

# On the Value of Reading and Reading More: A Personal Reflection and Educational Resource

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## Abstract

Professional accountants—at all levels (student, educator, practitioner)—may be looking for strategies to support professional development and/or continuing education, including the development of communication skills. This paper provides an example of critical self-reflection, which resulted in a retirement-induced reading spree for the author and an appreciation by the author of the value of *reading* as a strategy for enhancing one's reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. To illustrate these benefits with greater concreteness, the paper includes a short discussion of each of 18 subjectively determined "power words" (and related definitions) gathered by the author from recent issues of the Wall Street Journal. These examples illustrate how appropriate word choices allow authors of cited material to communicate (in context) with conciseness and precision—power for short. I complement this set of words with additional "power words" I self-selected from a variety of business and nonbusiness sources. The paper contains a listing of additional resources (both printed and web-based) that individuals interested in improving their vocabulary can consult. As a learning resource, the paper can be used in accounting courses with a communications component, for personal and/or professional development purposes, and in CPE courses focused on communication skills development. An appendix provides sample word-choice quizzes based on the 18 words discussed in the paper.

Keywords: communication skills, critical self-reflection, professional development, vocabulary, word choice, experiential sharing, communicating with power, learning resource

As a writer, "(r)emember that words are your only tools you've got. Learn to use them with originality and care."<sup>1</sup>

"[T]he defining characteristics of good prose [are]: ... a large vocabulary that enjoys exploiting the different etymological and social levels of words (and) an insistence on verbal and logical precision"<sup>2</sup>

"You'll never make your mark as a writer unless you develop a respect for words and a curiosity about their shades of meaning that is almost obsessive."<sup>3</sup>

One of the "elements associated with writing *well*, or *very well*... (is) a capacious vocabulary and the ability to use it..."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zinsser (2006), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Yagoda (2013), p. 169, quoting critic F. W. Bateson. See: [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1894701.F\\_W\\_Bateson](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1894701.F_W_Bateson)

<sup>3</sup> Zinsser (2006), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Yagoda (2013), p. 104 (emphasis in the original).

## Introduction

Recent retirement has afforded this erstwhile accounting professor an opportunity to engage in a process of critical introspection, at both a professional and a personal level. In turn, this period of self-reflection has provided me with an opportunity to share experiential insights with other accounting professionals. In Stout (2016) I share with readers self-reflective insights regarding both my professional and my personal life, while in Stout (2018) I offer selected career-based observations and insights regarding the process of publishing in accounting education. These two pursuits were motivated largely by a desire to exploit the benefits of critical self-reflection and experiential sharing, particularly from a faculty development perspective.

Recent retirement also afforded me the opportunity to engage in what can best be described as a reading spree. In this regard, I have recently read a wide variety of non-business-related works, including (among others) *Alexander Hamilton* (Chernow, 2004), *Jung: A Biography* (Bair, 2003), *His Excellency: George Washington* (Ellis, 2004), *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 1930), *The Last Good Time: Skinny D'Amato, the Notorious 500 Club, and the Rise and Fall of Atlantic City* (Van Meter, 2003), *Sprezzatura: 50 Ways Italian Genius Shaped the World* (D'Epiro and Pinkowish, 2001), and *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (Ambrose, 1996). For a variety of (probably weak) reasons, I did not allot time during my academic career to reading of this nature. I was, in a sense, “doing my own thing,” keeping apprised of technical developments in accounting (and accounting education) and the associated literature in this regard.

What became obvious to me early on during my reading spree was a vocabulary-related deficiency on my part. This realization in turn motivated me during the course of my reading to keep a dictionary handy, which I consulted every time I encountered a word I did not know or for which I had only vague familiarity. I realized, too, that without such effort on my part I would likely be missing out on what, precisely, authors of the books I was reading were trying to say. After researching a word and re-reading the passage from the book in which the word appeared, I more often than not would say to myself: “this was the perfect word—one that allowed the author (of the text I was reading) to communicate with power, precision, and verve.” As a learning (and professional development exercise), I made handwritten notes of these self-identified “power words” along with a short definition of each. The more I read, the lengthier the list became.<sup>5</sup> I was quickly convinced, however, that the extra effort on my part was well worth it, humbling as this process of being tethered to a dictionary and making handwritten notes seemed to be.

These events ultimately motivated me to reflect more critically on what was happening. I asked myself how it was even remotely possible that my reading spree was so demanding, in a way I could hardly have foretold. How was it possible that I earned advanced degrees and, according to conventional measures, had a successful career as an accounting professor, and yet felt compelled to use a standby assistant to more fully understand and appreciate the power of the books I was now reading?

At this point, I recalled two critical incidents from my academic career—both of which were apparently locked away for many years in the deep recesses of my mind, but which now assumed saliency. The first event involved Gary Previts (former American Accounting Association [AAA] president, member of the Accounting Hall of Fame, etc.) and an event that occurred in conjunction with a small AAA committee meeting I was attending along with him. I do not recall the reason for or nature of this meeting, but I do clearly remember that at a certain point in the meeting Gary challenged committee members thusly: “Do you know what our basic problem is? We (i.e., accounting academics) don’t read enough!” Strange, I thought at the time. As members of the academy a large part of our professional life involved two things: reading and writing. What, then, was Gary’s point?

The second event also occurred some years ago, during the time I was serving as accounting department head at Villanova University. Our department had just introduced a Master of Accountancy (MAcc) degree program. In conjunction with the development of this program we hosted on-campus presentations for senior representatives of various stakeholder groups, including individual events for each of the major accounting firms. Both faculty and

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<sup>5</sup> As of this writing, the list consists of over 175 words.

students typically attended these (evening) sessions, which featured presentations by both faculty and non-faculty attendees. One such event was designed for representatives of Arthur Andersen. We were fortunate to have in attendance that evening Mr. Robert Mednick, who at the time was a senior auditing partner for the firm.<sup>6</sup> Near the end of the session, a student asked this individual: “What advice would you offer students, such as us, who are pursuing accounting degrees?” Again, I recall with clarity the response offered by Mr. Mednick: “I would tell such students to **read more**—it’s not so important *what* you read but *that* you read!” Great advice for our students, I thought. For whatever reason, however, it never occurred to me at the time that this advice likely applied to me (and other accounting professionals) as well.

Thus, there was in my mind a recent confluence between the above-two events from my academic career and what I was experiencing in my retirement-based reading spree. I soon realized, though, that I had ignored sage advice I had received early in my career from two separate (and credible) parties. This realization motivated me in turn to produce the present paper in the hope that an experiential sharing with other accounting professionals would benefit their own professional development. In short, the present paper is offered in the hope that other interested parties—accounting students, practitioners, and faculty members—could both learn from my experience and avoid some of the embarrassment I now feel.

As an educational resource, a high-level objective of this paper is to affirm, for other accounting professionals and through my own personal experience, the benefit of reading (beyond technical accounting). To illustrate this benefit with some level of concreteness and specificity, I present (with accompanying definitions) a set of what I consider to be “power words” that I gleaned from recent issues of a popular business periodical, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ).<sup>7</sup> To provide interpretive value and to demonstrate proper use of these words, I include excerpts from the text in which these words appeared.

From a technical standpoint, and as suggested by the quotes that appear at the start of this paper, the present learning resource deals with a strategy of improving one’s communication skills through vocabulary development and appropriate word choice.<sup>8</sup> The intended audience is accounting professionals (students, faculty, and practitioners) interested in pursuing what has been for me a personally rewarding strategy for personal improvement and development.

### Communication Skills and Accounting

It is well established that communication skills are considered important to professional success in accounting.<sup>9</sup> Weber and Cutter (2019), for example, assert that because automation and outsourcing have eliminated many tasks

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<sup>6</sup> According to <https://www.bloomberg.com/profile/person/17576211>, at the time of this writing Mr. Mednick is serving as Co-Senior Vice-President, Roosevelt University and as Board Member and Treasurer of the National Bureau of Economic Research. At Andersen Worldwide Mr. Mednick served ultimately as managing partner. At the 2020 Annual Meeting of the American Accounting Association Mr. Mednick was inducted into the Accounting Hall of Fame (<https://aaahq.org/AHOF>).

<sup>7</sup> My thinking here is that limiting the self-selected set of “power words” to those obtained from a popular business publication would enhance the attractiveness of the paper to accounting (and perhaps other business) professionals. At the same time, I later address in this paper the question of small-sample bias and generalizability of the underlying argument by providing complementary word-choice examples from selected non-business works and from two randomly selected issues of the WSJ.

<sup>8</sup> The four quotes listed at the top of this paper refer specifically to *writing* ability but would reasonably apply to communication skills in general (i.e., to reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills).

