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!