

Throw Away Your Thesaurus

In school, you may have been given this advice: Instead of repeating “house” over and over throughout your document, select a substitute such as “home,” “cottage,” “dwelling,” “residence,” “mansion,” or “abode.” Instead of writing “evaluation,” write “survey,” “opinion,” or “analysis.” The instructor’s intention was to help you add variety and to build your vocabulary.

But the downside of that advice is something like the following:

In order for all parties to have incentive to cancel these arrangements and enter new ones, subsequent contracts should qualify for the maximum lawful price. (Does “arrangements” mean “contracts” or other working arrangements?)

Table I summarizes the production values at each site; the evaluation does not include the Malcolmson project. (Is “Table I” the same thing as “the evaluation,” or are they two different items?)

Your merchandise has been shipped to the warehouses. Our inspectors will be touring all the facilities next week and can report on any irregularities. The storage units have adequate environmental controls for all products. (Are the “warehouses” the same as the “facilities” or just one part of the “facilities”? Are the “storage units” the same as the “warehouses” or different places? If different, why mention the “storage units” when talking about the “warehouses”?)

Sure, select a synonym if there’s no way to misunderstand the point. And before you delete or toss out that thesaurus, hold on. A thesaurus comes in handy when you want to find the most precise word for an idea.

But once you find the most precise word, never hesitate to repeat it. Repetition is always preferable to miscommunication.
