

CBV **Federica Nazzani** of Capital Assist (Valuation) Inc. has recently been nominated for Professional of the Year by the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce. She is the first CBV to be nominated and it is great recognition for the profession in the Windsor-Essex and Southwestern Ontario area. The award winner will be announced at the 2015 Business Excellence Awards gala on April 22, 2015. [Click here](#) to view the program.

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Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapona

Welcome to Writer's Edge – a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid writes about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid – she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than ten years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade – Are they as clear as can be?

Could You Repeat That, Please?

By Ingrid Sapona

This column is about synonyms. You remember them – they're words or expressions that have the same, or nearly the same, meaning,¹ like cry and sob, for example. Inspiration for this column came from comments by Steven Pinker in his newest book, *The Sense of Style*. Pinker is a Canadian-born cognitive scientist and linguist at Harvard who specializes in psycholinguistics, which is “the study of the mental faculties involved in the perception, production, and acquisition of language.”² I'll come back to Pinker's comments about using synonyms in a minute.

I find there are two distinct situations when I reach for the thesaurus. The first is when I'm concerned about whether a word I've used might be subject to misinterpretation. A word's synonyms can give you a sense of the different ways the word might be interpreted. For example, “covert” has a pretty straightforward dictionary definition: “not openly shown, engaged in, or avowed.”³ But, based on the word's synonyms it could be interpreted as isolated or remote – meanings you may not intend. Depending on what a word's synonyms reveal, you may decide to find a different word or clarify exactly how you're using the word.

The other situation I turn to the thesaurus is when I'm using the same word or phrase over and over. Concerned that I might be boring the reader, I search for synonyms or other descriptors. Sometimes there are good synonyms, but often I find there aren't. When that happens, if I truly am concerned with being repetitive, I try re-casting the sentence or paragraph.

Pinker's discussion of the issue of whether to use different words to avoid repetition is very interesting. He notes that many style experts warn against using different words. Indeed, apparently Henry Fowler (author of *Modern English Usage*) sarcastically referred to the practice as “elegant variation.”⁴ Even more memorable are comments Pinker attributes to Theodore Bernstein, who apparently described the fear of using the same word twice

1 Here's Merriam-webster.com's full definition of synonym: words or expressions of the same language that have the same or nearly the same meaning in some or all senses

2 Merriam-webster.com.

3 According to Merriam-webster.com

4 Pinker, Steven, *The Sense of Style*, (Viking) at page 156.

as monologophobia and who coined the term synonymomania for “the compulsion to call a spade successively a garden implement and an earth-turning tool.”⁵

Pinker agrees there are times when you should avoid repeating words in close succession. For example, he points out that sometimes when a writer uses the same noun in quick succession, readers assume the second noun refers to a different individual. Using the same noun can cause confusion because “the natural way to refer to an individual a second time is with a pronoun.” But, Pinker warns that if using a pronoun would make it unclear, you should use a generic definite noun phrase instead. The example Pinker gives is this sentence (written about Oedipus):

*The baby, he says, was given to him by another shepherd from the Laius household, who had been told to get rid of the child.*⁶

Pinker says the author was correct to use “the child” rather than repeating “the baby” because readers might have wondered whether a second baby was being referred to. As well, he notes that simply substituting the pronoun *him* for “the child” wouldn’t work because it wouldn’t be clear whether the pronoun refers to the baby or the other shepherd.⁷

Pinker’s Advice

So, what’s a writer to do? As you might expect, Pinker says psycholinguistics can help. He suggests that writers avoid varying wording capriciously because, in general, people assume that if someone uses two different words they’re referring to two different things.⁸ And, writers should never vary wording when comparing or contrasting two things. But, you should use a different word if you’re referring to something multiple times in quick succession and using the same name makes it monotonous or if repeating the same name might suggest to the reader that a new actor has entered the scene.⁹

One other comment Pinker makes that I think is especially useful relates to being careful to choose replacement word(s) that make it easy for the reader to track. Pinker says that the replacement word is acting as a “pseudo-pronoun” and so it should be “pronounish in two ways”: it should be more generic than the original noun and should, if appropriate, apply to a larger class of entities.¹⁰ Here’s the example¹¹ he gives:

Example 1: A bus came roaring around a corner. The vehicle nearly flattened a pedestrian.

versus

Example 2: A vehicle came roaring around a corner. The bus nearly flattened a pedestrian.

According to Pinker, in an experiment on understanding stories, participants found Example 1 easier to understand. You’ll note that rather than repeating bus, the writer used a pseudo-pronoun in the second sentence and that the term used (vehicle) applies to a larger class than the original word. And finally, so that readers don’t have to work too hard, Pinker says that the replacement word should easily call to mind the first one. In the example, since a bus is a typical kind of vehicle, the reader is able to make the connection effortlessly. In contrast, Pinker points out that had the first sentence been about a tank coming around a corner, readers may have had difficulty making the connection between a tank and a vehicle.

Conclusion

When it comes to deciding whether to use a synonym rather than repeat a word, the key is making sure you’re not sending the reader any subtle signals that you don’t intend. Don’t trade the possibility of boring readers with the possibility of confusing them or making them work harder to understand what you’re talking about.

5 Id.

6 Id. at p. 157.

7 Id.

8 Id.

9 Id.

10 Id. at p. 158.

11 Id.