates with our award-winning all-in-one app.

What's wrong with the snippet above?

The text is full of blah and low on meaning:

- The only real information in this fragment is that this app helps you schedule social media updates. That's useful to know.

- The text does not explain why scheduling social media updates matters; that's why it lacks meaning.

- The text is filled with buzzwords like *pioneering, market leader,* and *award-winning all-in-one app.*

How can you improve it?

Think about a reader and how you would have a conversation with them. How would you explain the advantages of the app?

The following version is more meaningful:

> Save time with our new app. Schedule all your social media updates in one go.

Why is this better?

- The text is benefits-driven: *saving time* is a powerful benefit.

- The feature is clear and specific: *schedule all your social media updates in one go.*

- The text is written in plain English without gobbledygook.

Here's another example of a gobbledygook-filled sentence:

> Make your life awesome with our world-class widgets

Why is this sentence gobbledygook?

Because it doesn't tell us anything. We can't visualize it. The only thing this sentence tells us is that it's about widgets. So, let's imagine what this widget might do for us:

Get more email subscribers with our drag-and-drop signup forms for WordPress

Why is this better?

- The text is more meaningful because it's benefits-driven: *get more email subscribers*.
- The feature is much clearer: *drag-and-drop signup forms for WordPress*.
- The text is written in plain English without gobbledygook.

Scrapping gobbledygook not only makes your text easier to read, it also strengthens your message.

How to make your writing more meaningful

How do you avoid gobbledygook?

Think of your reader and write as if you're having a conversation with them. Use their language.

If you have a draft text ready, imagine picking up the phone to a reader and reading your text to them. Would you really talk like that?

For instance, this is rather meaningless and therefore gobbledygook:

We offer a high-quality service.

Why is it meaningless?

Because you can't visualize high-quality service. What does it mean in practice?

To rewrite that sentence, think about what that high-quality service means to your clients. Here are two more meaningful options:

No waiting when you call. Our customer service team picks up the phone within 3 rings.

Get a free personal onboarding session so you never need to figure things out on your own.

See how these message communicate a clear picture of what kind of service you can expect?

Examples of gobbledygook

Gobbledygook and buzzwords are words that at first glance sound good.

However, on closer inspection, they're almost meaningless. It's difficult to say what these words mean in practice, and you can't visualize their meaning.

One way to check whether a phrase is gobbledygook is to turn it around, and try the opposite.

Let's say you've written that you offer fast delivery. Would anyone write slow delivery instead? Nope. That's because fast delivery is a basic requirement of doing business. So, shouting about fast delivery makes no sense unless you are more specific, such as:

> Delivery in 2 hours; guaranteed delivery in 2 days.

No one writes about average customer service or rubbish product quality so phrases like excellent customer service or top-quality products are meaningless.

If you want to explain how good your product or service is, be specific.

Below follow more examples of gobbledygook to avoid. This list is not exhaustive:

- **Best-in-class:** Unless you have research to prove why you're the best, you better scrap this phrase.

- **World-class:** Are you really among the best in the world? Like Usain Bolt? Or like Dutch speed-skater Irene Schouten who won 3 gold medals at the Beijing Winter Olympics?

- **State-of-the-art** and **cutting-edge**: Do you mean you're not behind the times?

- **Industry-standard** and **first-rate**: Does anyone ever claim to deliver goods or services that are below industry standards or second-rate? Well?

- **Breakthrough**: Have you discovered the God particle? Or are you exaggerating your contribution to mankind?

- **Next-generation**: Were you thinking about going back in time to launch the previous generation?

- **Revolutionary** and **pioneering**: Were you the first the climb Mount Everest? Or cross the Atlantic Ocean?

- **Best or most whatever**: For example: *This is guide provides the best advice on word choice.* Superlatives can quickly dent your credibility unless you can demonstrate why you're the best, the fastest, or the friendliest. What are the facts?

- **Amazing, stunning, fantastic** and **ultimate**: These words are almost like superlatives and the same rules apply.

- **Fast delivery**: Customers would rather hear when they can expect your product delivery. In 2 weeks? In 2 days? In 2 hours?

