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Finalist

Creative Non-fiction Category

2018 Emerging Writers Contest

The Importance of Word Choice

As someone who tends to over-analyze everything – and no, that is not hyperbole – word choice is imperative to me. Whenever I am composing an email, text, letter, or any other form of written communication where the recipient cannot see my face, I take time to read over my statements and make sure they are phrased in the best way possible. I think of the possible indications of my word choices, and if the words I have chosen are fulfilling the job as I had intended. I do this to not only lessen confusion, but to enhance clarity and avoid any possibility of offense. Because I believe the word choices we use when we speak – the phrases we employ, the wording and diction we utilize – show who we are, and what we value, to others.

I have always suffered from anxiety, but high school seemed to heighten my sensitivity to social situations. In high school, I often found myself overanalyzing anything anyone had said to me, searching out any possible negativity aimed towards me. Once in tenth grade my mother bought me some art to hang on my wall. She had purchased it from a locally owned country themed store that she loved. The piece was country chic, three pieces of wood coated in light blue paint, and read: ‘Act like a lady. Think like a Boss’ in painted on bold lettering. My mom thought it was the cutest thing she had ever seen; I disagreed.

Though I thanked her for the gift, I expressed that I was not comfortable hanging something so clearly not me in my bedroom. When she asked me to explain I did, but with hesitation. I did not want her to think that I thought I was too good for the piece, but I wanted her to understand my reasoning against it. So very carefully I said, “I don’t really want to hang this in my room because of the way it is phrased. It implies that women are not capable of being feminine and holding a boss position simultaneously.” The word choice and phrasing of the work had rubbed me the wrong way – whether that was the intention of the piece or not, it was how I had first perceived it – and this art was not the first thing I wanted people to see when they entered my room. After I explained to my mom my reasoning further – that if I perceived the wording this way, others may too, and this is not at all my belief – she began to understand: though, begrudgingly. My careful word choice posed in my argument helped to aid in my case against what I referred to as the ‘poor choice of word choice’. In being careful of what I said, I was able to lower the risk of offending my mother, and help her to understand my angle of reasoning.

After our conversation, that refurbished piece of wood was removed from my room and placed out of sight until my mom could find a new place to hang it. Later that year, however, the old wooden piece remained in its same hiding place. I asked my mom why she had not hung it up – because originally, she thought it was so cute and creative – and she admitted that she could not stop thinking about it in the way I had. She had become disenchanted with this piece and its wording and – though I couldn’t tell her at the risk of receiving a snarky remark – I was very happy she had come to see the other perceptions of the wording, and the damage that could be done if she chose to hang it up in our home. Through this experience my mother and I were able to come to an understanding involving word choice due to our own word choices!

I believe word choice – and the use of tone and body language to support it – is imperative to society and individuals. When I am speaking I think about what I want to say. I turn my brain off auto pilot so that I can think through what I am hoping to say and design the best way to convey it. I believe it is imperative to utilize the most effective form of communication possible when speaking so that I can put myself, and others, at ease while a conversation is carried.