Chapter 2

Word Choice

> Anyone who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid (1).
>
> H.W. Fowler

This sounds a useful caution.

Previously, chapter one has already demonstrated how the snapshot of particular moments entice the readers into the story being developed. Nevertheless, to further craft the story into a coherent, unified whole, as Fowler noted, skills in making the content clear and concise is no less important. This chapter presents key principles of selecting vivid words that picture the context in the reader's mind while clearing away the unnecessary.

2.1 Concrete Word

When using generic term or when the content becomes abstract expression, the writer risks perplexing the readers. Consider the examples below and compare the abstract expression in (a) to the concrete in (b).

Example 2.1.1

(a) Abstract: The sky was fabulous. Not only was it lovely but the bright moon was also reflecting on the water's surface and everywhere surrounded us.

(b) Concrete: The sky flamed up reddish-purple for a moment then went to dark navy. Over distant mountain ranges behind us hung the moon full and hazy while flickering its silvery white reflection above the sheeny water, hovering over rocky crags and over all the valley floors.

In (a), there can be no sound discussion how exactly a reader can 'see' the same fabulous sky or the same lovely moon as in the writer's description. In (b), the writer replaces the adjectives 'fabulous' and 'lovely' with the pictures captured in the scene ('flamed up reddish-purple for a moment then went to dark navy' for *fabulous*, and the rest of the description to designate the other adjective 'lovely').

EXERCISE

Prompt 5: Specific Sensory Detail

Instruction: Write a scene of a new trendy café which looks warm and inviting.

Limitation: The objective of the exercise at this stage is to help you describe specific sensory detail in the scene so do not alter the content being tested here. Instead, embed the readers fully in the scene of this café. Think how all the adjectives of the café mean to you and visualise them.

A skillful writer can craft a longer piece of concrete expression which paints—in words—a more complete portrayal of the scene, as in "Kew Gardens" a short story by an English writer Virginia Woolf.

Example 2.1.2

> From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour (Black 232).

In the opening of this short story, Woolf presents a scenic view of London botanical garden. Notice the words she deliberately painted her snapshot of the scene: the flowers, shapes, petals, colours and so on—all abound with sensory details.

Another example of rich visual descriptions could be a short traveling writing "Around the Jokhang" by an Englishman Alec Le Sueur who captures a specific view of Barkhor Bazaar in Tbet where traditional houses and narrow lanes line in and around this commodity area.

Example 2.1.3

> A ramshackle collection of metal stalls lines each side of the street selling a mixture of imports, antiques, fakes, and forgeries. Trinkets from Kathmandu and nylon clothes from China share stands with Tibetan rugs and traditional jewelry. Bulky silver rings studded with beads of red coral or turquoise, heavy-set earrings of gold, old Indian coins made into brooches, and any amount of religious paraphernalia are all on offer for sale (35).

And here is the description of the streets:

> *Streets twist and turn*, sometimes thirty feet wide, sometimes six feet wide, veering off at night angles between old whitewashed stone buildings three to four stories high with black trapezoid windows (37).

Above, the writer here mesmerises the readers by his realistic visual details that pop off the zoom-in and panning view of the area. Notice also how he begins with the statement, 'streets twist and turn,' before further supplying the readers additional details revealing the concrete shape of the streets ('sometimes thirty feet wide, sometimes six feet ...high with black trapezoid windows').

As previously presented in the examples, adjective formation or the choice of adjective is usually associated with value judgment of the writers. Look at the example

below, for instance, the writer uses the adjective 'unusual' to express value judgment of the clothing style in description (a).

Example 2.1.4

(a) My brother wore *unusual* clothes.

(b) My brother wore *a red gypsy shirt with blue denim overalls topped by a silk paisley turban.*

In description (b), the writer removes the adjective 'unusual' and replaces it with the description of the clothing style being discussed ('a red gypsy shirt with blue denim overalls topped by a silk paisley turban').

Now, study similar examples below (Example 2.1.5 and Example 2.1.6). Notice that both adjective and the noun it modifies in (a) are replaced with a single, precise noun.

Example 2.1.5

(a) Abstract My professor owns an *old* car.

(b) Concrete My professor owns a *1950 Volkswagen.*

Example 2.1.6

(a) Abstract That little boy has a *serious* disease.

(b) Concrete That little boy has *leukemia.*

In description (b) of both examples, there is no need to place the adjectives; the writer's intentions to convey the attitude about the car ('old') and about the boy's disease ('serious') have been denoted by the precise nouns ('1950 Volkswagen' and 'leukemia').

