A rigorous writer might intend “statistics” to mean usefully arranged “data,” but I see no evidence that that’s the case here.

The use—for the purpose of variety—of different words to deliver the same meaning is called elegant variation. (Though elegant’s meaning itself has varied over the years, elegant’s modern, positive meaning makes the term elegant variation sarcastic: elegant variation isn’t elegant at all, but rather is an affectation.)

At worst, elegant variation misleads.

At best, it exacts an opportunity cost, denying readers cumulative familiarity as to which word we’re assigning to which meaning. A graphic example illustrates the point: A driver could read stop signs even were they variously octagonal, square and circular besides the standard hexagonal. But what cumulative familiarity would be lost!

Whence elegant variation? Some writers scrounge for synonyms because an early teacher—admirably trying to expand students’ vocabularies—cautioned against repeating a conspicuous word in the same paragraph.

Back to the mines statistics, or data. Of course the writer would be right to say “statistics” and “data” to deliver different meanings. But was that the writer’s intent? Readers apply these two tests, at least unconsciously: (1) Is the writer usually consistent? (2) Does the writer signal that the different words are intended to deliver different meanings?

The same budget justification, in the course of just 32 words, apparently commits elegant variation 5 times: “Initial laboratory results have indicated which modifications are required to make the phosphate dewatering process effective on alumina red muds. Preliminary tests have shown that the Bureau dewatering technique also is applicable to coal washing fines as well as slimes from beneficiation of copper and gold ores and production of silica.”

I presume the Bureau of Mines didn’t intend “initial” to be earlier than “preliminary,” “laboratory results” to be more definitive than “tests,” “indicated” to be weaker than “shown,” “process” to be more abstract than “technique,” and “effective” to be stronger than “applicable.”

Still, maybe the bureau intended to differentiate between “statistics” and “data.” But any such intent to differentiate is obscured by the bureau’s record of apparent elegant variation.
“Beach Patrol Lt. Butch Arbin says 50 percent of the male applicants and more than 80 percent of the female tryouts pass.” (Fleishman, Washington Post, 7/29/96)

Are “applicants” all those who merely say they want to be lifeguards, and “tryouts” an elite subset who get into the water and take the lifeguarding test?

“Two servicewomen dismissed by the British military after becoming pregnant won a landmark sex discrimination case against the government and were awarded $45,000 in compensation . . . Lesley Leale, a 37-year-old former sergeant, was awarded $27,000 in damages while ex-corporal Julie Lane, 27, won $18,000 in compensation.” (Washington Post, 12/18/91)

Unlike “compensation,” “damages” could mean compensatory plus punitive damages. Or maybe it’s just elegant variation and the words are intended to be interchangeable.

“Gautama Chopra, 24, is not the only young writer capitalizing on a literary lineage. There are Jong, Heller, Updike, Bellow, Theroux, Styron, Rice and McPhee (make that three McPhee) children writing, not to mention two Cheever offspring.” (Angel, New York Times, 4/25/00)

With “children” present, it would be better “not to mention . . . offspring.” Much more so than “children,” “offspring” has the secondary meaning “descendants,” which of course can extend beyond one generation. Two of John Cheever’s children—not just “offspring”—are writers. Resist elegant variation in favor of a “most valuable asset a writer can have”: consistency, one word per meaning.

8 Places You Should Vary Your Words

While avoiding elegant variation (synonyms for synonyms’ sake), do vary your words to:

1. Vary your meaning

Even as choosing the best word and sticking with it makes you clear and crisp, do vary your words if you want to vary your meaning.

That’s what I thought the Washington Post was doing here—till I got just past the third bolded word:

“U.S. airline traffic dropped 10.2 percent in February, with traffic on international routes plummeting 26.8 percent. The pattern was repeated on the other side of the Atlantic, where British Airways watched its business drop 30 percent.” (Hamilton, 3/22/91)

“Dropped 10.2 percent . . . plummeting 26.8 percent.” Good shading of meaning, I thought. But reverting to mere “drop” for 30%—the largest of the three percentages—showed that the Post was just synonym-dropping.