- **Superior quality** or **top quality**: If your product has a high quality, explain exactly why. Is it the material? The manufacturing process? What exactly?

- **Excellent customer service**: If your service is excellent, tell readers why. Do you solve all complaints within three hours? Do you have a no-quibble guarantee? Are your opening hours longer than those of your competitor?
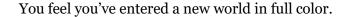
Rule 2: Appeal to the senses

Imagine walking through the woods on a foggy day.

The whole world seems grey.

And all you hear is the soft sound of water drops falling. *Drip-drop. Drip-drop.*

You've brought a Braeburn apple, your favorite. You take a bite and wonder … Does an apple taste blander when it's foggy?

Now, imagine entering an open area in the woods. The fog has lifted. The sun warms your face. The autumn leaves glisten in the light.

You feel you've entered a new world in full color.

Your apple seems to taste better. Juicier. Crispier. More refreshing.

Most writing is like that foggy walk.

And when writing is bland, it fails to connect.

Vivid writing, in contrast, is meaningful and powerful. Vivid writing stands out like a red poppy in a sea of grey content. You'll remember it.

But how do you make your writing more vivid?

Try painting pictures using sensory words.

Sensory words are powerful because they make readers see, hear, smell, taste, or feel something.

When you're reading non-sensory words, your brain just processes text. However, when reading sensory phrases—like *bland, sweet, dazzling,* or *silky smooth*, research[1] suggests that different areas of your brain light up.

Your brain processes sensory words as if you **taste** a bland or sweet cake, as if you **see** a dazzling display of colors, as if you **feel** a rough texture.

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[1] This research was published in the journal *Brain and Language*:
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0093934X12000028

Sensory words are descriptive—they describe how we experience the world: how we smell, see, hear, feel, or taste something:

- Words related to sight indicate colors, shape, or appearance. For instance: *gloomy, dazzling, bright, foggy, gigantic.*

- Words related to touch describe textures. You can use them to describe feelings and abstract concepts, too: *gritty, creepy, slimy, fluff, sticky.*

- Words related to hearing describe sounds. For instance: *crashing, thumping, piercing, tingling, squeaky.*

- Taste and smell are closely related. For instance: *zesty, tantalizing, sweet, stinky, stale.* Most taste and smell words are useful substitutes for bland words like *good, nice,* or *bad.*

You can find opportunities to use sensory words almost everywhere—in headlines and email subject lines, on your About page, in product descriptions, business emails, or e-newsletters.

For instance:

A headline without sensory words:

> 5 Tips for Turning Boring Information into a Practical Tutorial

With sensory words:

> 5 Tips for Turning Drab Information into a Tantalizing Tutorial

A product description without sensory words:

> These long-lasting cabinets are made from the best material, guaranteed for 10 years.

With sensory words:

> These cabinets remain squeak-and-creak free. That's guaranteed for 10 years.

A bio without sensory words:

> Irreverent writer on a mission to eradicate gobbledygook and to make boring business blogs interesting.

With sensory words:

> Irreverent writer on a mission to stamp out gobbledygook and to add sparkle to business blogs.

You notice the difference?

Sensory details inject a dose of personality into your writing. They make your writing stand out, and help readers picture the scenes you're describing.

How to make your writing more sensory

Pick a sentence and see whether you can replace one of its words with a more sensory alternative.

For instance:

> Her presentation was good.

Now, try sensory words instead of good:

> Her presentation was dazzling.
> Her presentation was smooth.
> Her presentation was silky smooth.

Or add an adverb before good:

> Her presentation was lip-smackingly good.
> Her presentation was shockingly good.

Or use a sensory verb instead:

> Her presentation sizzled.
> Her presentation dazzled her audience.

There's never just one option. Try to play with different words and sentence structures. Choose the option that expresses your meaning most accurately and that suits your voice best.

Here's another example of a non-sensory sentence:

> She impressed him with her proposal.

A few sensory options:

> She blew him away with her proposal.
> His jaw dropped to the floor when he heard her proposal.
> Her proposal gave him goosebumps.
> Her proposal tickled his interest.