REMARK 1: When using precise nouns many writers may no longer add descriptive adjectives that lengthen their sentences, but some writers do. "The Realm of the Clouded Leopard" a work written by a Canadian anthropologist and

ethnobotanist Wade Davis, for instance, shows how the adjective when not overused can help the readers understand the overall description easier:

Example 2.1.7

> Weighing no more than sixty pounds, far less than a snow leopard, with a total length of perhaps six feet, including the tail, *the clouded leopard is relatively* **small**...(41)

In Example 2.1.7, Davis uses the adjective 'small' in the description of the clouded leopard to summarise the preceding details of its size, scale, and proportion ('weighing no more than sixty pounds, far less than a snow leopard, with a total length of perhaps six feet, including the tail').

Similar to the precise nouns, strong verbs can give a clear picture of the action and do not require adverbs. The opening of "Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India" written by William Dalrymple is a good example.

Example 2.1.8

> Below **lies** the ancient pilgrimage town of Sravanabelagola, where the crumbling walls of monasteries, temples and dharamsalas **cluster** around a grid of dusty, red earth roads. The roads **converge** on a great rectangular tank. The tank **is dotted** with the spreading leaves and still-closed buds of floating lotus flowers (1).

Here, without adverbs Dalrymple instead presents the scene of this pilgrimage site with the highlighted verbs that organise the portrayal of the town and the roads.

REMARK 2: Note that when using precise verbs the writer can also make a scene real with other sensory detail other than the visual. To name one, a work which has rich sound description could be "On the Ice: An Intimate Portrait of Life at McMurdo Station, Antarctica" written by Gretchen Legler, a Professor of Creative

Writing and two-time Pushcart Prize winning. The work uses strong verbs to recount the wind in Antarctica a little known land where Legler describes as "famous for wind." Notice how the verbs she uses for the wind here:

Example 2.1.9

> ...the wind **whoop, whoop, whoop, whooping** through the electrical and telephone wires. ...the winds **whipped** and **howled** and **moaned** and **moaned** and **moaned** around the buildings, into nooks and out again, **eddying** and **swirling**, **dancing** and **buzzing** through the wires overhead, **playing** the wires as if they were the strings of a deep bass, **pushing** me along, **pushing** me, **hurrying** me along so forcefully that I had to lean back back into the strength of the wind to stand upright (70).

Above, Legler shows up the sounds of the wind and its movement through repetition of verbs; and even more impressively, she also visualises the wind through the movement of the flags:

Example 2.1.10

> ...the flags, **slap, slap, slapping** in the wind, **snapping** against themselves, **cracking like whips** in the 100 degrees below zero air (70)

EXERCISE

Prompt 6: Precise Nouns and Verbs

Instruction: Write a scene of the same café in the previous exercise (Prompt 5).

Limitations: The objective of this exercise is to enable you to use specific nouns and verbs instead of more general ones. Focus on what makes the place vivid for you. When finished, look for adjectives and adverbs to eliminate by choosing more precise nouns and verbs. Also, try adding sound and smell details into the description.

2.2 Needless Words

When beginners bring together unnecessary strings of words in their writing, most often those words are 'False Elegance' or 'Empty Word.' Example 2.11 below gives an example of unnecessary complexity in (a) whereas the original version concisely written in a non-fiction history book "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" by an English historian Edward Gibbon is presented in (b).

Example 2.2.1

(a) ...they consented **to make an acknowledge of** the lawful election of his competitor, and to divide the provinces of Italy and the West between the two emperors.

(b) ...they consented **to acknowledge** the lawful election of his competitor, and to divide the provinces of Italy and the West. between the two emperors (25).

Another example, in "A Wild Sheep Chase" a mystery story by a Japanese author Haruki Murakami, the writer makes a concise expression when describing the protagonist's girlfriend:

Example 2.2.2

> She was a part-time proofreader for a small publishing house, a commercial model specializing in ear shots and a call girl in a discreet intimate-friends-only club. Which of the three she **considered** her main occupation, I had no idea. Neither did she (27).

Had Murakami made false elegance he would have written "...which of the three she **had given consideration to** her main occupation..."

Additionally, words that add nothing to the context should also be removed.

Example 2.2.3

(1) I **saw** the morning mist rising off the river *with my own eyes.*

(2) Franklin wrote the first five chapters of **the autobiography** *of his own life* in England in 1771.

(3) My graduation gown is **red** in *colour.*

As presented, the words in bold and italic of each sentence are repetitious expressions and hence, removing the words in italic does not alter the meaning of these sentences.

REMARK 3: Always keep in mind that when using a too-general word in the description or narrative, the writer risks creating a 'wordy modification.'

