



Ambivalence: What You Said Isn't What They Think You Meant

This lesson will help you avoid confusion over multiple meanings of words.

Leif Erikson Park in Duluth, Minnesota, has a famous rose garden where hundreds of rose varieties flourish. One summer when the blooms were full, our local newspaper encouraged people to go out to the rose garden and “pick your favorite rose.”

Now if somebody told you to go *pick a rose*, what would you do? Right. People went to the park and snapped off their favorite blooms to take home. Before the paper could print a retraction, the Leif Erikson rose garden had been severely pruned.



The rose garden was a victim of **ambivalence**.

The newspaper writer knew that “pick” means “select.” The readers knew that “pick” means “snap off the stem.” Both were sure they knew the meaning of the word, and the rose garden paid the price.

It makes you want to tear out your hair and scream, “*Those dummies!* How could they *not* understand?” But that won’t help your writing—or your scalp. As writers our job is to make things as clear as possible to our readers, even if some are, yes, dummies.

Principle: What you mean is not necessarily what your readers will understand.

Secondary principle: Be aware of multiple meanings of words, and use a synonym if necessary.

The rose garden demonstrates that you don’t need to write a long convoluted passage to be ambivalent. **Often one word is plenty to confuse your reader.**

• **Ambivalence can result from multiple meanings of one word, like “pick.”**

When Dale and I moved into the house where I grew up, we planted a berry patch. I could hardly wait until the red raspberry bushes bore enough to make jam. The third summer, we had enough berries for one batch of jam—four jars. I wanted to enter a jar

in our county fair, but only if I got it back when the fair was over. I knew the judges would open the jars to taste the jam. The rule book warned that “*Entries will be discarded as they spoil.*” What did “*as*” mean? “*Entries will be discarded because they spoil*”? (Then all entries would be discarded.) “*Entries will be discarded as soon as they spoil*”? (Many canned foods would spoil in a week, but jam wouldn’t.) I called the fair office and found out “*as*” meant “*as soon as.*” I won a ribbon—and got my jar of jam back!



• **Ambivalence can result from regional word usage.** What do you call it when you ride a sled downhill on snow? Sledding, right? Well, one winter in northern Wisconsin we acquired a slide projector, and I thought it would be fun to have people come over and show their old slides. I invited several friends to a “slide party.” I was not aware that what I call “sledding,” they call “sliding.” People thought I had invited them to go sledding, a long way from looking at slides!

• **Ambivalence can result from “in group” usage.** If you send a memo to a community theatre group and tell them, “Everyone needs to be here for *strike*,” you mean everyone needs to help take down the set at the end of the show. Someone new to the theatre might think you are calling the cast and crew to go on strike!

Take something you have written and check it for ambivalence. Search especially for multiple word meanings, regional word usage, and “in group” word usage.

Some good ways to check for ambivalence:

- Read the piece aloud.
- Have someone else read the piece silently and then tell you what it said.
- Have someone else read the piece aloud to you.

Rewrite the piece to remove any ambivalence and make your meaning as clear as possible.

Check it again. Rewrite until the piece communicates exactly what you mean to say.

Yes, rewriting is tough. **But your ideas are worth the trouble!**
Do all you can to **make sure people understand what you mean.**