Each option has a slightly different connotation. When you're blown away by something, you hadn't thought it was possible to create something so good. When you get goosebumps, you feel so touched you get a little emotional. And when your interest is tickled, you want to find out more.

A thesaurus can help find sensory words but always check that the word you choose communicates the meaning of your message and that it has the right connotation. For instance, fine hair sounds more positive than thin hair. A colossal mistake sounds even worse than a big mistake.

You'll find more examples of sensory words in the list below. This list is just a starting point. You can find boatloads more if you pay attention to the words your favorite authors use or if you use a thesaurus to look for (near) synonyms.

Examples of sensory words

1: Visual words

What are you seeing? What's the size? What's the light like? What are the colors?

Examples:
Gigantic, teeny-tiny, bulky, glitter, sparkling, shimmering, shiny, glowing, crooked, hazy, shadowy, gloomy, drab, murky, dull, knotty, vibrant, to sparkle, to shine, to brighten, to muddle, to dazzle, to spark, to glow, to shimmer, to glimmer, to beam

2. Tactile words

How does something feel when you touch it? What's the texture? The temperature? How does the humidity or pressure of the air feel?

Examples:
Fluffy, gritty, rough, smooth, slimy, sticky, creepy, crisp, hairy, chilled, to stifle, woolly, crisp, to smooth, to rub, to pierce, to stick to, to stroke, to brush, to squeeze, to cuddle, to nestle, to huddle, to snuggle, to embrace, to hug, to kiss

3. Auditory words

How does someone's voice sound? What kind of sounds are made? Is it loud or soft?

Examples:
Buzz, hubbub, humming, faint, deafening, squeaky, earsplitting, serene, to sizzle, to hiss, to shriek, snappy, boom!, roaring, thundering, crunchy, to crack, to tap, to snap, to sputter, to knock, to boom, to clap, to bang, to drum, to squeal, to bump, to chatter, to twitter, to chirp, to clank, to click, to click-clack, to tip-tap, to jingle, to jangle, to rattle, to tinkle, to hush, to murmur, to plop, to pop, to fizz, to sizzle, to swoosh, to gargle, to sizzle, to hiss, to burp, to hiccup, to whack, to thumb, to crunch, to creak, to squeak, to flutter, to giggle, to tee-hee, to cackle, to honk, to hum, to meow, to woof, to munch, to shush, to screech, to roar, to thunder, to cry, to howl, to sob, to blubber, to scream, to groan, to whisper, to yelp, to bark, to growl, to grumble, to mutter

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4. Words related to taste and smell

What's the aroma like? Is it natural or artificial? Strong or subtle? Pleasant or repulsive? And does something taste sweet, sour, savory, salty, or bitter? What does the taste or smell remind you of?

Examples:
Bland, rotten, fragrant, stale, juicy, stinky, gooey, bitter, yummy, pungent, zesty, sweet, spice, spicy, to stink, to sniff, to snuff, to savor, to flavor, to taste, to nibble, to lick, to sip, to spice up, to salt, to pepper, to season, to reek

Bonus tip:

Sensory words can be adjectives, adverbs, verbs, or nouns. For instance:

- She tickled him—*tickle* is a verb related to touch.

- He was bitterly disappointed—*bitterly* is an adverb related to taste; it modifies the verb *disappointed* (which isn't sensory).

- He heard a loud bang—*loud* is an adjective, *bang* is a noun, and both are sound words.

Rule 3: Beef up your verbs

Do you ever read text and wonder …

Why does this writing feel energetic?

Why is it so fast-paced?

And do you wonder why your draft text seems a tad limp in comparison?

It happens to all of us.

First drafts are full of weak verbs, and weak verbs make your writing limp and listless.

In contrast, muscular verbs add action and energy.

Muscular verbs describe a motion—the 6th sense.
Readers can experience the swerving of a car or the smoothly flowing movements of a dancer just like they can hear the loud bang or feel the moistness described in your text.

For instance:

> When he slams his fist, the air reverberates, the cups jiggle, and the tea sloshes onto table.

