Using Elements of Style as a Writer

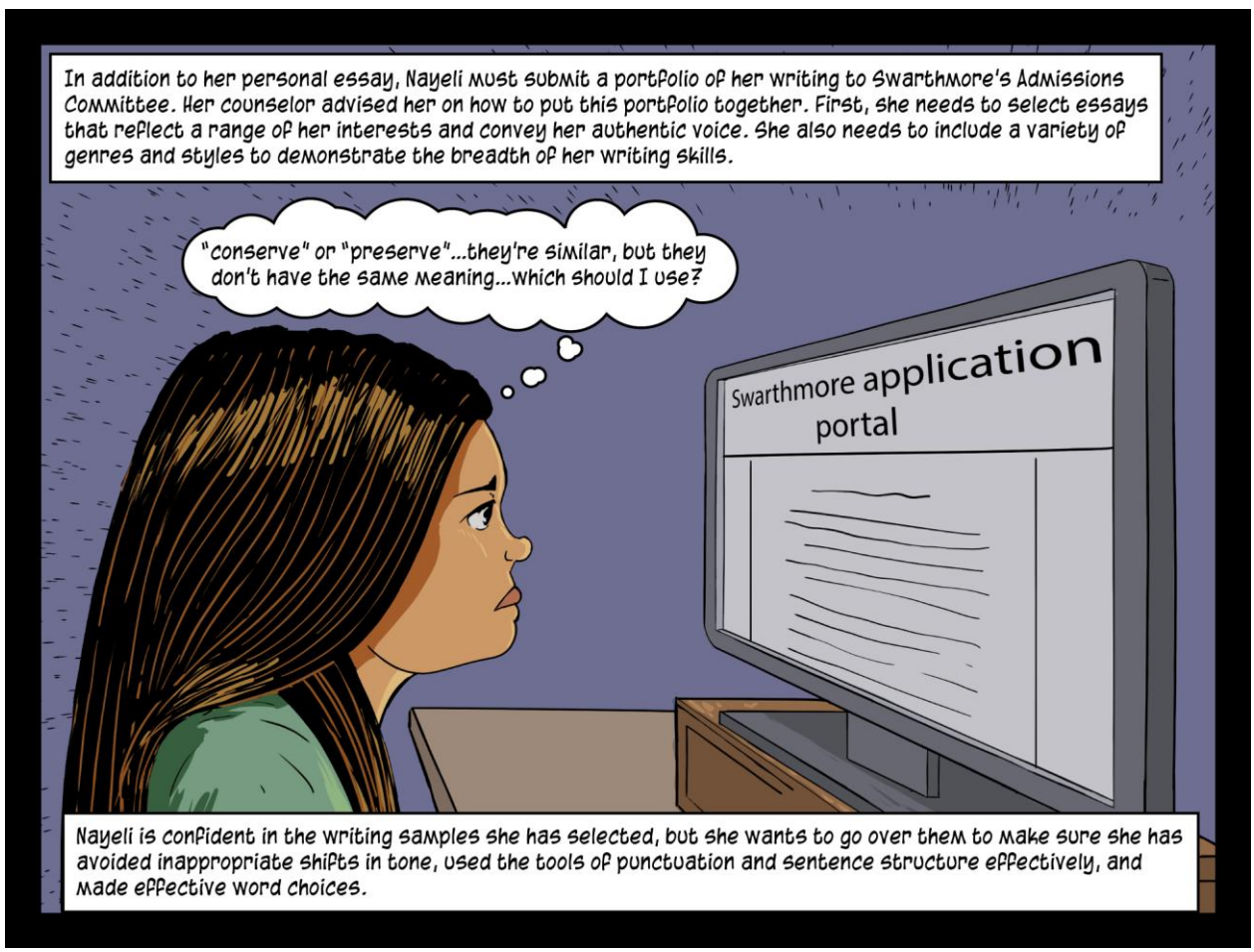
Key Concepts

- Style is the distinctive way in which authors craft the language of their writing to engage and influence their audience.
- Writers select words with meanings that most precisely fit the context and contribute to the tone or attitude being expressed.
- Academic writing builds credibility by avoiding overly casual language and maintaining a formal tone
- The way authors arrange parts of a sentence can demonstrate how ideas are related and help convey the intended meaning.
- Writers use punctuation such as parentheses and dashes to interject relevant information in the middle or at the end of a sentence.

8.A Using Word Choice and Tone Effectively

Writers should choose words that fit the context, maintain an appropriate tone, and convey their perspective. To do this, they must consider the connotations of words—the additional layers of meaning involved in the way a word or phrase evokes certain feelings, associations, or ideas. They must also choose words with definitions that fit the context in which they are used.

Nayeli's New Style Episode 3



Choosing the Right Words for the Situation

- Writers should choose words that convey the precise meaning required by the context of the sentence.

Ex: Linguists employ various methods to document and conserve languages that have never been committed to writing.

"Preserve" means to safeguard something to protect it from harm. "Conserve" means to prevent the loss of resources, typically by minimizing usage. Language is not a resource that can be used up, so it cannot be conserved, but it can be preserved for the future by encouraging its use. Therefore, "conserve" should be changed to "preserve."

- Writers should choose words that help convey their perspective.

Ex: Zapotec is a desirable language to learn because it uses a complex tonal system (pitch variations that convey meaning) and an intricate system of verb conjugations.

The details about Zapotec's "complex" and "intricate" systems suggest the perspective that Zapotec is difficult to learn. Therefore, if the writer wishes to convey that perspective, "desirable" should be changed to "challenging."

- Writers should choose words that maintain an appropriate level of formality. In academic writing, the tone should be somewhat formal rather than colloquial (overly casual).

Ex: Embedded in Indigenous languages is cool knowledge about ecosystems, plant life, animal behavior, and many other aspects of the natural world.

"Cool" does not match the formality of the sentence, so it should either be omitted or changed to a more academic term such as "significant" or "vital."

- Writers should avoid shifts in tone that may confuse the reader. If a writer wants to convey a positive, negative, or neutral tone, the writer should avoid using a term with connotations that conflict with the tone of the surrounding text.

Ex: Notorious for their advanced urban planning, the Zapotecs developed Monte Albán, a major city that served as their political and religious center from 500 BCE to 800 CE. Despite facing challenges from neighboring civilizations, the Zapotec culture endured, leaving behind a rich legacy of art, architecture, and intricate writing systems.

"Notorious" has negative connotations: being known for bad deeds. Since the following discussion conveys respect for the Zapotec civilization, the writer should maintain a respectful tone by using a word like "Renowned, " which has positive connotations: being well known for good qualities.

Activity: Revising to Improve Word Choice and Tone

Read the following excerpt from an essay Nayeli will submit in her college admissions portfolio and consider the choices she must make about the level of formality and precision in the numbered sections. Examine the word choice in each section and determine what changes if any she should make. Annotate the text to explain whether a revision is needed, and if so, suggest one. Then click the number in parentheses to reveal what revision, if any, should be made.

Indigenous languages are a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity that have been spoken by native communities for generations, rooted in the cultural heritage of their (1) alienated regions. (2) These languages hold a profound significance because they serve as more than just a way to communicate; they embody the identity, spirituality, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples worldwide. However, many of these languages are at risk of (3) expiration due to factors such as globalization, colonization, and the dominance of other languages. Efforts to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages are meaningful not only for linguistic diversity but also for safeguarding the unique worldviews and traditions they represent. Recognizing the value of these languages is a vital step toward (4) upping respect for Indigenous cultures and promoting their resilience in a changing world.