

How to Use a Thesaurus

What is a thesaurus? A thesaurus is a book of synonyms, or words having nearly the same meaning as another word. Many thesauruses also offer antonyms (words with opposite meaning as another).

How does a thesaurus work? Most commonly-used thesauruses are organized with base words listed in alphabetical order. When you look up a word, you will be presented with a list of other words that have a similar meaning as the first. For instance, the base word “friends” may be followed by “acquaintance”, “amigo”, “confidant”, “intimate” and “mate”.

Why would I want to use a thesaurus? The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus says, “The user of a thesaurus is seeking a more appropriate term than the one he has in mind.” That means a thesaurus should be used when you can think of a word that is almost right, but doesn’t perfectly match your intent.

How do I choose the right thesaurus? For casual correspondence, a word processor’s built-in thesaurus could be very handy. For more academic writing, you may wish to use a general print thesaurus or one designed for your particular field. A thesaurus is a tool of the English language – make sure you choose the right tool for the job!

Word Processor Thesauri: Many word processor programs (like MS Word) have a built-in thesaurus. This handy function offers a short list of synonyms, but often no other information.

Print Thesauri: Most common print thesauri are organized like a dictionary, with base words listed in alphabetical order, and they usually offer more specific help than word processor thesauri, like definitions, parts of speech, idioms, related words, contrasted words, and antonyms.

Online Thesauri: The internet offers a great resource at Thesaurus.com. This online thesaurus has much of the more specific help as a print thesaurus but is available via any computer with an internet connection.

Specific Thesauri: There are many types of thesauri, including ones aimed at different age groups. Children and student thesauri often leave out more highly academic terms. Some are specific to a particular field of work, like music or medicine. There are even thesauri for children’s book writers which specify what words are appropriate for a particular reading level.

How do I avoid “thesaurus abuse”? It’s easy to look in a thesaurus, see a big, complicated word and think it would really impress the reader. But beware! Not every word provided in a thesaurus is the perfect match for what you’re trying to say. A good rule to avoid “thesaurus abuse”: if you don’t know the word, don’t use it.

The Community Writing Center has access to different types of thesauri. Ask a Writing Assistant to show you where they are!

Library Square Plaza—210 East 400 South. Salt Lake City, UT 84111
(801) 957-4992—www.slcc.edu/cwc

