# Masterful vs. Masterly

Some words have historically different meanings but over time, these distinct meanings eventually become blurred and are now used interchangeably. Among these words are the terms, masterful and masterly. In this post, we will try to differentiate these two using their traditional meanings.

In its traditional sense, the word masterful is used as an adjective meaning "inclined and usually competent to act as master"or "suggestive of a domineering nature."

Kirk Cousins' Masterful Response To The Washington Redskins
Forbes

PepsiCo palm oil progress report dismissed as 'masterful window dressing'
Food Navigator

"'I later learned he was a masterful liar and manipulator,' Spindler is reported to have said in court, adding that it took years to recover about $111,000 he lost to Bohnenkamp."
Niagara Gazette

On the other hand, the term masterly is most commonly used as an adjective which means "suitable to or resembling that of a master, especially  indicating thorough knowledge or superior skill and power" or "having the power and skill of a master."

Currie's century proves a masterly innings
Toowoomba Chronicle

Cheryl Strayed on Richard Ford's Masterly Memoir of His Parents
New York Times

Mudbound review – a masterly, meaningful tale from America's divided past

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While some writers try to retain this distinction, the use of masterful to mean "skillfull" has become more and more widespread as time went by. Below are some examples of this trend.

Rookie WR Tim White makes masterful 33-yard touchdown reception
Ravens Wire

Aaron Nola is masterful as Phillies win third straight, 6-1, over Milwaukee Brewers
Philly.com

Taboo by Kim Scott review – a masterful novel on the frontier of truth-telling
The Guardian

Now that you have learned their traditional meanings, you may opt to maintain their distinction by using masterful and masterly in their original definitions. However, you would not be ridiculed if you have been using both words to mean the same thing.