The sentence above includes 4 muscular verbs describing movement: *slam, reverberate, jiggle,* and *slosh*.

Muscular verbs work just like sensory words. They allow readers to experience your story, to picture and feel the movement you're describing.

Muscular verbs don't need to convey powerful action. Subtle action can evoke powerful feelings, too. For instance:

> He cradles his baby girl, stroking her dark hair, and tickling her chin.

Muscular verbs are precise and concrete. In contrast, weak verbs are abstract and generic—they don't help you visualize a scene or experience a movement.

Examples of weak verbs include *to be, to provide, to add, to start,* and *to utilize*. You can't picture these words because they're abstract.

For instance, if someone *provides* feedback, is he shouting his comments? Or lecturing you with a smug face? Or perhaps scribbling a few suggestions in the margin of your handout?

You can't picture *providing feedback*, but you can visualize *shouting, lecturing,* and *scribbling*. That's why these words are stronger.

No clear distinction exists between weak and muscular verbs. It's a sliding scale, and it's up to you as a writer to decide how muscular you'd like your verbs to be.

For instance, *to walk* is more muscular than *to go* because it gives you an indication of how someone moved. But stronger options would be: *to saunter, hike, shuffle, trudge, stride,* or *plod*. Each of these verbs gives you an indication of how someone walked:

- to saunter: picture a girl walking rather leisurely, perhaps peeking into the shop windows

- to hike: picture a woman in walking boots with a backpack, walking at a good pace

- to shuffle: picture an elderly woman moving gingerly, hardly lifting her feet

- to trudge: picture a girl in wellies making a big effort, walking through the snow or mud

- to stride: picture a lady walking as if on the catwalk, with long strides

- to plod: picture a tired woman with sagging shoulders, looking at her feet while walking

When you use more precise, more muscular verbs, you paint more powerful pictures with your words.

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How to choose more muscular verbs

Read your sentences and pay attention to the verbs:

- Does a verb describe a movement? If so, can you describe the movement more strongly or more precisely?

- Is a verb sensory? If so, does it give the right sensory impression?

- Is a verb weak, cliched, or abstract? If so, can you replace it with a muscular or sensory verb?

Muscular verbs can also be used for abstract concepts.

For instance, imagine you've come up with oodles of ideas during a brainstorm session. What muscular phrase can you use instead of *generating ideas*?

Think about the movement of ideas, for instance:

- A few ideas popped into your mind.

- My mind exploded with new ideas.

- A stream of ideas burst forward.

- Ideas first trickled, then gushed forth.

- The brainstorm session spawned a stream of ideas.

Muscular verbs are more precise than weak verbs; they can paint vivid pictures of movement—even of abstract activities like thinking and generating ideas.

Examples of muscular verbs

Any word describing a movement is a muscular verb. Below are some examples:

To slosh, to squish, to whirr, to gnaw, to wipe out, to ripple, to tickle, to thrill, to explode, to burst, to guzzle, to gobble up, to breeze through, to drool, to spit, to reverberate, to resonate, to rumble, to flavor, to tremble, to vibrate, to pulsate, to throb, to quiver, to buzz, to slurp, to slobber, to blemish, to applaud, to clash, to bounce, to blend, to shake, to tantalize, to titillate, to pinch, to bathe, to hose, to douse, to shower, to drench, to spray, to sprinkle, to trickle, to splash, to seep, to slide, to slump, to tumble, to nose-dive, to fly, to float, to clog, to swoop, to propel, to dig in, to dip, to surge, to wolf down, to shovel, to gulp down, to roll, to soar, to curl up, to unfold, to weave, to swipe, to tear, to polish, to pale, to vanish, to spin, to weave, to intertwine, to buckle down, to button up, to stumble, to wobble, to swing, to lurch, to glide, to zip, to sail, to crash, to dive, to tiptoe, to pussyfoot, to duck, to flip-flop, to dilly-dally, to linger, to stall, to sway, to sink, to spurt, to hurry, to dash, to nip, to race, to whiz, to flit, to chew, to stroll, to sashay, to amble, to plod, to ramble, to loiter, to meander, to roam, to snake, to gallivant, to twist, to dance, to jig, to jive, to waltz, to tango, to swirl, to hop, to trip, to skip, to whirl, to gallop, to stride, to zoom, to trot, to dart, to sprint, to shoot, to leap, to crank up, to flood, to snowball, to skyrocket, to catapult, to flick, to jump-start, to tackle,