<sup>9</sup> This importance is reflected, for example, in the general framework for accounting education presented in Lawson et al. (2014), in at least two Pathways Commission Reports (2012; 2015) ([http://commons.aaahq.org/files/0b14318188/Pathways\\_Commission\\_Final\\_Report\\_Complete.pdf](http://commons.aaahq.org/files/0b14318188/Pathways_Commission_Final_Report_Complete.pdf) and supplement), in the AICPA’s *Precertification*

traditionally associated with entry-level positions in business, “employers are looking for fast learners who can quickly evolve and (who) have exceptional soft skills—the ability to write, listen, and communicate effectively.” Within accounting, and in the context of writing skills specifically, Collins (2018) asserts that “poorly written documents can reflect poorly on the individual (and the individual’s organization)” and that it is incumbent on accounting organizations to “teach new hires that the quality of their writing is a direct reflection of the quality of the work produced by them and (their) company or firm.”<sup>10</sup>

### ***Communicating with Power***

One interpretation of the preceding statements is the need for accounting professionals to be able to communicate with *power*, which (for purposes of this article) I define as the ability to communicate concisely and with precision.<sup>11</sup> Of course, multiple factors relate to this ability. Primary among these factors might be proper *diction*, that is, the appropriate “use, choice, and arrangement of words in writing and speaking.”<sup>12</sup> Put more succinctly: words matter. The present paper deals with the general issue of communicating with power, with specific emphasis on the role of vocabulary and word choice.<sup>13,14</sup>

### ***A Strategy for Learning to Communicate Powerfully***

Given other demands on their time, professional accountants may be looking for useful strategies for honing their communication skills, including the ability to communicate with power. One such strategy—advanced by communication experts (e.g., Elbow [1998], Yagoda [2013], Zinsser [2006])—is to *read more*. Yagoda (2013, p.

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#### ***Core Competency Framework***

(<https://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/accountingeducation/resources/corecompetency.html>), and in the Leadership Knowledge Domain component of the IMA’s *Management Accounting Competency Framework* (<https://www.imanet.org/career-resources/management-accounting-competencies>). I abstract here from the discussion of who should assume responsibility for communication skills development in accounting education, an issue addressed recently by Rebele and St. Pierre (2019) and Fogarty (2019). This and related issues (regarding the development of soft skills versus technical competencies) will be dealt with in more detail in a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Accounting Education*.

<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Zinsser (2006, pp.165-166) notes that “countless careers rise or fall on the ability of employees to state a set of facts, summarize a meeting, or present an idea coherently,” in short, because of poor communication skills.

<sup>11</sup> Other characterizations are possible. For example, within the context of writing, Elbow (1998, p. 134) defines *power* in terms of “precision and energy” or (p. 371) as “putting juice into words.” By contrast, Zinsser (2006) refers to freshness or “taste” in writing (p. 235), where “taste” can be defined as choosing “words that have surprise, strength, and precision.” Yagoda (2013, p. 3), on the other hand, notes that writing with power consists of “writing with clarity, precision, and grace.” Yet another perspective is provided by Farnsworth (2020) who uses the term “rhetorical power” or “rhetorical magic.” What seems to be common across these perspectives is the relationship between word choice and the ability to communicate with power. This relationship in fact provides foundational support for the present paper.

<sup>12</sup> Funk & Wagnalls, *Standard Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1972, p. 177).

<sup>13</sup> The point here is that sometimes precision demands the use of a particular word. Quoting Mark Twain, Yagoda (2013, p. 4) notes: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” Simply put, writing with precision—that is, choosing the right words—is a key component of writing (and therefore communicating) with power.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that “powerful” writing is context-dependent (e.g., audience-focused) and as such does not imply the exclusive (or even widespread) use of “big” or esoteric words. Such words could, in certain contexts, reduce rather than enhance one’s ability to communicate effectively. This critical point is developed further below, in the section titled “Word Choice, Context, and Nuance in Writing,” as one of three key issues related to the role of word choice in the writing process.

15), within the context of writing skills, puts it this way: “Almost without exception, **good writers read widely** and frequently. By osmosis, they learn from (their) reading an incalculable amount about vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, style, rhythm, tone, and other crucial writing matters.” (emphasis added)<sup>15</sup>

This paper shares with readers some of what I learned regarding how writers for the WSJ write. In terms of specificity, I present a sample of subjectively determined “power words” I identified from the WSJ over the past two years, associated definitions, and textual excerpts that demonstrate how (in my opinion) word-choice decisions allowed authors of the cited works to “write with power.” Before presenting these examples, however, a short discussion of various issues related to the role of word choice in the writing process seems warranted.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Issues Related to the Role of Word Choice in the Writing Process***

Before presenting and discussing my self-selected set “power words” from pieces I read in the WSJ recently, a discussion of the following four points seems warranted: (1) the conceptual role of word choice in the communications process, (2) the importance of target audience (or, writing context), (3) the time commitment required for mastering the writing (including word-choice) process, and (4) concrete examples of the power of formal writing through word-choice decisions.

#### **Defining a Conceptual Role of Word Choice in the Writing Process**

Writing theorists stress that good writing is the result of a process or sequence of activities. The issue of word choice (and diction), particularly in formal (including business) writing, properly arises late in this process. One argument in support of this position is that obsessing about proper word choice too early in the process detracts from creativity, idea generation, and other larger (or more strategically important) issues. Thus, the argument goes, the concern about proper diction and word choice should properly arise in the revision/rewriting part of the process, not in the early stages of this process.<sup>17</sup> As well, these issues seem more pertinent for formal as compared to informal discourse. Nothing in this paper is inconsistent with these points of view.

#### **Word Choice, Context, and Nuance in Writing**

Regarding the issue of word choice, one view is that “less is more.” For example, regarding the use of short vs. long words, Zinsser (2006, p. 15) cautions us to “Beware...of the long word that’s no better than the short word: ‘assistance’ (help), ‘numerous’ (many), ‘facilitate’ (ease), ‘remainder’ (rest), ‘initial’ (first), ‘implement’ (do), ‘attempt’ (try), ‘referred to as’ (called)...”<sup>18</sup> Along these same lines, a U.S. government document

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<sup>15</sup> Yagoda (2013) indicates (p. 16) that he routinely tells his students is that “if they want to be good writers, they should start reading as much as they can... (and that) they should read all kinds of things.” He goes on to assert (p. 17) that “specific benefits of widespread reading are many... (for example) it’s the very best and most painless way to absorb the rules of the language...,” ultimately concluding that “it’s far more effective to learn by observing (writing) than by studying a textbook or being drilled in a classroom.”

<sup>16</sup> I focus here specifically on *writing skills* for two reasons: (1) the listing of “power words” presented later in the paper is based on my own reading of what a variety of authors had *written*, and (2) the three technical communications-related books I read as part of my recent reading spree (Yagoda [2013], Zinsser [2006], and Elbow [1998]), and referenced earlier, all focus specifically on the development of *writing* skills. As noted above (footnote 7), it is likely that the points made by these three authors apply as well to other dimensions of communication skills.

<sup>17</sup> Zinsser (2006, p. xii) states the matter succinctly: “...the essence of writing is rewriting. Just because (writers are) writing fluently doesn’t mean they’re writing well.” Further, he states (p. 4) that “...professional writers rewrite their sentences over and over, and then rewrite what they have rewritten.” These comments apply most assuredly to formal writing, but probably less so to informal communications.

<sup>18</sup> In similar fashion, Yagoda (2013, p. 5) urges us not to “use a long word when there’s a shorter one that means the same thing.” A comparative listing of such “long” versus “short” words appears on p. 116 under the heading “Short Is Good.” Among the word pairs in this list are the following: buy (rather than purchase), live (rather than reside),

([www.plainlanguage.gov/](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/)) argues that “plain language makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications...(therefore) when you’re making word choices, pick the familiar or commonly used word over the unusual or obscure...the use of uncommon or complex, rather than simple, words leads to improved communication...readers are not impressed by the use of complex words; they’re frustrated by them.”<sup>19</sup> In short, the preceding statements take the position that, in general, simpler words can have greater communicative value than “fancy” or esoteric words.

