

Every time I read the word “slather” it sets my teeth on edge. Is there any more overused word in the English language? I have to admit to using it myself, because there just is no good synonym for the word.

“Slather” may have other applications, but we read it most often in regard to food, to the process of adding a rich covering to something—like butter or whipped cream, or chocolate frosting. Of course, there is also this other application—the word is commonly used to describe people’s covering themselves with sunscreen or other lotions.

My copy of Roget’s Thesaurus is old, and I don’t know if there are even updated versions produced anymore in this age of the internet. In my Roget’s the word “slather” does not even appear, so the thesaurus people didn’t have a good synonym either.

Whenever I read this word in a book by an author I admire, I wonder: “Isn’t there some other way you could have evoked this image without using my despised word?”

But, there does not seem to be. And, very recently, I was reading over something I had written myself, and there was The Word. I could find no other word that adequately expressed the quality of “spreading something on” to complete my sentence. I should have given up at that point, used “slather” and resigned myself to its usefulness. But, instead, I labored mightily, inserting word after word in my sentence. I spread, plastered, and covered. I brushed, smeared, coated, and daubed. No other word described the process as well as “slather.”

So, what is a writer to do? Should I give in and slather my compositions with words I dislike? Or shall I never again refer to the delectable prospect of warm, crusty bread with lots of melting butter? Shall I forget about describing pumpkin pie with whipped cream? Must I forever sacrifice sharing the experience of rich chocolate cake with creamy chocolate frosting via the written word?

I looked up “slather” to discover its etymology. And found that—not surprisingly—the origin of “slather” is really unknown. Some sources use it in the sense of “slip” or “slide.” And some called it a dialectical noun meaning “large amount.” The word apparently was not used until the middle of the 19th century. How did people describe delectable desserts covered with peaks of creamy toppings before that time?

It was interesting, though, that the article that was cited to

show the use of the word was on a topic far from whipped cream on pie or butter on bread. Instead, it was advice to farmers to “slather on the manure on all hoed crops.” Although, if you think about it, that butter or whipped cream is just another step farther along in the cycle of life. Those liberally fertilized crops produce the feed for the cows that give the milk and cream that are the origin of those substances that authors so delight in slathering on their prose.