to grab, to grasp, to wrestle, to poke, to stir, to prod, to stab, to strike, to smash, to hit, to plunge, to drop, to dump, to drain, to topple, to ditch, to block, to muzzle, to electrify, to galvanize, to fire up, to ignite, to kindle, to whip up, to sharpen, to shock, to jolt, to beat, to regurgitate, to trigger, to pocket, to bat, to smack, to slap, to kick, to kick-start, to hammer, to nail, to club, to flog, to clutch, to hook, to cling, to grip, to choke, to strangle, to smother, to gag, to suffocate, to throttle, to moan, to fret, to fume, to bleed, to nag, to steal, to kidnap, to ransack, to loot, to pilfer, to plunder, to snitch, to puke, to vomit, to spout, to suck, to scold, to plummet, to collapse, to skid, to agitate, to wreck, to ruin, to cripple, to devastate, to decimate, to trash, to shatter, to torpedo, to sabotage, to capsize, to maul, to crush, to slash, to bruise, to hijack, to flourish, to thrive, to bloom, to blossom, to mushroom, to smile, to grin, to cheer, to raise, to boost, to lift, to bolster, to invigorate, to energize, to excite, to enliven, to fortify, to hearten, to embolden, to animate, to arouse, to hypnotize, to spellbind, to sweep off one's feet, to fall in love, to unclog, to disentangle, to liberate, to relieve, to release, to unshackle, to massage, to cradle, to enfold, to envelop, to sprout

Rule 4: Sprinkle –ly adverbs sparingly

Stephen King wrote that *"the road to hell is paved with adverbs."*

But are adverbs really that bad?

When statistician Ben Blatt[2] analyzed novels, he found that the greatest novels use 25% fewer adverbs than amateur novels posted online.

Toni Morrison, for instance, uses 76 -ly adverbs per 100,000 words on average; and Ernest Hemingway 80. If you translate that to a blog post, you could use only one adverb for a blog post of around 1,000 words.

But it's not a strict rule. Nobel Prize winner Sinclair Lewis, for instance, uses an average of 142 -ly adverbs per 10,000 words.
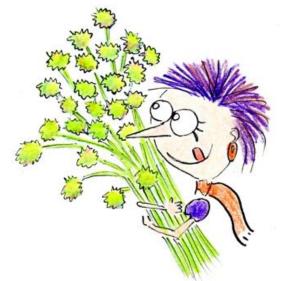
As writer, you can choose how many adverbs you'd like to use. The key is not to minimize the number of adverbs in your writing but to use them with care.

So, how do you decide which adverbs to use and which to cross out?

It helps to focus on two types of -ly adverbs: One type is best to avoid, and the other type, you can use with care.

Let me explain ...

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[2] Ben Blatt describes his analysis in his book *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve*

Avoid this type of -ly adverbs

The first type of -ly adverbs modifies verbs, and I mostly avoid it.

For instance:

> Henneke walked quickly.

What's the adverb?

- The word *walked* is a verb because it describes what Henneke does.
- The word *quickly* describes how she walked. Therefore, *quickly* modifies the verb *walked*, so it's an adverb.

Why writers should care:

When you delete the word *quickly*, you change the meaning of the sentence. *Henneke walked* doesn't mean the same as *Henneke walked quickly*.

So, instead of crossing out the word *quickly*, you can replace the word *walk* to paint a more precise and vivid picture:

- Henneke hurried.
- Henneke ran for her life.
- Henneke sprinted.
- Henneke jogged.
- Henneke sped ahead like a hungry hyena spotting an antelope.

When an adverb modifies a verb, you can almost always remove the adverb and pick a more accurate verb:

- She spoke softly—She whispered; she mumbled.
- She said loudly—She barked; she yelled; she screamed; she shrieked.
- She said jokingly—She joked.
- She worked really hard—She slaved; she labored; she toiled.