Example 2.2.4

> We trekked through the jungle by foot, along a narrow and rugged creek before eventually met a well-tamed elephant and *a man who controlled it.*

The word "man" is too inclusive so the writer needs to specify the kind of man presented in the context ('who controlled it [elephant]'). To replace the text in italic, the word "keeper" is more precise and only one modifier (its) is needed while, if the writer had known this term, a 'mahout' is a single word that is much more precise and best fit.

REMARK 4: Good readers are aware of how well they understand the text as they read so be aware that the writers may risk confusing the readers when using a technical term or specialized word in a context, especially when communicating with readers who do not share their expertise. Wise writers therefore do not leave the readers struggling with unfamiliar word but provide them a brief specification that represents the assumption or key concepts of the subject matter. For example, in "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down" which won the National Book Critics Circle

Award for nonfiction, Anne Fadiman illustrates how medical plants are collected 'under the tutelage of Hmong herbalists.'

Example 2.2.5

> ...twenty medical plants she had collected under the tutelage of Hmong herbalists, which, in various forms—*chopped, crushed, dried, shredded, powdered, decocted, infused with hot water, infused with cold water, mixed with ashes, mixed with sulphur, mixed with egg, mixed with chicken*—were indicated for burns, fever, weakness (165)

To general readers who may not be familiar with Hmong people and their tradition, text in italic depicts how tradition of Hmong herbalists in collecting the plants for healing purpose is like (*chopped, crushed, dried, shredded, powdered, decocted, infused with hot water, infused with cold water, mixed with ashes, mixed with sulphur, mixed with egg, mixed with chicken'*).

Note also that it is not uncommon to find an unfamiliar word or dialect words in a narrative especially in travel writing:

Example 2.2.6

> Overlooking Mangde Chhu river in Trongsa lies a massive **Dzong**—*an ancient fortress monastery with wood and stone facades* —which has a rich history dating back to the 16th century.

Above, the writer illustrates a brief architectural shape of the Dzong in Trongsa for general readers ('an ancient fortress monastery with wood and stone facades').

2.3 Figurative Language

Most great writers are masters of figurative language. An American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, for example, writes in his Letter from Birmingham Jail:

Example 2.3.1

> *Like* a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured (Ana 119).

In Example 2.3.1, Martin Luther King defines injustice and shapes his reader's perception by comparing it with the nature of a boil, how likewise the existing law and order failed to establish the justice being discussed.

Chief Seattle a prominent chief of the Indians during early eighteenth century also uses figurative language in his Treaty Oration 1854 to shape the relationship between the Indians and their reactions with the White man.

Example 2.3.2

> *Day and night cannot dwell together.* The Red Man has ever fled the Approach of the White man, as *the morning mist* flees before *the morning Sun* (Johansen 119).

Or in other part of the Treaty, he uses the grass and the scattering trees to picture the different numbers of the Indians and the White.

Example 2.3.3

> His people are many. They are *like* the grass that covers vast prairies. My people are few. They resemble the scattering tress of a storm-swept plain (Johansen 919).

In "An Underground Hotel in Leningrad," Kelly Cherry expresses the city's description with a formal garden:

Example 2.3.4

> The whole city **is** a measured spread of pastel set against a pewter sky carefully engraved with clouds; it'*s like* a formal garden in which the ornately trimmed shrubs are made of stone (91).

Now, notice how William Patrick Kinsella a Canadian novelist and short story writer portrays the scene in his "Shoeless Joe" here (the brightness of the moon and a fairly bright yellow colour of the butter).

Example 2.3.3

> Above the farm, a moon *bright as butter* silvers the night as Annie holds the door open for me (265).

Some writers such as William Gibson suggest a resemblance between 'the sky above the port' and 'the color of television tuned to dead channel.'

Example 2.3.4

> The sky above the port *was* the color of television, tuned to a dead channel (3).

Or in a well-known novel "A Study in Scalet" Sir Arthur Conan Doyle describes the scene when Dr. Watson was expressing his surprise to find that *Sherlock Holmes' ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge* as in Example 2.3.5.

Example 2.3.5

> I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across ... It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. (33).

With a man's brain as an empty attic, Holmes here acknowledges his fellow Watson the habit of his observation and how he ignores whatever he considers a useless fact.

Despite simile and metaphor, Hyperbole is another figure commonly used in writing. A master of Hyperbole Mark Twain, for instance, often uses this figure to cast his point:

Example 2.3.6

> The banging and slamming and booming and crashing were beyond belief, the racking and pitiless pain of it remains stored up in my memory alongside the memory of the time I had my teeth fix (33).

In his "A Tramp Abroad" presented above, Twain uses hyperbole to picture a memorable experience while viewing a romantic opera Lohengrin.