But writing theorists also tell us that context (or audience) informs appropriate word choice. That is, the issue of word choice is more nuanced. Yagoda (2013), for example, notes that good writing is context-based and that (p. 168) “[e]ach form or genre (of writing) has its own stylistic dress code...some of the variables (comprising this code) are word choice, length of sentence (etc.)...” Elbow (1998, p. 191) refers to the notion of “audience-based writing” wherein the audience serves “as a kind of magnetic field that exerts an organizing or focusing force in our works.” To lend concreteness to the argument, Elbow (1998, p. 227) refers to what he calls “practical writing” in which “words are designed to make something happen in the world...for example, requesting a refund or a contribution, (or) writing a resume or a letter of recommendation” on behalf of a colleague or student. In sum, this view (exemplified by the comments of Yagoda and Elbow presented above) asserts that word choice is part of the “stylistic dress code” employed by the writer and that nature of this “code” is largely defined by audience/context. Put another way, the issue of word choice is nuanced.<sup>20</sup>

In a similar vein, Farnsworth (2020) asserts that while it is true that “good writing is simple, clear, and direct,” what makes such writing *powerful* is style, which is “the result of decisions regarding word choice, arrangement of sentences, tone, and cadence.” Thus, the argument adduced by Farnsworth (and Yagoda [2013] when he refers to “stylistic dress code” and Elbow [1998] when he refers to “audience-based writing”) is that the issue of writing with power or “rhetorical magic” is more nuanced than reflected by the general guidelines noted above. In fact, Farnsworth’s entire book is about how “talented writers have achieved eloquence *when they needed it.*” (emphasis added) The allusion here is to context or audience.

How to put all of this together? For informal, quick-response type communications (“Got it!,” “Later,” “Process on to Billing,” etc.), word choice is likely irrelevant. In more formal writing, however, the issue of word-choice takes on heightened importance. As illustrated by the example sentences presented later in this article, *precision*, *energy*, and *impact* sometimes demand a particular word, or what Zinsser (2006, p. 5) describes as “using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength.”<sup>21</sup> I chose the word-choice examples presented below specifically because, in my opinion, each word choice helped the writer to communicate with energy, verve, and power.<sup>22</sup> Given the intended readership (mostly college-educated professionals), these word-choice decisions seem entirely appropriate, if not necessary. A corollary point is that an adequately developed vocabulary is fundamental to one’s ability to comprehend and appreciate an author’s text (or oral presentation). These points should be kept in mind as readers evaluate the potential value of the present learning resource to their own purpose.

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use (rather than usage), and need (rather than require). Nothing in the present paper is inconsistent with this general recommendation. I argue, however, that there are situations and writing contexts where stronger or “words with punch” are appropriate, as illustrated by the WSJ word-choice examples offered later in the paper.

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this reference and the points contained therein.

<sup>20</sup> As a preview of what is to come, I note that given the assumed readership of this paper the use here of “nuanced,” rather than “characterized by subtle shades of meaning or expression,” is a cogent example of the intersection of word choice, writing with power, and audience/context.

<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, Zinsser (2006, p. 87) refers to the benefit of “replacing a humdrum word with one that has more precision and color.” See the preceding footnote for an example.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to a colleague who, upon reading an earlier draft of this paper, opined: “Note, too, that poor word choice can be reflective of fuzzy thinking on the part of the writer.”

### *Time Commitment*

For most individuals, honing of communication skills (reading, listening, writing, or speaking) requires a commitment of time, energy, and practice. No resource—including the present one—is a magic tonic that will result effortlessly in improving one’s communication ability. Put another way, the present learning resource should be viewed as a tool to be used in the process of honing one’s communication skills. The successful use of this tool demands an appropriate investment of time and practice.

### *Word-Choice Classifications*

Word-choice decisions—including those illustrated below—fall generally into one of two categories. In the first, the writer (or speaker) considers and evaluates one or more words that are near substitutes for one another. For example, in the book *Hamilton*, the author (Ron Chernow) writes (p. 190) that “Hamilton had the most durable pair of lungs in the New York bar... (some attorneys) complained that the *prolix* Hamilton never knew when to stop.” One could argue that the meaning, impact, or communicative value of this statement is unchanged were we to substitute any of a number of synonyms for “prolix” (long-winded, wordy, verbose, rambling, etc.). In the more complex—and, can be argued, more interesting or important—situation we substitute a phrase or clause or group of words with a single, powerful word, as demonstrated by the example I offer in footnote 19. To illustrate the point further, I provide three examples from the book *Hamilton* that reflect power or verve based on the author’s choice of words. In the first example, Chernow notes (p. 145) that “As he [Hamilton] tutored [Elizabeth] Schuyler (Hamilton’s future wife) in self-improvement, there was a *Pygmalion* dimension to his wishes...” Here, the author conveys, with precision and verve, the notion of “self-fulfilled prophesy” or the “phenomenon whereby others’ expectations of an individual affect that individual’s behavior or performance” by use of a single, powerful word: *Pygmalion*.<sup>23</sup>

The second example from *Hamilton* evokes a powerful image of the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Chernow notes (p. 311):

Shy and aloof, he (Jefferson) seldom made eye contact with listeners yet could be a warmly engaging presence among small groups of like-minded intimates. This laconic man knew how to sprinkle his conversation with brilliant aperçus that lingered in people’s minds.

The author’s use of the words *laconic* (i.e., terse or concise—using few words) and *aperçus*<sup>24</sup> tells us—and succinctly so—that Jefferson was someone who was reserved yet eminently stimulating and engaging in speech. Put another way, he was viewed as someone who “said little but spoke volumes.” The wording here is powerful because the reader, on the basis of a short description provided by the author, can almost “see” or “feel” the presence of Jefferson as the passage is being read.

As in the case above regarding Thomas Jefferson, a few carefully chosen words in the passages below (pp. 239-240) provide a vivid picture of one of Hamilton’s closest friends, Gouverneur Morris:<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> As noted in <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pygmalion>, Pygmalion, in Greek mythology, was a king who was the father of Metharme and, through her marriage to Cinyras, the grandfather of Adonis. The Roman poet Ovid relates that Pygmalion, a sculptor, made an ivory statue representing his ideal of womanhood and then fell in love with the statue. In answer to his prayer, the goddess Venus brought the statue to life.

<sup>24</sup> The word *aperçus* can be taken here to mean “a comment or brief reference that makes an illuminating or entertaining point.” In my opinion, the use of this word—and particularly with its linkage to the word *laconic*—is another example of writing with power. (I note here, too, that an alternative definition of *aperçus* is “an outline, brief survey, or sketch.”)

<sup>25</sup> Morris represented the state of New York from 1777-1779 as a member of the Continental Congress and from 1800-1803 as a member of the U.S. senate. In addition, he served (under Robert Morris) as U.S. assistant superintendent of finance, 1781-1785.

Like Hamilton, the blue-blooded<sup>26</sup> Gouverneur Morris dreaded mob rule and favored a Senate made up solely of property owners. He considered slavery a ‘*nefarious* institution’ that would summon the ‘curse of heaven on the states where it prevailed.’ ... The *polyglot* Morris was a *bon vivant* who admitted that he had ‘naturally a taste for pleasure.’ (emphases added)

The essence of *nefarious* goes beyond “evil” to something akin to “pure evil” or “extreme wickedness”—something truly abhorrent or despicable. The statement about Gouverneur Morris tells us that he was both well-educated—at least in the sense of being multilingual (i.e., a *polyglot*)—and that, as a *bon vivant*, he was a “lover of the good life.” Together, these three words provide a vivid description of the individual in question. In fact, after reading the above quoted passage it is almost possible for the reader to “see” him. Put another way, the above passage is illustrative of Chernow’s ability to write with power or, as characterized by Zinsser (2006, p. 233), the ability to “write with respect for the English language at its best—and for readers at their best.”

### Word-Choice Examples

In the space below, I provide for each of the 18 words listed in **Table 1** a brief definition and, to illustrate the power of the author’s word choices, one or more excerpts from the WSJ where the specified word appeared. In certain cases, I provide interpretive commentary but for the most part the examples are meant to be self-explanatory, particularly given the power of the word-choice examples from *Hamilton* referenced above. For expository purposes, I have grouped these words into one of three categories: (1) foreign (or foreign-based) words, (2) words that in my opinion are commonly confused (e.g., words that sound alike but have different meanings), and (3) personal favorites of mine (i.e., miscellaneous words that have appeared two or more times in recent issues of the WSJ).

#### *Foreign (or Foreign-Based) Words*

*de minimis* (adj.) (Latin<sup>27</sup>): lacking significance or importance; something too minor or trivial to merit consideration, especially in law

In an Opinion piece (“Containing China Will Be Complicated”) published May 8, 2020 (p. A15), the authors’ (E. Colby and A. Mitchell) use of “*de minimis*” to mean something minimal or inconsequential is illustrated in the following passage: “...a revised U.S. grand strategy must also include a different approach to alliances in Europe. European allies’ resistance to *de facto*<sup>28</sup> Chinese colonization in Eastern Europe and Beijing’s commercial-technological inroads in Western Europe is a **de minimis** requirement.” The use of contrast in the next sentence helps to energize the use of *de minimis*, as the authors opine: “Ultimately, Europeans need to be able to handle more of their own defense—with abiding American support...”