So, be careful when using adverbs to modify verbs. Always check whether you can use a more accurate, more powerful verb on its own instead of a verb + adverb.

Sprinkle this type of adverb sparingly

The second type of adverb modifies an adjective. I use this type of adverb more often than the first type.

Let's look at an example:

> Henneke is a very crazy girl.

What's the adverb?

- Nouns refer to people or things so the word *girl* is a noun.

- Adjectives describe what people or things are like so the word *crazy* is an adjective.

- *Very* describes how crazy Henneke is so it's modifying the adjective *crazy*, and that means *very* is an adverb.

Why writers should care:

The word *very* doesn't help you paint a clear picture, and that's why it's a mucky adverb.

When you delete *very* you might feel that the remaining sentence—*Henneke is a crazy girl*—isn't strong enough. So, look for a stronger expression and add zing to your writing. For instance:

- Henneke is nutty as a fruitcake.

- Henneke is bonkers.

- Henneke is looney.

- Henneke is dippy.

- Henneke is weird.

Take your pick. Which version describes Henneke best? Which version suits your voice best?

When to use adverbs

Adverbs left carelessly in sentences are almost always mucky.

In contrast, adverbs chosen with care are fine. Choose them to paint a more precise or more vivid picture. For instance:

> Her friend is really beautiful.

The adverb *really* is meaningless and can be deleted but you may feel that the sentence *Her friend is beautiful* understates the friend's beauty. So, you can pick a stronger word:

> Her friend is gorgeous.

Or you can add a stronger adverb to stress her beauty even more strongly:

> Her friend is breathtakingly beautiful.

Breathtakingly beautiful is a little longer and more flowery than *gorgeous*. But both versions are fine.

Choose the words that suits your voice and the rhythm of your writing.

How to balance these 4 rules

Have you noticed a tension in the 4 rules?

Let's have another look:

1. Pick the words your readers use
2. Appeal to the senses
3. Beef up your verbs
4. Sprinkle -ly adverbs sparingly

What's the tension?

If you only pick the words your readers use, you probably won't be using many sensory words and you won't beef up your verbs.

So, which rule takes precedence?

It's up to you as a writer to find your own balance:

Do you want to sound more casual? Do you want to make your writing as easy to understand as possible? If you answer yes to these questions, then focus more on the first rule. Pick everyday words and dial down your appeal to the senses.

Do you want to paint more vivid imagery? Do you want your writing to stand out? Would you like to add a poetic touch? If you answer yes to any of these questions, then sprinkle a few sensory words, beef up your verbs, and try one or two strong -ly adverbs—even if any of these words are slightly unusual. Your writing becomes a touch more flowery, and a bit less like everyday conversation. The readability of your text may be a tad lower but your writing voice stands out a little more.

Writing is always about balance.

And you can find your balance by experimentation. Try strengthening a couple of verbs, add a strong adverb, or sprinkle a few sensory words.

How does it sound? Do you like it?

Playing with the 4 rules will help you find your voice.

Word choice in practice I

Here's how I wrote the title of this guide …

In the main title I wanted to explain that this guide was about word choice, so I started with:

Choose Better Words

I felt that the word *better* was too mundane, so I played with various options such as:

Choose Words with Flair and Flavor
Choose Words with Sizzle and Zest
Choose Words with Zest
Choose Words with Power
Choose Words with Power and Pizzazz
Choose Enchanting Words

I usually opt for a more sensory version but here I liked *power and pizzazz* because it communicates more accurately that word choice is about both powerful communication and personality. Moreover, *pizzazz* is an unusual word because of the 4 z's and that adds an element of fun and makes the headline stand out, too.

