

Avoiding 'Thing' Words

The Problem:

- Vague
- Bland
- Imprecise
- Weak
- Open to interpretation
- Travel in packs



Definition:¹

"thing" (*noun*)

1. any movable possession (especially articles of clothing)
 - She packed her things and left
2. a special situation
 - This thing has got to end
 - It is a remarkable thing
3. an action
 - How could you do such a thing?
4. a special abstraction
 - A thing of the spirit
 - Things of the heart
5. an artifact
 - How does this thing work?
6. an event
 - A funny thing happened on the way
7. a vaguely specified concern
matter; thing; affair.
 - Several things to attend to
 - Things are going well
8. a statement regarded as an object
 - To say the same thing in other terms
 - How can you say such a thing?
9. an entity that is not named specifically
 - I couldn't tell what the thing was
10. any attribute or quality considered as having its own existence
 - The thing I like about her is ...
11. a special objective
 - The thing is to stay in bounds
12. a persistent illogical feeling of desire or aversion
 - He has a thing about seafood
 - She has a thing about him
13. a separate and self-contained entity
 - What is that thing?

How to Avoid 'Thing' Words:

- 1) Use the above list of definitions above to identify its reference
 - An action, an attribute, a special situation, etc.
- 2) Does the 'thing' word need to be there?
 - "I want to be ~~something~~ more than an average Joe"
 - "It doesn't seem likely for ~~something like~~ that to happen"

- 3) Consider appropriate replacements
 - “She packed her things and left” → “She packed her clothes and left” *or* “She packed her tools and left”
 - “Things are going well” → “The assignments are going well” *or* “The treatments are going well”
- 4) Rethink the sentence structure
 - “It doesn’t seem likely for something like that to happen” → “It’s unlikely that would happen”
 - “Something bad happened and soon after, a flower sprouted out my scalp.” → “A flower sprouted out my scalp soon after it happened.”
- 5) Check for other ‘thing’ words
 - “I got uncomfortable after writing the last thing because it reminded me of the bad thing and I didn’t want to go there after all.”
 - “Suddenly, the room began to change with everything stretching out. Nothing looked normal.”
- 6) Embrace the three Ps of word choice: Precision. Power. Poetics.

NOTE: Replacing ‘thing’ words often depends on the surrounding sentences & context so keep that in mind

Exceptions:

- When used in dialogue – if that’s how a character speaks, stay true to that representation
- Ditto for writing in the first-person point of view, but carefully consider the image you want to create of your narrator
- There are exceptions to every rule but you can push yourself to do better.

Bonus: The Logical Impossibility of Nothingⁱⁱ

- 1) If some thing is something, it is certainly not nothing
- 2) Every thing is something
- 3) Therefore, nothing is nothing
 - Or, no thing is not a thing

In other words, there is no such thing as ‘nothing.’ By definition, ‘nothing’ can’t exist – because there’s nothing to exist.

ⁱ “Things: Meaning, Definition, Usage” from <https://www.niftyword.com/dictionary/things/>

ⁱⁱ “The Logic of Nothing” by Steve Patterson <http://steve-patterson.com/the-logic-of-nothing/>