*de rigueur* (adj.) (Fr.): socially obligatory; prescribed or required by etiquette, custom, or current fashion; in vogue; proper

To illustrate proper usage of *de rigueur*, I cite here a front-page article (“The New Way of Flying Includes a Hefty Rule Book”) from the May 19, 2020 edition of the WSJ, which reports (p. A1) that U.S. “airlines are rolling out new

<sup>26</sup> “Blue blood” is an English idiomatic phrase for “noble birth or descent.” It can also be used to refer to someone from a socially prominent family.

<sup>27</sup> According to <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/de%20minimis>, the fuller Latin phrase from which *de minimis* is taken is “*de minimis non curat lex*,” which can be translated roughly as “the law is not concerned with trivial matters.”

<sup>28</sup> The short phrase “*de facto*,” which can be taken to mean “actual, in reality, or in fact,” appears frequently in the WSJ. Interestingly, one antonym for *de facto* is *de jure* (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/de-facto>).

(and stricter) protocols for boarding, dining, and bathroom use...face masks are now **de rigueur** for travelers across the U.S.” A second example comes from an article (“Get the Balls Rolling”) containing a recipe for Kentucky Bourbon Balls, which appears on p. D6 of the May 16-17, 2020 edition of the WSJ. The author (A. Crapanzano) notes that “After bourbon balls debuted in Kentucky, it didn’t take long for them to become **de rigueur** on Derby Day and catch on all over the South as a boozy finish to most any gathering...” The reader may note the alternative meanings of *de rigueur* conveyed in each of the above two examples.

*dictum* (plural *dicta* or *dictums*) (n.) (Latin): an authoritative formal pronouncement; also, a noteworthy statement or condensed piece of wisdom; also, as a legal term in the U.S., *obiter dictum* (literally, “statement made in passing”) refers to a strong statement a judge might add to a written opinion, which statement is not directly relevant to the case being adjudicated<sup>29</sup>

Appropriate use of *dictum* is illustrated by the following excerpt from an article (“A Cold War With China Would Be A Mistake”) by R. Haass that appeared on page C4 of the May 9-10, 2020 edition of the WSJ: “We would be wiser to adhere to the **dictum** ‘Physician, heal thyself’ than to scapegoat China.” The plural form (*dicta*) is illustrated by a vivid (albeit esoteric) statement that appears in B. Allen’s review (“How the Lion Groomed His Cubs,” May 16-17, 2020) of two biographical accounts of acclaimed author Philip Roth. Allen notes (p. C10): “It seems likely that Roth fixed on Mr. (Benjamin) Taylor, a capable writer in several genres over (and) two decades Roth’s junior, as a votary who would diligently record the master’s lapidary **dicta**.”<sup>30</sup> Three strong words, one very evocative statement.

*métier* (n.) (Fr.): a profession, trade, vocation, or occupation

Proper usage of the French word *métier* is illustrated in the following sentence taken from R. Holmes’ review (May 16-17, 2020) of “A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey,” which was a first-hand account by Henry Mayhew of the cholera epidemic in London that appeared in the September 24, 1849 edition of *The Morning Chronicle*. Holmes writes (p. C5): “Mayhew had found his *métier*. From October 1849 to November 1851, he went on to publish a series of 82 articles about working-class London.” The second of the above-two sentences helps establish the power of Holmes’ use of the word *métier* to mean Mayhew’s newfound profession (that is, his specialization within the writing field).

*zeitgeist* (n.) (Ger.): the spirit or (moral, cultural, or intellectual) climate (or mood) of an era, from a combination of the German words “Zeit” (time) and “Geist” (spirit)

The notion of “spirit of the times” via the use of the word *zeitgeist* is illustrated by the following excerpt of an Opinion piece (“Joe Biden and the Moralizers”) by D. Henninger that appeared on page A15 of the May 7, 2020 edition of the WSJ: “So much of our national politics looks like bread and circuses that one can miss important shifts in the political **zeitgeist**.”<sup>31</sup>

### Commonly Confused Words (i.e., Word Pairs)

<sup>29</sup> See <https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/obiter+Dicta> or <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obiter%20dicta>.

<sup>30</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/votary>) the original meaning of *votary* was “a devout or zealous worshipper; a staunch believer.” The more modern, and capacious, sense of the word is “a devotee or a devoted admirer.” The word *lapidary* is derived from the Latin word for stone. The adjectival form of the word can be taken to mean (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lapidary>) “having the elegance and precision associated with inscriptions on monumental stone... (for example) a stanza (from a poem) that has a *lapidary* dignity.”

<sup>31</sup> Additional words I would have included in this section, were there no space constraints: *apparatchiks*, *coup de grâce*, *détente*, *élan*, *en masse*, *ennui*, *milieu*, *protégé*, *raconteur*, *repartee*, *tête-à-tête*, *tour de force*, and *wanderlust*. All such words have appeared in recent issues of the WSJ.

*abrogate* (vb.): to abolish or to repeal; to annul by authority (e.g., a law), vs.

*arrogate* (vb.): to take or claim something without justification; to seize, takeover, or usurp; also, to attribute or to assign to another person (e.g., blame)

In an Opinion piece from the WSJ of May 22, 2018 (p. A14), the author states: “A 5-4 ruling (by the U.S. Supreme Court) the other way would have **abrogated** hundreds of thousands of employment contracts...” A second example of the proper use of the word *abrogate* comes from the March 19, 2019 issue of the WSJ (p. A17) in an Opinion piece by Bill Hammond titled “Banishing Profit is Bad for Your Health:” “If a manufacturer (of a prescription drug) won’t agree to an ‘appropriate’ price for its product, federal officials (in the author’s opinion) could **abrogate** the patent (held by the manufacturer) and assign another company to make the drug.” By contrast, the use of the word *arrogate* to mean seize or “to appropriate to one’s self” (or to a group of individuals) is illustrated by the following excerpt from an Opinion piece by Alan M. Dershowitz (May 14, 2020, p. A15): “...courts (in the U.S.) have **arrogated** to themselves powers the Constitution explicitly denies them.” Both of these two “power words” (*abrogate* and *arrogate*) can be used to convey fundamental legal principles and as such should be of interest/use to wide range of business professionals, including accountants.

*abstruse* (adj.): obscure or difficult to understand; complex; mysterious; arcane; vs.

*obtuse* (adj.): lacking acuteness of intellect; not sharp/dull; simple-minded

The use of *abstruse* to represent something “obscure or difficult to understand” is reflected in two recent passages from the WSJ. The first passage is from an Opinion piece by D. Henninger (“Yes, Flatten the Curve”) that appeared on p. A17 of the March 19, 2020 edition: “It is appropriate that in an era dominated by technology, with much of life ordered by **abstruse** code running in the background, the crisis of our era should be defined by the arcane world of statistical epidemiology.” Inclusion of the word *arcane*<sup>32</sup> in the latter part of the sentence amplifies the power and effect of the earlier-appearing (and related) word, **abstruse**. This, in my opinion, is writing with power. The second passage is from R. Davenport-Hine’s March 28-29, 2020 (p. C7) review of the book “Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers” by C. Misak: “Why, then, is (Frank Ramsey) so little known? The subjects that he investigated were **abstruse**.” Once again, the power of this word choice is enhanced by what follows. The writer continues with (p. C7): “Few people felt confident of understanding them. Fewer still could keep pace with the originality of his ideas and the unorthodoxy of his conclusions.”

The use of *obtuse* to convey the notion of something that is “simple-minded” or, to be more blunt, “stupid,” is illustrated in the following excerpt from an Editorial (“Another FISA Fiasco”) that appears on p. A14 of the January 14, 2020 edition of the WSJ: “Federal Judge James Boasberg...became presiding FISA judge on Jan. 1 (2020). That he would act in such an **obtuse** fashion (regarding methods used to assess the FISA court’s surveillance application process) is another argument for the FISA court’s abolition.”

The noun form of *obtuse*, *obtuseness*, is illustrated in the following passage: “...of all the parent’s many shortcomings, the worst may be their **obtuseness**: their failure to grasp that the world is ending—the familiar world, anyway,” which I took from a review (May 16-17, 2020, p. C11) by E. Burrow of “A Children’s Bible” (by L. Millet). The explanatory clause that ends the sentence makes the use of the word *obtuseness* in the preceding passage all the more powerful.

*insidious* (adj.): progressing imperceptibly, but harmfully (as in a disease); proceeding in a gradual, subtle way, but with harmful effects; also, wily, subtly cunning, or deceitful, vs.

*invidious* (adj.): a situation or action likely to create resentment, envy, or anger in others; also, something that has an unpleasant or objectionable basis; obnoxious

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<sup>32</sup> I cover this word later in the paper.

