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**An Ode to the King of Writerly Tools**

***By***[***LOIS LEVEEN***](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/lois-leveen/)

I once wrote a love poem to my thesaurus.

After all, a writer’s relationship to her thesaurus is a very emotional thing. And, in my case, a lasting one: my thesaurus and I have been together for more than 26 years. Longer than a lot of marriages. Definitely long enough to finish each other’s sentences. Or at least for the thesaurus to complete most of mine.

As with any great romance, I vividly remember when my thesaurus and I first met. In the summer between high school and college, I generated a list of words to which there seemed no possible synonym. Then I spent hours in my hometown bookstore checking each word in each thesaurus to see how they compared.

I started with orange. [Nothing *rhymes* with orange](http://oxforddictionaries.com/words/are-there-any-words-that-rhyme-with-orange), but I wondered if there were words that conveyed the same meaning as orange?

Yes, according to Roget’s International Thesaurus, Fourth Edition. It offered me orangish and orangey, and also ocherous, ochry and ochroid. Helianthin and Rubens’ madder. Not to mention a produce-section’s worth of apricot, carroty, tangerine, peach and pumpkin. And that was just one entry, taking up less than half of one column of a single page.

In the bookstore, the paperback felt fat in my hands, thick with linguistic possibility. Just to be sure, I checked fat and thick. Each appeared in 11 entries as adjectives; fat also weighed in with four entries as a noun and one as a verb, while thick garnered one each as a noun and an adverb. Entranced, I flipped back and forth among the feathery pages, seeking out each entry.

Why so much flipping? Because a Roget-style thesaurus doesn’t organize entries alphabetically, as a dictionary does, but taxonomically, under eight broad classes that branch into smaller categories. To a casual user, an alphabetical listing might seem easier. You thumb your way to the early Fs, and, between *fasting* and *fatal*, you find a single entry listing some synonyms for fat. Choose one, and you’re done.

But to a true connoisseur, a lover of language, traveling Roget’s branching lines of categories and subcategories to explore subtle shifts in meaning provides its own adventure. In all the years my thesaurus and I have been together, I’ve found few things as gratifying as reaching for it, consulting numerous entries and reaping the reward of encountering an elusive word.

Finding the precise word matters. Take that last sentence: at first I wrote, *finding the right word matters*. Right wouldn’t have been wrong, exactly, but precise is more, well, precise. Although one of several words might convey the same general meaning in any given sentence, lighting on a word that does *more* makes prose memorable.

Selecting a word is often more a matter of connotation, the subtle implication of ideas or emotions, than of denotation, the literal meaning. You might try five different outfits to find one in which you look slender, but would you be pleased to go out wearing one that makes you look skinny? Both mean “thin,” more or less. And neither has the negative implication of “scrawny.” Yet slender is more desirable.

Practiced writers know — sometimes so instinctively we’re not even conscious of it — that word choice involves things beyond even connotation. “A Story of Two Cities” isn’t as compelling as “A Tale of Two Cities.” Although we typically associate alliteration, rhythm and assonance with poetry rather than prose, a good prose writer relies on them as well. *Big* is a short word with two hard consonants, the final one a little muddy sounding. *Enormous* is a longer word with softer consonants. *Titanic* gives us a crisper end-sound than *big’s* glottal g, while also packing a walloping allusion. I’d hate to make a big mistake, but I’d be more upset if I made a titanic one.

Although a good thesaurus is one of a writer’s most powerful tools, it’s also one that can be easily abused. When I taught composition, one of the cardinal rules I imparted to my students was *never utilize ‘utilize’ when you can use ‘use.’* Thesaurus in hand, a writer can substitute longer, more arcane words just to try to make prose sound more erudite — but end up sounding like a ninny instead.

Unless, of course, the judicious use of arcane words is intentional. When the protagonist of my novel “The Secrets of Mary Bowser” is freed from slavery and sent to Philadelphia to be educated in a private school, her narration becomes peppered with new words, which she uses for the sheer pleasure of reminding herself that she now knows them. Although she never utilizes *utilize*, she does invoke *poetical*, *impassioned* and *ostentatious*.

Her evolving word choice conveys to the reader how her experiences in freedom shape her character. In real life, [Bowser was a Union spy](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/a-black-spy-in-the-confederate-white-house/)who posed as a slave in the Confederate White House. In “The Secrets of Mary Bowser,” she uses the word *intelligence* more often than *espionage* to describe her work. That choice is a way of asserting her own intellectual abilities and rejecting racist claims of black inferiority.

Sometimes Mary’s vocabulary outstripped my own, leaving me more deeply indebted than ever to the thesaurus that gave me the words to put into her mouth. As a stickler for historical accuracy, I knew that if I found an *itsy-bitsy* anachronism, my thesaurus could guide me to a *teeny-tiny* correction that might save me a titanic embarrassment (*itsy-bitsy* wasn’t coined until the 20th century, long after *teeny-tiny* made its 19th-century appearance).

Alas, my thesaurus itself has become a bit of an anachronism, devoid of terms like *cyberspace*, listing *friend* only as a noun — and existing as a print tome rather than a software app. But that’s part of my attachment to it: my thesaurus provides a pleasurable physicality, akin to [what some authors experience writing longhand](http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/on-writing-longhand/31030). Reaching for my thesaurus, feeling its familiar weight, provides a corporeal anchor during the mostly cerebral act of writing.

But my thesaurus is also more comprehensive than any *app* I’ve tried, even if it doesn’t know what an app is. I’ll admit, at times I use the thesaurus program on my computer, but it always feels like the writerly equivalent of settling for drive-through fast food: convenient yet uninspiring, and perhaps indicative of a regrettable larger slide into slothfulness. And the bells-and-whistles animations of the various visual thesauruses I’ve tried can’t obscure how sparse their entries are. In an age when word processing has made revision faster and easier, taking the time to consult my thesaurus confirms that faster and easier aren’t always better.

My thesaurus’s page corners aren’t as crisp as they once were, and I’ve taped the binding up in several places. But after all our years together, my thesaurus still serves as both stalwart companion and as definitive reminder that the pleasure of writing lies in the thrill of the hunt.

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