Diction

The term *diction* refers to work choice, especially with regard to correctness, clearness, or effectiveness. The following guidelines will help improve your writing.

1. **Avoid unnecessary repetition of words and ideas.**
   Poor: Golf players use tiny, little round balls, which, in my opinion, I think are made of plastic.
   Better: Golf players use tiny balls that, I think, are plastic.

   Poor: The first poem in the book is a masterpiece in itself and quite a work of art.
   Better: The first poem in the book is a work of art.

2. **Use slang or informal words only when appropriate to the audience, the purpose, or the occasion.** Also, make sure word choices are consistent with the rest of the paper.
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slang</th>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dopey</td>
<td>dense</td>
<td>obtuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gypped</td>
<td>cheated</td>
<td>swindled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the man</td>
<td>cop</td>
<td>police officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Avoid overblown writing.**
   The lively lad eclipsed the illuminated taper. (Jack jumped over the candlestick.)
   The rotund ovum postured upon the balustrade. (Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall.)

4. **Avoid sexist language.**
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inappropriate</th>
<th>Appropriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>authoress</td>
<td>author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the common man</td>
<td>the average person, ordinary people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lady doctor</td>
<td>nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weatherman</td>
<td>weather forecaster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   Poor: The professors and their wives attended. (assumes professors are male)
   Better: The professors and their spouses attended.

5. **Choose the appropriate word.** *(Helpful hint: See “Glossary of Usage,” *Harbrace Handbook*)
   
   **Imply** *(words)/ infer *(thoughts)*: The student implied he had studied algebra, but, after looking at his grades, I inferred he was in danger of failing.

   **Affect** *(verb)/ effect *(noun)*: Smoking affects the heart. This effect can be devastating.

   **Farther** *(more distant)/ further *(additionally)*: Furthermore, I can go no farther today.

   *Other difficult pairs: especially/specially, bring/take, can/may, adopt/adapt, fewer/less, accept/except, their/there/they’re, weather/whether, who’s/whose, past/passed, advice/advise, etc.*
6. **Choose a specific and concrete word rather than a general or abstract one.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General</th>
<th>Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fast food</td>
<td>pizza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>short stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>city</td>
<td>Cleveland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**bad children:** rowdy, rude, ungrateful, selfish, or perverse children  
**bad mean:** tough, tainted, overcooked, or contaminated meat  
**nice teacher:** sympathetic, empathetic, patient, or understanding teacher  
**good movie:** entertaining, visually stimulating, compelling or dramatic movie

**Vague:** She has kept no reminders of performing in her youth.  
**Concrete:** She has kept no sequined costume, no photographs, no fliers, and no posters from that part of her youth.

7. **Avoid wordiness.**

**Poor:** In the early part of the month of August, a hurricane was moving threateningly toward Houston.  
**Better:** In early August, a hurricane threatened Houston.

**Poor:** Each actor has a unique talent and ability that he or she uses in his or her own acting.  
**Better:** Each actor has a unique talent.

8. **Avoid wordy expletive constructions, such as There are, It is, etc.**

**Poor:** There were four children playing in the yard.  
**Better:** Four children were playing in the yard.

**Poor:** It is difficult to learn to speak French.  
**Better:** Learning to speak French is difficult.

9. **Change passive voice to active when appropriate.**

**Passive:** Calculus is studied by many college students.  
**Active:** Many college students study calculus.

10. **Avoid substituting would for simple past tense.**

**Poor:** When the bell rang, he would quickly disappear.  
**Better:** When the bell rang, he quickly disappeared.