In a roundup of scores, sports reporters who keep their eye on the ball, and avoid distractions and distracting, choose “won” or even “prevailed,” but not both. But they do distinguish shades of meaning: “Mudville romped, 10-0. Dustville squeaked by, 1-0.”

Likewise, try “I told them to try, though I told them it would be tough.” Or even the clunky “I said to them they should try, though I said to them it would be tough.” But not “I told them to try, though I said to them it would be tough.” Best: “I encouraged them to try, though I warned them it would be tough.”

Sometimes the contrast between 2 meanings is evocative. The song I’ll Be Seeing You (Kahal, 1938) closes with: “I’ll be looking at the moon, but I’ll be seeing you.”

2. Define

Call it a “computer,” or a “system,” but don’t switch back and forth for variety.

But see the informational value, in some circumstances, of this switch: “Make sure the brace covers your whole patella (kneecap). You might need
to uncrimp the brace to get it to cover your whole **patella.**”

By contrast, keeping the two synonyms—while omitting the parenthetical that signaled just now that “kneecap” *defines* “patella”—would confuse: “Make sure the brace covers your whole **patella.** You might need to uncrimp the brace to get it to cover your whole **kneecap.**”

So add a synonym if necessary to define a word—but be clear that’s why you’re adding the synonym.

(Still better, lead with the word that’s clearer to your readers: “Make sure the brace covers your whole **kneecap (patella).** You might need to uncrimp the brace to get it to cover your whole **kneecap.**”)

### 3. Confirm or inform

“The **Merkel** Says She Is Open to Stimulus for **Greece / German Leader** Softens Stance and Advocates Keeping **Athens** in Euro Zone.” (Kulish & Eddy, *New York Times*, 5/17/12)

“German Leader” confirms for most readers, and informs some others, that Merkel means the German leader.

But “Greece . . . Athens” is distracting elegant variation. Readers would already know that Athens is the capital of Greece. And even if they didn’t, that fact would be irrelevant.

### 4. Resonate with the context

I say, “Correct errors the **correct** way and break bad news the **good** way.” That’s to resonate with the fact that we “correct” our errors, not “good” them—even though “good” resonates as the obvious opposite of “bad” in “bad news.”

### 5. Alliterate or achieve some other sound

“**Awesome** automobile, Batman! **Super** soup-up.”

So long as the variation’s alliteration purpose is obvious, you might occasionally find it effective to emulate “First **Dallas Drops**, Now **Philly Falls** / After Huge Road Wins, Redskins Sensing the Possibilities.” (Washington Post, 10/6/08)

Alliteration and still other aspects of sound, notably meter and rhyme, are reason to deploy a synonym, notably of course for poetry.

### 6. Be brief

Abbreviations and pronouns are space-saving variants: “Plants absorb **carbon dioxide.** The **CO₂** shows it’s essential to life by photosynthesizing, with water and sunlight, into various sugars and oxygen.”

### 7. Show you mean the same meaning, with a pronoun

In that CO₂ example, the pronoun “it”—besides saving space—helpfully tells us “I repeat a meaning you recently met.”

By contrast, we’d be jarred by “The CO₂ shows CO₂’s essential to life . . ..” Likewise, the movie line “My name’s Forrest Gump. People call me Forrest Gump” wants to resolve to something like “My name’s Forrest Gump. People call me that.”

Thus in the special case of a pronoun, we vary our words in order to show we’re repeating our meaning.

### 8. Portray a fictional character’s use of elegant variation

Like many real people, many fictional characters would write with elegant variation, for example “Dear **Ace Lab Equipment**, please **send** me the beaker now, and when you get them in please **ship** me the test tubes.”

Also, any character—including even a character who values consistency—would occasionally speak superfluous synonyms. It’s hard to keep track of my words while I’m spontaneously speaking, so I’m sure I often speak something like “**Turn** right at this light here, and then go 3 blocks and you’ll see a bowling alley on your left and there’s a light there. **Make a** right at that light.”

So, for verisimilitude if you write fiction, consider deliberately throwing occasional elegant variation into how some of your characters write and how all of your characters speak.

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