The notion of *insidious* to mean “something progressing harmfully and imperceptibly” is illustrated by the following excerpt from “Uncertainty Emerges as a New Enemy” by G. F. Sei, which appeared on p. A4 of the May 26, 2020 edition of the WSJ: “When it comes to economic recovery, the coronavirus remains Public Enemy No. 1. But not far behind is an equally **insidious** force: uncertainty.” In the same edition, M. Rees, in his (p. A15) review of the book “Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World” (by V. H. Murthy), recounts a passage from the book where the author talks about the travails of a U.S. soldier returning from Afghanistan and the “treatment facility that helped (this soldier) get sober...and ‘to recognize just how **insidious** and powerful a hold loneliness had over him.’”<sup>33</sup>

The use of *insidious* to mean “wily or subtly cunning” (or perhaps even “deceitful” or “treacherous”) is illustrated in the following excerpt from an Opinion piece (“Disinfecting Journalistic Ethics”) by H. W. Jenkins, Jr. found (p. A13) in the May 6, 2020 edition of the WSJ: “... maybe it would be more accurate to say Mr. Trump modeled his own intellectual sloppiness on the cable TV that he consumes in such large doses. Nowadays an **insidious** rationale has intruded: Reporters are actually praised for ‘advancing the narrative’—i.e., finding ‘facts’ to support a desired story line.”

By contrast, the primary definition of the word *invidious* is “something that produces anger, envy, or resentment in others.” An example of such usage appears in a Letter to the Editor (“Discrimination Law Isn’t Supposed to ‘Punish the Wicked’”) published in the June 7, 2018 edition of the WSJ (p. A17). The author of this opinion piece writes: “Monday’s (court) ruling won’t open the floodgates to **invidious** discrimination as critics imagine.” Again, I would assert that for the assumed audience, the use of “invidious” is a powerful way to say that the ruling in question will not likely “produce anger, envy, or resentment in others.”

*inveigh* (v.): to denounce, castigate, remonstrate, or fulminate; to speak (or write) about something with great hostility (usually used with “against”) vs.

*inveigle* (v.): to lure or entice someone to do something by means of flattery or deception; to “sweet-talk” or “bamboozle” someone

The notion of “speaking about something with great hostility” for the word *inveigh* is aptly illustrated by the following excerpt from B. Swaim’s (June 10, 2020) review of the book “Our Time Is Now” by Stacey Abrams.<sup>34</sup> Swaim opines (p. A15) that the words of Ms. Abrams “...are strong, (but) her arguments weak. She **inveighs**...against voter ‘purges,’ the removal from voter lists of names of people who haven’t voted in recent elections (etc.).” In my opinion, this is an excellent example of the author’s use of a single, powerful word to make a point.

The use of *inveigle* to connote “deception of purpose” is illustrated in the following excerpt from M. Swaim’s May 5, 2020 review (p. A15) of the book *Pelosi* by Molly Ball: “Add to Mrs. Pelosi’s gifts a mesmerizing personal

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<sup>33</sup>In a passage titled “Don’t Interrupt Others or Finish Their Sentences,” Carlson (1997) in his book *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff: and it’s all small stuff* notes (p. 21) that “[O]nce you begin noticing yourself interrupting others, you’ll see that this *insidious* tendency is nothing more than an innocent habit that has become invisible to you.” (emphasis added). This statement provides another example of how the word *insidious* can be used powerfully to represent “something that is working or spreading harmfully but in subtle or stealthy manner.”

<sup>34</sup> Stacey Abrams, a Democrat, served as minority leader in the Georgia House of Representatives until 2017, when she resigned that position to run for governor in 2018, a race she lost to Brian Kemp, a Republican.

charm. Somehow, she has **inveigled** Molly Ball, Time magazine’s national political correspondent, into writing one of the most cloyingly adulatory paeans<sup>35</sup> to a living politician I’ve ever read.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Miscellaneous Words (Personal Favorites)*

*arcane* (adj.): secret, hidden, known or knowable only to a few people

In a Letter to the Editor published May 21, 2018, Gordon Larsen writes (p. A16): “Through Mercatus<sup>37</sup> I became a disciple of...economists with a knack for translating **arcane** research into useful information for policy makers.” A second illustration is from an August 23, 2019 page-one WSJ article titled “Overstock CEO Ends Turbulent Tenure.” The authors of this piece (P. Rudegear and P. Vigna) provide the following quote from what can only be considered a discursive<sup>38</sup> letter to shareholders written by the outgoing CEO of Overstock, Patrick Byrne: “It has been an honor to serve you through thick and thin, threats grand and **arcane**...” In a Letter to the Editor published on May 8, 2020, the writer (Lee Becker) concludes his letter by referring to (p. A14) “**arcane**, eye-of-the-beholder provisions of the (U.S.) Constitution.” Finally, in an article titled “Covid-19 Has Been Brutal to Weak Firms—Hertz is Latest” (May 26, 2020), the authors (N. Naughton, M. Wirz, and C. Lombardo) tell us (p. A11) “...Hertz had little capacity to borrow, so it turned to one of the more **arcane** corners of Wall Street, the market for asset-backed securitizations, or ABC...” All of the preceding examples illustrate the notion of “something known only to a few,” a sentiment captured powerfully by the use of a single word, *arcane*.

*discordant* (adj.): characterized by lack of agreement; differing or clashing; quarrelsome; being at variance with

The use of the word *discordant* to reflect the notion of “clashing” or “being at variance with” is cogently illustrated in the following excerpt from an opinion piece (“Michael Moore’s Inconvenient Half-Truth,” June 6-7, 2020) by H. W. Jenkins, Jr., which Jenkins wrote in response to Michael Moore’s recent film, “Planet of the Humans.” To wit, Jenkins notes (p. A13): “This counsel of despair is...**discordant** with the film’s opening, in which (the film’s director) Mr. (Jeff) Gibbs recalls the pollution problems of his youth...(which) in large measure (have been) corrected today.” The reference to “counsel of despair” refers to the following comment that Moore made in his film: “...We humans must accept that infinite growth is suicide.”

*evocation* (n.): a calling forth or summoning (as of old memories or of a spirit); an imaginative recreation (e.g., the evocation of a simpler time, or, evocations of the sights and sounds of the annual festival held in our hometown)

A good example of the proper use of the word *evocations* comes from a review of the film “Stan and Ollie” (January 4, 2019). The reviewer, Joe Morgenstern, notes (p. A10) that the quality that made the comedy team Laurel & Hardy

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<sup>35</sup> According to the Free Dictionary (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/paeon>), the word paeon means “a joyous song or hymn of praise, tribute, thanksgiving, or triumph.” As in the case at hand, however, the word can also be taken to mean, more simply, “enthusiastic praise.”

<sup>36</sup> In the absence of space constraints, I would likely have included in the discussion the following additional word-pairs, the elements of which have all appeared in recent editions of the WSJ: *compartment* vs. *deportment*, *fulminate* vs. *fulsome*, *indolent* vs. *insolent*, *quash* vs. *quell*, *peremptory* (or *peremptorily*) vs. *preempt* (or *preemptory*), *rail* vs. *roil* vs. *rile*, and *stoic* vs. *stolid*. Note that in some cases both words in each pair could be used interchangeably.

<sup>37</sup> The Mercatus Center at George Mason University is a non-profit free-market-oriented think tank (see: <http://mercatus.org>).

<sup>38</sup> According to the Free Dictionary (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/discursive>) there are two primary meanings of the word *discursive*. Relevant to the present context, we can take the word to mean “rambling or digressive” or “passing from one topic to another, usually in an unmethodical way.”

funny “... suffuses<sup>39</sup> (the film). Sometimes it’s manifest in the film’s **evocations** of memorable Laurel & Hardy routines...” Similarly, in his review of the movie “The Trip to Greece” (May 22, 2020), Morgenstern tells us (p. A12) that “Two special treats (in the movie) are Rob’s fricative-rich<sup>40</sup> rendition of Dustin Hoffman’s Ratso Rizzo in ‘Midnight Cowboy,’ followed by Steve’s **evocation** of the same actor’s Dorothy Michaels in ‘Tootsie.’”

*nascent* (adj.): beginning to exist or develop; newly conceived; coming into being or starting to develop; coming into existence or developing; emergent

The word *nascent* (in the sense of beginning to be developed or emergent) has appeared often in recent issues of the WSJ, as evidenced by the following two examples: “Short-term offerings (of health insurance in the U.S.) are **nascent** and several states ban them...” (“About That ‘Junk’ Health Insurance,” May 20, 2019, p. A16); and, “(former Xavier University basketball star and NBA [National Basketball Association] player David West has) retired from the NBA...and has recently become chief operating officer of a **nascent** outfit called the Historical Basketball League, which is recruiting top high school players for a summer season that would begin in 2020” (Brian Costa, “Former NBA Star Wants to Disrupt NCAA’s Model,” February 26, 2019, p. D1).

