Avoiding Ambiguous Words
An exercise in clarity

INCORRECT: Some words are bad. They say what you want them to say, but they do not say things clearly. There is a problem with these words, being that they are unclear.

CORRECT: Some words hinder a person's ability to communicate because they cause ambiguity in meaning.

From this point on, try to avoid using these words in your writing:

- Being
- Do/does
- Is/are/was/were
- Has/have
- There
- Thing/something
- This (as a pronoun)
- What
- You
- *Contractions

- BEING
    - -INCORRECT: Being that she was a doctor, she ordered the tests.
    - -CORRECT: The doctor ordered the tests.

- DO/DOES
    - -INCORRECT: He does a good job as a baker.
    - -CORRECT: He bakes delicious cakes.

- IS/ARE/WAS/WERE
    - -INCORRECT: This virus is the latest threat to the monkey population.
    - -CORRECT: This virus threatens the monkey population.

- HAS/HAVE
    - -INCORRECT: Her response has no relation to her personal feelings.
    - -CORRECT: Her response fails to indicate her personal feelings.

* You may use contractions in informal writing. Consider avoiding contractions in more formal writing.

- THERE
  - -INCORRECT: There is a problem with my car's transmission.
  - -CORRECT: My car's transmission needs to be repaired.

- THING/SOMETHING
  - -INCORRECT: He needs something to do.
  - -CORRECT: He needs a new hobby.

- THIS (AS A PRONOUN)
  - -INCORRECT: This is the woman who taught me French.
  - -CORRECT: Professor Vilette taught me French.

- WHAT
  - -INCORRECT: The senator discovered what caused the accident.
  - -CORRECT: The senator discovered the accident's cause.

  NOTE: If you want to use a question in your essay, you cannot use "what," since rhetorical questions should also be avoided in academic writing.

- YOU
  - -INCORRECT: You should obey your local authorities during crisis.
  - -CORRECT: Citizens should obey their local authorities during crisis.

- *CONTRACTIONS
  - -INCORRECT: He's the worst singer ever, and he can't dance!
  - -CORRECT: He sings horribly and he cannot dance.

Before turning in an easy, be sure to have your computer search for each of these words. If you find one, edit the sentence to express your ideas more clearly and precisely. You can also use Editor on any of the UWC computers to point out issues such as "vague diction."

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