Next, I decided to add *how to* because it's a power phrase suggesting you'll learn something from this guide:

How to Choose Words with Power and Pizzazz

I also played with different options for the verb *choose*:

How to Pick Words with Power and Pizzazz
How to Embrace Words with Power and Pizzazz
How to Sprinkle Words with Power and Pizzazz

I liked the word *pick* because of the alliteration with *power* and *pizzazz*. However, I worried (wrongly?) there was a risk that the meaning of the title would become muddled so I stuck to the everyday word *choose*:

How to Choose Words with Power and Pizzazz

In the subtitle I wanted to explain why better word choice matters:

A Short Guide to Captivating Your Audience

I tried a few options for *captivating your audience*:

A Short Guide to Reeling In Your Audience
A Short Guide to Hooking Your Audience

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A Short Guide to Enchanting Your Audience

Even though *reeling in* and *hooking* are more muscular verbs, I decided that the word *captivated* captured my intended meaning better so I stuck with that.

I did change the phrase *a short guide* and made it more precise:

4 Rules for Captivating Your Audience

And I added the word *wordy* to be more specific:

4 Wordy Rules for Captivating Your Audience

Your choice of title and subtitle may be different from my final choice. That's absolutely fine. There's not just one correct option.

Word choice in practice II

A draft text can be overly wordy.

If that's the case, you need to do more than replace a few words. You also have to scrap redundant words.

It can be useful to do this in two steps.

Here's an example of a verbose paragraph:

While quietly sitting at her wooden desk, she slowly formulated her thoughts and worked really hard to write her blog post. The next day she felt apprehensive and nervously hit publish. Would her audience be interested enough to read her content word-by-word?

To add energy to the text, the first step is to strip the content back to its bare bones. Focus on who's doing what with no extra flourishes:

~~While quietly sitting at her wooden desk,~~ she ~~slowly~~ formulated her thoughts ~~and worked really hard~~ to write her blog post. The next day she ~~felt apprehensive and nervously~~ hit publish. Would her audience ~~be interested enough to~~ read her content ~~word-by-word~~?

Here's that version again, now without the crossed-out words:

She formulated her thoughts to write her blog post. The next day she hit publish. Would her audience read her content?

That's a bit boring, right? The stripped-down version lacks nuance and color. So, let's add a little context and emotion, using stronger words:

For hours, she sat at her desk. She wracked her brain and toiled over her words to write her blog post. And the next day? She hit publish with trepidation. Would her audience gobble up her words?

This last version features a few muscular words: *wrack, toil, gobble up*. I also like *trepidation* because it indicates movement—the 6th sense.

Of course, the choices I made above are personal. If you rewrite that paragraph, which words would you choose? How muscular would you make your verbs? Would you appeal to the senses more or less?

Remember, no one is looking over your shoulder with a red pencil in hand.

Try to see word choice as a fun project and nurture a sense of play.

4 wordy rules to add power and pizzazz

Choosing your words is a bit like adding spices to a dish.

Just like a chef grinds a little extra pepper, sprinkles a few coriander leaves, or drizzles extra lime juice, you need to balance the flavors of your writing, too.

And just like we all have our favorite spices, we have our preferences for certain words, too. Some like our dishes spicier, others prefer more subtle flavors. Some love sensory words and muscular verbs, and others prefer to use more everyday language.

Experiment and find out what works for you and your audience.

Pick the words your readers use so your writing is easy to understand.

Use sensory words so readers can experience your story.

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Beef up your verbs to add energy and zest to your writing.

Sprinkle -ly adverbs sparingly to balance the impact and pace of your writing.

Use your editing time wisely

A poet has an ocean of time to rewrite a few lines. To find a more dazzling metaphor. To replace a weak word with a more energetic word.

Most of us don't have that amount of time, so you spend your editing time on your most important lines.
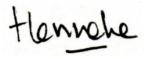
For instance, if you're writing a blog post, make time to fine-tune your headline. Click-worthy headlines will attract more readers to your blog. If time allows, try polishing your first and last paragraphs, too. Your first paragraph is essential in engaging potential readers and making them read your post. The final paragraph inspires them, and it may linger longest in their minds.

You can learn a lot about word choice by paying attention to the writers you admire most. Which of their words appeal to you? How can you introduce them to your own writing?

Notice how they tell a story. Which muscular verbs do they use? Pay attention to how they sketch a scene. How do they appeal the senses?

The more you pay attention, the more you appreciate the beauty of words.

Have fun!

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