Avoiding Vague Wording

Writing with precision and clarity depends on a wide vocabulary. Paying attention to the words used by esteemed scholars in your field of study will expand your vocabulary and allow you to choose language that communicates your intended meaning unambiguously.

Avoid vague wording in thesis statements

Ensure that your thesis statement addresses a specific point about a specific person, group of people, place, idea, or situation. Do not proceed with vague wording, such as "all over the world," "many people," or "will cause problems."

Vague	An unhealthy diet is associated with many health problems in young people.
Precise	The standard American diet has been associated with poor mental health among adolescents.

Check your thesis statement for loose connections made with a <u>coordinating</u> conjunction (e.g., and, but, or) and consider substituting it for a <u>subordinating</u> conjunction to show a closer relationship between two clauses (e.g., because, unless, although).

Vague	Today's horror movies are too graphic, <u>and</u> people have serious objections to them.
Precise	Horror movies have desensitized American viewers to violence <u>because</u> current cinematic techniques result in more graphic content.

Avoid vague or implied antecedents

Antecedents are nouns or clauses represented by a pronoun later in the sentence. In the first example below, the antecedent of *it* is not clear because *it* refers to an unstated <u>singular</u> noun, such as *the hike* or *the excursion* (note that *the trails* are <u>plural</u>). While the meaning of an implied antecedent may seem obvious to you, your reader will appreciate the clarity of the second example that specifies *the excursion*.

Vague	Because the Niagara Escarpment trails lead hikers atop cliffs, through forests, and along rocky shores, it will prove challenging.
Precise	Because the Niagara Escarpment trails lead hikers atop cliffs, through forests, and along rocky shores, the excursion will prove challenging.

Below are some examples of alternatives to common words that have more nuanced meanings. The more precise words are not all synonyms; choosing the best one depends on the context. See the BU Writing Centre *Avoiding Informal Wording* handout for more examples.

Vague adjective	More precise adjectives
scared	alarmed, fearful, tense, startled, apprehensive, uneasy, panicked
angry	exasperated, indignant, irate, irked, outraged, fuming, bothered
sad	despondent, distraught, dejected, dismayed, forlorn, melancholic
weak	depleted, powerless, frail, fragile, weary, feeble, tenuous, inept
happy	ecstatic, elated, euphoric, delighted, joyful, enthusiastic, cheerful
strong	mighty, daring, unyielding, powerful, robust, assured, steady, solid
interesting	compelling, persuasive, unanticipated, unexpected, refreshing
normal	mainstream, typical, banal, unremarkable, mundane
silly	absurd, thoughtless, light-hearted, playful

Vague verb/noun	More precise words
do	accomplish, execute, endeavour, complete, finalize, terminate
fix	mend, repair, secure, fasten
get	(depends on the context) become, transform, evolve, grow acquire, attain, obtain, inherit, receive understand, comprehend, fathom
things/stuff	actions, affairs, articles, belongings, components, contraptions, devices, factors, items, matters, measures, objectives, tools (or specify what the *thing* is)

References:
http://sana.aalto.fi/awe/style/vocabulary/index.html