The notion of using *nascent* to mean “coming into being” or “emergent” is illustrated by the following statement that appeared in a May 8, 2020 front-page article (“Coronavirus Hijacks the Body from Head to Toe”): Infection (by the virus) “may affect pregnancies, though the science (regarding this issue) is **nascent**.” Finally, I note the following related usage that appears on page A1 of the June 6-7, 2020 edition of the WSJ: “U.S. stocks surged as (recently released) jobs data spurred investors to increase bets on a **nascent**, if likely uneven, economic recovery.”

*prescient* (adj.): having foreknowledge; having or exhibiting knowledge of events before they take place

As illustrated by the following two examples, the word *prescient* appears often in items found in the WSJ. Steven A. Cohen and Matthew W. Granade, authors of the *Opinion* piece “Models Will Run the World” published August 20, 2018, state (p. A17): “Marc Andreessen’s essay ‘Why Software is Eating the World,’ appeared in this newspaper Aug. 20, 2011. Mr. Andreessen’s analysis was **prescient**. The companies he identified—Netflix, Amazon, Spotify—did eat their industries. Newer software companies—Didi, Airbnb, Stripe—are also at the table, digging in.” Similarly, a Letter to the Editor by Steve Tanberg (March 5, 2019) states (p. A16): “(Benjamin Franklin’s response to a question posed to him regarding the nature of the government founders of the U.S. had given us—‘A republic, if you can keep it!’) reflects a **prescient** doubt that America could hold together this wonderful but fragile form of responsible freedom.” Finally, in a Letter to the Editor published May 14, 2020 (p. A14), the writer (W. R. Jewell) grouses “...doesn’t anyone read the Constitution anymore, specifically Amendments V and VI, which are **prescient** in these (Title IX) matters?”<sup>41</sup>

### Generalizability

A skeptic might question whether the words presented above were contrived or whether they represent a self-serving sample. To address this issue, I present below words taken from alternative sources I read recently. None of these words appear in the listings presented above. These additional examples—from multiple sources (business and

<sup>39</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/suffuse>) the word suffuse can be taken to mean “to spread over or through,” “to flush or fill,” or “to imbue or infuse.”

<sup>40</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fricative#examples>) the noun form of fricative is a linguistics term that refers to “a sound made by forcing air out of your mouth through a narrow opening that is made using the lips, teeth, or tongue.”

<sup>41</sup> Space limitations preclude coverage of additional favorites of mine. Among the “power words” from recent editions of the WSJ that did not make the cut for the present paper are the following: *argot*, *coda*, *draconian*, *endemic*, *exculpatory*, *hegemony*, *implacable*, *intractable*, *mercurial*, *obsequious*, *paeon*, *palpable*, *scuttle*, *surfeit*, *tutelage*, *vagaries*, and *vicissitudes*.

nonbusiness)—would seem to argue against the creation of a biased or selective sampling. Rather, they support the validity of the strategy of using *reading* as a mechanism for learning to communicate better.

### ***Alexander Hamilton***

In my opinion, serious readers of *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow (2004) will be impressed by Chernow’s felicity with words and his ability to use *word choices* to communicate with power and verve. I presented three such examples earlier in this paper. An abbreviated listing of additional “power words” I identified from my reading of *Hamilton* is as follows: *affectation*, *apotheosis* (or *apotheosize*), *comport*, *contretemps*, *dissipate*, *dissolute*, *encomia* (or, *encomium*), *enmity*, *fastidious*, *machinations*, *obsequious*, *peremptory*, *querulous*, *scuttle*, *truculent*, and *voluble*. An understanding of these words seems fundamental to appreciating the author’s lively account of one of the most influential individuals in the history of the United States, Alexander Hamilton. As such, I reference these words here as “power words.” I note, too, that many of these words have appeared as well in recent issues of the WSJ.

### ***The Wall Street Journal***

To test whether I had exhausted the WSJ as a source of “power words,” I read two recent editions of the Journal, front to back.<sup>42</sup> Following is a set of intriguing, and potentially useful, words (and minor accompanying text, to provide context and interpretive value) I found in the June 3, 2020 edition of the Journal: “a *dystonic* facial expression” (p. A17),<sup>43</sup> “a *fortuitous* encounter” (p. A17), “Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *conundrum* ... pertaining to things about which ‘we cannot speak’ and must therefore ‘pass over in silence’” (p. A17),<sup>44</sup> “two of the most *egregious* (massive data-privacy breaches)” (p. A18), “[I]t was *sophistry*” (p. A18), “*sybarites* living it up at taxpayer expense” (p. A18), “Ms. Curran (a Nassau County Executive) *hector*ed that it is forbidden to play (tennis) on a court next to another court (being used)” (p. A19), “the narrative that law enforcement is *endemically* racist” (p. A19), and “food makers like Campbell ... found (that) their *ubiquity* and consistency turned out to be an advantage against newer brands like Amy’s Kitchen that had (prior to the pandemic) cut into sales” (p. B1).

From the June 5, 2020 edition of the Journal, I identified the following “power words” (with minor accompanying text): “*superannuation* retirement accounts” (p. A11), “he (the catcher) reels in his prey (iguanas) for the quick *coup de grâce*” (p. A11), “an insufferable *pedant*” (p. A13), “a (film) grade lowered by *prolixity*” (p. A13), “(the film) suffers from a *surfeit* of currents and undercurrents” (p. A13), “the (movie) is *blithely* misconceived” (p. A13), “in this insistently *whimsical* ... version (of an earlier film)” (p. A13), “her *mercurial* marriage” (p. A13), “*exculpatory* information” (p. A15), “*apocalyptic* nonsense” (p. A16), “the *penultimate* sentence (of an author’s editorial statement)” (p. A16), “Edward Banfield’s *epigram* of the day” (p. A17),<sup>45</sup> “*contagion* theory” (p. A17), “a popular Twitter *meme*” (p. B11), “major financial *ructions*” (p. B11), and “the *quintessential* high-tech industry” (p. B12).

The point here is not that accounting professionals will use all or even many of these words in their own professional writing or speaking—it is impossible for me to know or even speculate about this. At a minimum, though, knowledge of these words seems fundamental to one’s reading ability, as demonstrated by the occurrence of

<sup>42</sup> None of the 18 words presented and discussed above are from these two editions of the WSJ.

<sup>43</sup> According to the Mayo Clinic (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dystonia/symptoms-causes/syc-20350480>) *dystonia* (the noun form of *dystonic*) is a movement disorder in which a person’s muscles contract uncontrollably, causing repetitive or twisting movements.

<sup>44</sup> According to the Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/>) Ludwig Wittgenstein is considered by some to be the greatest philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. ... His two major works (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921] and *Philosophical Investigations* [1953] examined language and its relationship to the world.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Christie Banfield was an American political scientist who wrote widely on the topics of urban planning, urban politics, and civic culture (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_C.\\_Banfield](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_C._Banfield)).

these words in the WSJ. I do not think it a stretch to assert that knowledge of such words has the potential to improve one's writing, listening, and speaking skills as well.

### ***Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus***

In an effort to test the limits of my argument, I recently listened to a complete audio clip of the 1818 version of *Frankenstein*, a novel written a little more than 200 years ago by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.<sup>46</sup> Among the intriguing words I found in this superbly written tale, all of which I have added to my ever-expanding list of “power words,” are the following (with minor accompanying text): “a lecture delivered (by the professor) without any presumption or *affectation*,” “attempts (by the monster) to *ameliorate* his fate,” “I found her (Elizabeth) attractive and *amiable*,” “a *capacious* mind (of the doctor),” “the powers...were (more) *chimerical* (than real),” “a great *dissimilitude* in our behavior and manner,” “the *dross* of human nature,” “he (Dr. Frankenstein) *entreated* his father to reconsider” (also: “my weary *entreaties*”), “my *incantations* were unsuccessful,” “I raved *incessantly* concerning him (the monster),” “*indefatigable* attention to public business (paid by my father),” “I *inured* my body to the rigors of scientific experimentation,” “at length *lassitude* succeeded to the tumult I had endured,” “the study of which was made *odious* to me,” “(the professor) concluded (the lecture) with a *panegyric* of modern chemistry,” “there is no *pedantry* in his manner,” “my father made no *reproach* in his letters to me,” and, “a boy with *singular* intelligence and manner.” I note that this listing contains but a sampling of “power words” that, in my opinion, allowed Shelley to create a most gripping and haunting tale.<sup>47</sup> It is not at all clear to me how one could appreciate the brilliance of the novel without knowledge of these (and other) words found in the story.

