

# Vagueness is a Journalistic Sin

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

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## Vagueness is a journalistic sin

Vagueness is one of the most common sins in journalism.

### Think about these questions:

- How many is "a few" or "a lot"?
- How often is "very often", "often", "sometimes", "rarely" and "very rarely"?
- How many minutes or hours are in "a long time" and in "a short time".
- How much money has "a poor person" and "a rich person"?
- How heavy is "a big woman"?
- Name one item sure to be in "a picturesque view".
- What exactly grows in "a lovely garden"?
- What food is on the menu of "a fine quality restaurant"?
- What is the exact cost of "an expensive meal" and is it still expensive if James Packer pays?
- Is \$1 "a lot of money"? (It would be if you're buying a kilo of rice and its price is \$1 per grain.)
- Is \$1 "not much money"? (It would be not much money if you're buying an original Picasso artwork for \$1.)

A lot of vagueness (and sheer confusion) occurs because of silly over-use of adjectives and adverbs.

Some students ask about the guideline that says "Do not depend on adjectives, use strong verbs".

Some early (or bad) writers will write: "She had a beautiful face but wore ugly clothes and laughed oddly."

The adjectives "beautiful" and "ugly" convey NOTHING.

- Beautiful . . . how, in what way, to whom?
- Ugly as in worn-out?
- Ugly as in dirty?
- Ugly to the writer?

But what did the clothes in fact look like? Using the adjectives "beautiful" or "ugly", and the adverb "oddly" and hoping they mean something to the reader is lazy.

Relying on adjectives and hoping they mean to the reader the same as they mean to you the writer, is LAZY WRITING.

"Show don't tell" is the rule here. Describe the clothes and let the reader decide if they're ugly.

However, strong verbs like shoved, smashed, floated, sank . . . convey a picture well.

If the person's walk is "odd" to you the writer, then describe the walk and let the reader decide if that is odd.

Read good publications and good books and you'll see that NOT relying on adjectives, but using strong verbs makes for much better writing.

NOTE: It's important to avoid vagueness and use concrete and specific descriptions, not vague images that mean something to you the writer, but could mean anything to the reader.

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