

# The Perfect Word—It's Out There BY BRYON CAHILL

Ooh, I love your magazine. My favorite section is "How to increase your word power." That thing is really ... really ... really ... good.

In the great, big, super-neat world of writing, there are many fun, exciting, and clever ways of using words.

Argh.

In the voluminous world of writing, there are many amusingly witty ways of using words.

No good.

Voluminous sounds too clunky. And amusingly witty, what's that?

OK ... one more time ...

In the fantastic world of writing, there are many ways of using words.

There it is! I think.

How often do you use a thesaurus? Not that often or way too much? Do you use one at all? However ~~often~~ frequent the case may be, here are a few tips to help you the next time you can't decide which word to use.



**TIP 1:**  
Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

*It was a nice day.*

Was it? Was it really *nice*? What does *nice* mean anyway? Anything can be nice. Dogs are nice. Neapolitan ice cream is nice. My sister is nice. Big deal! *Nice* says nearly nothing!

What do you really mean when you say "*It was a nice day*"? Was the day *fair*, *decent*, *sunny*, *pleasant*, *swell*, or *utterly delightful*?

Oh, my—so many words, so little time! What's a writer to do?

First of all, don't get so wrapped up in searching for the perfect word that you forget the meaning of your sentence. If you've gone back and forth between six different words, chances are that your first instinct was right.

True, *nice* can be a ~~boring insipid~~ bland word, but sometimes it can be perfect. For example, in *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice, frustrated with the state of the absurd world into which she has fallen says, "It would be so nice if something made sense for a change." In this case, *nice* worked just ~~nicely~~ fine. Imagine if Lewis

Carroll had consulted a thesaurus and changed *nice* to *copasetic*. Alice's character would have come off as being more grown up than she actually was, and young readers everywhere would have been scratching their heads.

However, you probably wouldn't want to use *nice* when trying to describe a tranquil garden scene:

*When I walked through the really nice flower garden, I noticed how nice the day really was.*

Yuck. Try this:

*When I walked through the lush flower garden, I noticed how pleasant the day really was.*

It's not Shakespeare, for sure, but you get the idea.

**TIP 2:**  
Don't let the synonym search get out of hand.

Let's say you want to find another word for *accident*. When you look up *accident* in the thesaurus, you'll find that one of its synonyms is *disaster*. When you seek out *disaster*, you come across *cataclysm*. Although you're starting to despise the *calamity* surrounding your word, a part of you is ~~attracted to~~ intrigued by its meaning.

Oh, where, oh, where could the definition be? LOOK IT UP! Look 'em all up! Check the dictionary and notice how your newfound word and its synonyms relate to the meaning you want to convey in your sentence.

Here's an example:

*The small accident in my mother's kitchen didn't cause any damage.*

*The small cataclysm in my mother's kitchen didn't cause any damage.*

The second sentence doesn't make sense, does it? How can a *cataclysm*, a "very bad accident," not cause any damage?

Just because you've picked a word's relative doesn't mean that it's not a distant cousin. Don't let an *accident* become a *disaster* or a *calamity* until you know the facts. Grabbing at a word because it looks pretty is the biggest catastrophe of all! Oh, and a ~~colossal~~ big word is not always ~~ameliorative~~ best. C. S. Lewis (author of the classic fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia*) once said, "Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say 'infinitely' when you mean 'very'; otherwise, you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite."

**TIP 3:**  
Don't lose the flow. Respect your words.

When the words are pouring out of you, and your muse has a firm grip of your hand, *don't* stop the music to consult your thesaurus. If things are going well, let them. Keep writing. You can always go back in ~~later~~ subsequent drafts to cut out the ~~lame~~ trite stuff and substitute your words with pearls. That's called revision. When you're revising your work, also check to see whether you seem to favor certain words and replace them. In other words, if you see a word that you ~~seem to favor~~ tend to repeat, ~~replace it~~ substitute it with a gem from your thesaurus.

**Remember:** Writers own words. Readers merely rent them. Show your readers what you're made of by expressing yourself to the fullest extent of your capabilities. When you work with a thesaurus, your vocabulary soars as your writing ripens and becomes ... fantastic? marvelous? magnificent? resplendent? ... I dunno ... something kinda like awesome.

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**DID YOU KNOW?** The *Roget's Thesaurus* that you use today was created and published in 1852 by a man named Peter Roget. It was the first book to provide alphabetically arranged synonyms of words. The word *thesaurus* means "treasure" in Latin. *How apropos!* A thesaurus truly is a treasure trove of words. Open it up to inject new life into your sentences. If you're not into the whole ~~old~~ archaic reference book thing, you can find the right word online at [thesaurus.com](http://thesaurus.com).