REMARK 5: As discussed some writers use figurative language to compare the unfamiliar to what their readers are familiar with or emphasize a point through exaggeration; hence figures in focus here are simile, metaphor and hyperbole. However, for beginners, do keep in mind that when there is a cliché, or too much exaggeration, the description can be a faulty and should therefore be rewritten.

Example 2.3.7

(a) After many long hardworking nights, my brother was *sick as a dog*.

(b) After many long hardworking nights, dark smudges rimmed a ring around my brother's eyes and his hair was messy.

The expression 'sick as a dog' in (a) is a cliché and fails to bring fresh description in the reader's mind. It is not easy for nonnative beginners to distinguish between a good comparison and a cliché, or worse, find it hard to select the

expression that matches with the picture in their head, so in description (b), the writer replaces the expression in italic with the portrayal of the brother after long hardworking nights to depict how the writer defines the cliché expression 'sick as a dog'.

Hyperbole is another possible faulty which is often found when the writers overexpress the subject of discussion:

Example 2.3.8

> Located next to the main gate of our town, the chapel is *the most magnificent and most impressive example of the wisdom of mankind ever made known on earth.*

Example 2.3.8 is an example of false hyperbole; the writer's impression toward the chapel (text in italic) is overexpressed and tells nothing about its architectural structure to the readers.

EXERCISE

Prompt 7: Precise and Vivid Description

Instruction: Write a scene of a historical site. Select one that is less known to public.

Limitations: Enrich your sensory description with at least one of the three figures introduced in this chapter—simile, metaphor, or hyperbole. Do not forget to remove unnecessary words and add additional sensory details other than visual description where possible.

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Note: In December 2010, to answer how the award has changed my life or broaden my opportunities, I compared my life with a piano song (with and without the black keys).

SAMPLE 1

Before the award, my life merely played a simple rhythmic pattern, like a piano son without the black keys, that although it was so carefully composed that each note flow smoothly into the next, It sent out a fairly simple piece. After the award, my life has gone beyond that unending white row, and even allowed me from time to time to pick out some particular notes that emphasis my own rhythmic accents. My research focus, for instance, has first been expanded by my own curiosity—like others in pure scholarly world, but later it has delved into more practical benefits which in the past few months have no only challenged the scholarly settings but also highlighted its findings in health services for every person. Unlike the black-and-white arrangement of the real piano, however, the number of those I have come into contact with after the award, and I feel grateful to, is greater than 36, half of which go to people from AustCham and Australian Embassy Bangkok (Antarasena 23).

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Prompt: Write a description of a place around 80-100 words. Add also a vivid moment into the scene.

SAMPLE 2

On the corner of Flinders and Swanson Streets stands a grand building of central railway station a cultural icon to Melbourne, perhaps twice as big as Hualampong, with a richly embellished mix of buttresses, turrets, arches, domes and spires. The platform slowly comes back to life with morning rush hour commuters now chattering and loitering; and deafened at times as the automated platform announcement echoing "The next train to arrive..." and teetering and cramming onto their train; and suffocating for breath inside—quietly, regularly, orderly.

Chapter 3

EXERCISE 1

Instruction: Expand either the subject, or the verb, or the object in the statements given. Try adding at least three modifiers to each statement. Include as much sensory detail as possible.

Example I found a trimly-kept garden.

I found a trimly-kept garden, definitely owned by the rich, decorated with symmetrically-arranged statues and fountains, and evergreen shrubs, and bulbs of rose, and magnolia.

6

Example It is now about five o'clock in the morning.

It is now about five o'clock in the morning, mid winter, with the sun not shining, the clouds thinned, and the fog, lifting.

1. A car honked.

2. The trees in my garden rustle.

3. My heart aches.

4. That little girl blushed.

EXERCISE 2

Instruction: Using the same basic statements. Add at least four clauses of at least fifteen words long to each statement, using **multiple coordination**.

1. A car honked.

2. The trees in my garden rustle.

3. My heart aches.

4. That little girl blushed.

EXERCISE 3

Instruction: Using the same basic statements. This time, expand only **the subject**.

1. **A car** honked.

2. **The trees in my garden** rustle.

3. **My heart** aches.

4. **That little girl** blushed.

EXERCISE 4

Instruction: Using the same basic statements. This time, expand only the verb.

1. A car **honked**.

2. The trees in my garden **rustle**.

3. My heart **aches**.

4. That little girl **blushed**.

EXERCISE 5

Instruction: Using the same basic statements. This time, expand it by adding each of the statement with an interpolated clause.

1. A car honked.

2. The trees in my garden rustle.

3. My heart aches.

4. That little girl blushed.

EXERCISE 6

Instruction: Write about a person you know well.

Limitations: Use **multiple coordination,** no more than one hundred words.