### **Implementation Options**

I developed the present paper, as a learning resource, for application in a variety of professional settings, to include formal classroom as well as CPE (continuing professional education) offerings. Classroom applications can range from accounting courses that have a communications component<sup>48</sup> to a full-fledged accounting communications course, such as those offered in selected MAcc (Master of Accountancy) programs. If used in this way, it is recommended that the instructor (or discussion leader) stress the dual focus of the paper. Any of the word-choice examples contained in this paper could be used in both formal accounting classes and CPE sessions to show how it is possible to communicate with “power” or “verve.” At a more conceptual (or general) level, the paper provides an experience-based example of the value of critical self-reflection and of *reading* more—a message that should resonate well with a broad selection of accounting professionals.

If used in conjunction with a CPE session dealing with the development of accountants' communication skills, the lists presented in this paper (both Table 1 and elsewhere) could be used as the basis for determining which of these self-identified “power words” are deemed most appropriate for business/accounting communication.<sup>49</sup> As well, session participants might be broken down into small groups for the purpose of developing example sentences demonstrating these applications.

Prior to the dissemination and discussion of material in this resource, an ambitious faculty member (or CPE session leader) might perform a pre-test as a baseline assessment of student (attendee) knowledge of the vocabulary items

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<sup>46</sup> The YouTube clip I viewed is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuyEaMdcwWU>.

<sup>47</sup> Other words I found intriguing and “powerful” (in the sense of being able to appreciate more fully the *Frankenstein* novel): *adduce*, *execrate*, *ignominious*, *languidly*, *languor*, *obdurate*, *perambulation*, *pertinacity* (or, *pertinacious*), *promontory*, *salubrious*, and *timorous*.

<sup>48</sup> An example is the required MBA managerial accounting course described in Stout (2014), which course included a two-hour-and-forty-minute “communication skills development” module. I can attest to the fact that this module was popular with many graduate students, but particularly for students for whom English was a second language and for students who at the undergraduate level had majored in a technical field of study, such as engineering.

<sup>49</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

contained herein. To assess educational gains, a follow-up post-test could then be administered at an appropriate time. To facilitate such applications, and based on the words presented in Table 1, I present in an Appendix word-choice quizzes in three different formats: fill-in-the-blank (Panel A), matching (Panel B), and multiple-choice (Panel C). In addition to pre- and post-tests, the number of individuals who committed themselves to additional reading as a strategy to improve their communication skills, could be documented. A follow-up assessment could also include documentation of the number of students who registered for and actually used any of the additional resources listed below. Any of these strategies, and perhaps others, could be implemented for program assessment purposes (e.g., AACSB).

### **Other Resources**

The present learning resource can be supplemented by any of the resources, both printed and web-based, presented below.

#### ***Printed Resources***

For those accounting professionals interested in developing their communication skills further, the word-choice articles by Stout and Sorensen (2015) and Stout et al. (2015) can be consulted. Both papers provide a discussion and examples of different types of potentially confusing words (e.g., impinge vs. infringe, frail vs. fragile, denounce vs. renounce, and continual vs. continuous). Both of these papers provide sample sentences illustrating correct usage of words referenced therein and as such may be useful in improving the communication skills of accounting professionals at all levels and contexts. As well, these two papers can be used in CPE settings and/or formal accounting courses that have a communications component (as described above).

#### ***Web-Based Resources***

Free subscriptions to “Word-of-the-Day” websites can be obtained at <https://www.dictionary.com/>, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day>, <http://www.wordthink.com/about-us/>, <http://wordsmith.org/awad/subscribe.html>, and <https://www.oed.com/>. As well, the first two of these sites provide an opportunity to subscribe to daily “word-of-the-day” podcasts. The third site provides three word-delivery options: smartphone, RSS feed, and email. As noted below, the dictionary.com site provides regular online vocabulary (or word-usage) quizzes.

Web-based resources that provide example sentences for designated words are available at the following sites: <https://wordsinasentence.com/> (e.g., to get a listing of sample sentences in which the word “inchoate” is used, use the following URL: <https://wordsinasentence.com/inchoate-in-a-sentence/>), <https://useinsentence.com/>, <http://in-a-sentence.com/> and <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day>. In addition, a Google-developed “word-of-the-day” extension to Chrome is available at <https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/word-of-the-day/kloedcdpipobfmidkoafhmmmlpfjjehl?hl=en-US>. Besides a new word each day, this browser extension displays an associated definition of the word and one or two example sentences (from the web) illustrating correct usage of the word.

For those who might prefer a game-based approach for improving their word power, any of the following can be consulted: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-games> (weekly word challenge game); <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-games/vocabulary-quiz> (weekly vocabulary quiz), and <https://www.sporcle.com/games/subcategory/definition> (language definition quizzes).

Finally, for those interested principally in improving their writing skills, a listing of 10 universities in the U.S. (including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT], Purdue University, and the University of Michigan) offering free (mostly non-credit-bearing) writing courses online can be found at: [https://study.com/articles/10\\_Universities\\_Offering\\_Free\\_Writing\\_Courses\\_Online.html](https://study.com/articles/10_Universities_Offering_Free_Writing_Courses_Online.html).

### Limitations

There are three primary limitations to the present learning resource, all of which have been alluded to earlier: (a) requisite time commitment, (b) the issue of evidentiary support, and (c) focus (or nature) of the word-choice examples chosen. As to the first of these three items, it may be obvious—but worth repeating nonetheless—that to reap the purported benefits of the present resource (or any other communications-development resource for that matter) work and time commitment are required. Time is needed both for reading and for developing a system for learning, remembering, and then—as appropriate—using new words. The expanded “power word” examples from non-business sources reported earlier suggest value in such endeavors. It can be noted as well that investments needed to hone one’s communication skills are conceptually no different from those required to learn (if not master) other subjects, such as mathematics, taxation, or statistics. Put another way, the cited limitation here would seem more endemic to higher education than to the narrower issue of communication skills development.

As to the second item, as a recently retired accounting educator I no longer have ready access to students and therefore testing opportunities, a challenge exacerbated by the current coronavirus pandemic. As such, it is not practicable for me to provide evidence regarding the efficacy of the present learning resource. Although admittedly weak, I can only state as evidence that I was sufficiently convinced of the benefits of the present document to devote precious “retirement” time to its development and a sharing of experiential insights with other accounting professionals.

Finally, the focus of the present resource is broader than “accounting” or “business” communication. Some readers may therefore have a negative view of the applicability of the paper *for their particular (or defined) needs*. This is a fair criticism. At the same time, as has been argued implicitly throughout this paper, the notion of communication skills for accounting professionals can, and perhaps should, be capacious enough to include the types of skills referenced throughout the present resource.

### Conclusion

The ability to communicate effectively is important to success in accounting—at all professional levels. Good diction (including word choice) is an important element of communicating effectively. Communication experts note that one strategy for improving communication skills—writing, speaking, listening, or reading—is to *read more* and to *read more broadly*. The present paper provides an example of critical introspection followed by adoption of a reading-based plan for increasing the author’s vocabulary (or “word power”).

As an educational resource, the value of the paper lies at two levels: at a general level, the paper offers an experienced-based example of reading as a strategy for improving one’s communication skills; at a more specific level, the paper provides definitions and sample usage of a set of 18 self-identified “power words,” subdivided into three categories, from recent issues the WSJ. The Appendix to the paper includes a set of three word-choice quizzes for these words, which can be used in alternative educational settings. To address issues of sample bias and generalizability of approach, I supplement the set of 18 words with a listing of additional (self-identified) “power words” I gleaned recently from my reading of both business and non-business-related sources. Other accounting professionals can use these words judiciously in their own communications, both formal and informal. The paper lists additional resources that accounting professionals could access as part of a comprehensive plan to improve their own communication skills.

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**Table 1: “Power Words” from Recent Issues of the Wall Street Journal\*****Foreign (or Foreign Based) Words:**

1. de minimus
2. de rigueur
3. dictum (plural dicta or dictums)
4. métier
5. zeitgeist

**Words Apt to Be Confusing:**

1. abrogate vs. arrogate
2. abstruse vs. obtuse
3. insidious vs. invidious
4. inveigh vs. inveigle

**Miscellaneous Words (i.e., Personal Favorites):**

1. arcane
2. discordant
3. evocation
4. nascent
5. prescient

**\*Note:** The set of “power words” comprising **Table 1** is based on a subjective assessment by the author.

## APPENDIX

Panel A: Word-Choice Quiz, Version 1<sup>50</sup>

**Instructions:** Correctly complete the sentences below using the words on the following list.

abrogated	insidious
abstruse	inveighed
arcane	inveigled
arrogated	invidious
de minimis	métier
de rigueur	nascent
dictum (plural dicta or dictums)	obtuse
discordant	prescient
evocation	Zeitgeist

- Your \_\_\_\_\_ is whatever you choose to do with your life professionally, whether that is collecting garbage or building rockets.
- She was utterly annoyed with him but being a bit \_\_\_\_\_ he failed to recognize this displeasure.
- The performer's songs perfectly reflected the \_\_\_\_\_ of 1970s America.
- In 1877, the U.S. Congress \_\_\_\_\_ the Treaty of Fort Laramie.
- The unscrupulous couple \_\_\_\_\_ the novice into selling the urn for much less than it was worth.
- The professor's explanation was \_\_\_\_\_, and the students stared at him with incomprehension.
- At the start of each academic year, the school principal addresses incoming students and puts forth her \_\_\_\_\_ that all students can achieve if they are willing to work hard.
- He shut his eyes and tested his power of \_\_\_\_\_.
- The old science fiction novel now seems remarkably \_\_\_\_\_ about the role that computers would come to play in our century.
- In college, I did well in accounting. Math was another story. I never could understand its \_\_\_\_\_ notation!
- He made a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ comparison of children to pigs.
- At the town meeting, residents \_\_\_\_\_ against the council's squandering of state aid.
- She \_\_\_\_\_ all of the credit for their joint efforts on completing the project.
- Leather jackets are \_\_\_\_\_ on college campuses this year.

