

Synonyms

A synonym is simply a word which is identical in sense and usage with another, for example *fast* is a synonym of *quick*.

Synonyms are different words with almost identical or similar meanings. Words that are synonyms are said to be synonymous, and the state of being a synonym is called synonymy. In the figurative sense, two words are often said to be synonymous if they have the same connotation:

"A widespread impression that ... Hollywood was synonymous with immorality"
(Doris Kearns Goodwin).

Synonyms can be any part of speech (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs or prepositions), as long as both members of the pair are the same part of speech. More examples of English synonyms are:

- Noun
 - 'student' and 'pupil'
- Verb
 - 'buy' and 'purchase'
- Adjective
 - 'sick' and 'ill'
- Adverb
 - 'quickly' and 'speedily'
- Preposition
 - 'on' and 'upon'

Note that synonyms are defined with respect to certain senses of words; for instance, *pupil* as the "aperture in the iris of the eye" is not synonymous with *student*. Similarly, *he expired* means the same as *he died*, yet *my passport has expired* cannot be replaced by *my passport has died*.

Knowing words with the same or opposite meaning can help you make sense of unknown words.

When you read, you may come across a word you don't know. You can often figure out its meaning by thinking of a synonym or antonym for it.

A synonym means the same, or almost the same, as the unknown word.

E.g. I felt so *ungainly*, tripping over my own feet as we headed to the dance floor!

Can you think of a word to replace *ungainly* that would still describe someone who trips? How about *clumsy*, *awkward*, or *gawky*? They all have about the same meaning, but doesn't it sound more embarrassing to be *ungainly* than *clumsy*? By using *ungainly*, the author tells you more about the person's feelings.

When you learn a new word, you may grasp its meaning by associating it with one of its synonyms that you already know. For example, what's another word for *decrease*? You know that *decrease* means to *make smaller*, and its antonym is *increase*. So what is one of its synonyms? A good synonym for *decrease* is *diminish*. Write a sentence here using the word *diminish*.

Do you like the sentence you wrote any better because it uses *diminish* instead of *decrease*? Does it sound more important? More grown-up? More precise?

How to find the synonym you need

Many writers turn to a thesaurus to find synonyms. As warned before, however, using a thesaurus is tricky unless you already know the exact meaning of each synonym listed for a word. If you don't, you run the risk of picking a word with the wrong connotation, or even the wrong denotation.

Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, the "dictionary definition". For example, if you look up the word *snake* in a dictionary, you will discover that one of its *denotative* meanings is "any of numerous scaly, legless, sometimes venomous reptiles having a long, tapering, cylindrical body and found in most tropical and temperate regions."

Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the associations that are connected to a certain word or the emotional suggestions related to that word. The *connotative* meanings of a word exist together with the denotative meanings. The connotations for the word *snake* could include evil or danger.

For example, the name 'Hollywood' *connotes* such things as glitz, glamour, tinsel, celebrity, and dreams of stardom. At the same time, the name 'Hollywood' *denotes* an area of Los Angeles, worldwide known as the center of the American movie industry.

If you feel the need for extra help when you write, use a dictionary. It can help you to see the subtle differences in how a word can be used. For even more help, check out a dictionary of synonyms and antonyms. These dictionaries define all the synonyms and antonyms so you're less likely to substitute a word that doesn't make sense.

To know more, visit the Writing Centre. 😊