<sup>50</sup> This quiz was prepared by inserting the selected words into the program found at <https://www.wordsmyth.net/?mode=qm> and using the advanced dictionary option. This program allows the quiz maker certain options, including the ability to insert his/her own items and to amend, according to taste or preferences, recommendations created by the program.

15. Glaucoma is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ disease that can damage a person's eyes before causing any symptoms.
16. The \_\_\_\_\_ views of father and son caused frequent bickering over dinner.
17. If only you could come up with a complete plan and not just a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ idea!
18. The head of the tax division indicated that solutions for certain taxpayer-related issues—such as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ exemption for small transactions or an amnesty for low-level transgressions—will have to come from Congress.

**Solution** (question number followed by correct word choice)

1. métier	10. arcane (or abstruse) *
2. obtuse	11. invidious
3. Zeitgeist	12. inveighed
4. abrogated	13. arrogated
5. inveigled	14. de rigueur
6. abstruse (or arcane)*	15. insidious
7. dictum	16. discordant
8. evocation	17. nascent
9. prescient	18. de minimis

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\*Sources differ as to whether these words are sufficiently close in meaning to be considered substitutable. One view (e.g., <https://thesaurus.plus/related/arcane/abstruse>) is that the two words are synonymous—each word can be taken to mean “difficult for one of ordinary knowledge or intelligence to understand,” “esoteric,” or “known only to a few.” The Meriam-Webster Dictionary also shows these two words as substitutable (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/arcane>). Another view (e.g., <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english-thesaurus/abstruse>) is that the word *arcane* is more properly interpreted as “mysterious” (or, “very mysterious”) or “hidden,” as in “the *arcane* world of contemporary music,” while *abstruse* is more properly interpreted as “obscure” or “not easy to understand,” as in “meetings keep reverting to discussions about *abstruse* resolutions.” On the basis of this evidence, one might properly conclude that the difference between the meaning of these two words is a bit *arcane* (or is it *abstruse*?).

**Panel B: Word-Choice Quiz, Version 2**

**Directions:** Match words and definitions for each of the items below.

Words	Definitions
1. abrogate (v.)	A. having or exhibiting knowledge of events before they take place
2. abstruse (adj.)	B. lacking significance or importance; so minor as to merit disregard
3. arcane (adj.)	C. a particular area of competence (or talent) or field of activity (such as a trade or occupation)
4. arrogate (v.)	D. to obtain by way of flattery or deception; also, to win over or lead astray by guile or deception
5. de minimus (adj.)	E. the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era
6. de rigueur (adj.)	F. known only to a few; esoteric; mysterious
7. dictum (n.)	G. to protest or disapprove vehemently; to complain angrily or bitterly
8. discordant (adj.)	H. something required by etiquette, custom, or current fashion
9. evocation (n.)	I. dissonant or inharmonious; lacking agreement; characterized by dissent
10. insidious (adj.)	J. an authoritative or formal pronouncement; also, a well-known saying or maxim
11. inveigh (v.)	K. to abolish, repeal, or nullify by authority; to do away with or to set aside
12. inveigle (v.)	L. tending to arouse feelings of resentment or animosity, especially because of being slighted; also, something that is offensive or discriminatory
13. invidious (adj.)	M. not keen or quick to notice, feel, or comprehend; lacking quickness of perception or intellect
14. métier (n.)	N. difficult to understand or comprehend; esoteric
15. nascent (adj.)	O. seemingly or outwardly harmless, but actually extremely dangerous; also, dangerous through cunning, subtlety, and underhandedness
16. obtuse (adj.)	P. to claim presumptuously for oneself without right; also, to ascribe or attribute to another without warrant (e.g., blame)
17. prescient (adj.)	Q. in an early stage of existence; partially or imperfectly developed; emergent
18. Zeitgeist (n.)	R. a calling up or summoning, as of memories or of spirits

**Recommended Solution:** 1 (K), 2 (N or F),\* 3 (F or N),\* 4 (P), 5 (B), 6 (H), 7 (J), 8 (I), 9 (R), 10 (O), 11 (G), 12 (D), 13 (L), 14 (C), 15 (Q), 16 (M), 17 (A), 18 (E)

\*Sources differ as to whether these words are sufficiently close in meaning to be considered substitutable. One view (e.g., <https://thesaurus.plus/related/arcane/abstruse>) is that the two words are synonymous—each word can be taken to mean “difficult for one of ordinary knowledge or intelligence to understand,” “esoteric,” or “known only to a few.” The Meriam-Webster Dictionary also shows these two words as substitutable (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/arcane>). Another view (e.g., <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english-thesaurus/abstruse>) is that the word *arcane* is more properly interpreted as “mysterious” (or, “very mysterious”) or “hidden,” as in “the *arcane* world of contemporary music,” while *abstruse* is more properly interpreted as “obscure” or “not easy to understand,” as in “meetings keep reverting to discussions about *abstruse* resolutions.” On the basis of this evidence, one might properly conclude that the difference between the meaning of these two words is a bit *arcane* (or is it *abstruse*?).

**Panel C: Word-Choice Quiz, Version 3**

**Directions:** Choose the BEST word for each of the following definitions.

1. an occupation or field of activity (such as a trade); also, a particular area of competence, expertise, or talent
  - curation
  - métier
  - nomenclature
  - aspiration
  
2. not keen to feel, comprehend, or notice; also, dull or insensitive
  - obtuse
  - acute
  - recondite
  - sentient
  
3. in the spirit of the age; also, a popular outlook or trend of a particular period or generation
  - Zeitgeist
  - epoch
  - apotheosis
  - raconteur
  
4. to abolish, repeal, or nullify by authority
  - disavow
  - extricate
  - abrogate
  - exculpate
  
5. to entice or ensnare by clever talk or flattery
  - ruminare
  - castigate
  - comport
  - inveigle
  
6. difficult for one of ordinary knowledge or intelligence to understand
  - manifest
  - superficial
  - querulous
  - abstruse

7. a well-known saying or maxim (i.e., aphorism or adage)

- sophistry
- dictum
- asperity
- triage

8. the act of bringing or recalling a feeling, memory, or image to the conscious mind; also, a summoning (as of a spirit)

- incarnation
- ritualization
- evocation
- avocation

9. having or exhibiting knowledge of events before they take place; having foresight

- prescient
- perspicacious
- preternatural
- tendentious

10. of a secret or esoteric nature; mysterious; hidden

- unequivocal
- arcane
- tortuous
- meandering

11. tending to arouse feelings of resentment, ill will, or animosity, especially because of a slight; provoking anger or resentment

- belie
- belligerent
- invidious
- inexorable

12. to protest strongly or attack vehemently with words; to rail (against)

- eviscerate
- vitrify
- vitiate
- inveigh

13. to claim or seize without justification; to take or claim for oneself without right

- adumbrate
- approbate
- arrogate
- assignate

14. something required by etiquette, custom, or current fashion

- du jour
- de rigueur
- de facto
- desultory

15. seemingly or outwardly harmless, but actually extremely dangerous; also, crafty, cunning, or stealthily deceitful

- insidious
- recondite
- vile
- obstreperous

16. in conflict or disagreement; clashing or differing; incongruous

- incommodious
- uncontentious
- complaisant
- discordant

17. coming into being or starting to develop; emergent

- preparatory
- chimerical
- nascent
- panegyrical

18. inconsequential, trivial, or insignificant

- detente
- dilettante
- de minimis
- de jure

**Suggested Solution:**

1. métier	2. obtuse	3. Zeitgeist	4. evocation	5. inveigle
6. abstruse	7. dictum	8. evocation	9. prescient	10. arcane
11. invidious	12. inveigh	13. arrogate	14. de rigueur	15. insidious
16. discordant	17. nascent	18. de minimis		