

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CONCRETE AND ABSTRACT/GENERAL AND SPECIFIC

Concrete and Abstract

Words that name the ideas and qualities of things are **abstract**. What they refer to cannot be perceived through the five senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell. Some abstract words are courage, beauty, goodness, honor, color, and education.

Mr. Carr took pride in his son's intelligence.

**Concrete** words are sensory words. What they refer to can be perceived through the five senses. Some concrete words are book, animal, tree, building, and sound.

George smelled smoke, but he didn't see fire.

Good writers will always choose the more concrete term over the vague abstraction. Consider the following paragraphs:

But perhaps more significantly, the War was not resolved by the conflict of the active participants. Even the events at Petersburg were not a definite influence on the outcome.

But perhaps more significantly, the War was not resolved by any actual battles fought by the tired armies in the field. Even the North's bloody victory at Petersburg could not force the surrender of Lee's depleted forces.

Which paragraph is more interesting? Why? What words are substituted in the second paragraph for the vaguer words in the first paragraph?

Good writing deals in particulars. For instance, when you state, "My boss is conceited," you no doubt have details in mind--he brags about his money; he expects his employees to grovel; he exaggerates his talents, and so on. Let your readers in on these concrete particulars.

**Vague:** Everything looked inviting.

**Concrete:** The homemade potato salad and the apple pie looked inviting.

**Vague:** He wore unusual clothes.

**Concrete:** He wore a red gypsy shirt with blue denim overalls topped by a paisley turban.

**Vague:** White people deceived the Indians.

**Concrete:** White people deceived the Indians by breaking treaties, stealing pastureland, and herding them into sterile reservations.

**Vague:** She stole the show with her fine dancing.

**Concrete:** She stole the show with her fine dancing, a combination of well-executed pirouettes, bows, leaps, and half-twists.

## **Practice Exercise A**

List enough specific, concrete details to make each of the following abstractions meaningful and tangible.

Example: democratic--election, voting, liquor-by-the-drink referendum

- |                   |              |
|-------------------|--------------|
| 1. virtue         | 2. unselfish |
| 3. beautiful      | 4. happiness |
| 5. brotherly love | 6. evil      |
| 7. sexy           | 8. reality   |

## **General and Specific**

A general term names a class or group and stands for broad characteristics or things. A specific term names a member of a group and stands for more definite, precise things or characteristics. *Flower* is a general term; *rose* is a specific word. Context may make a word more or less specific in relation to another word. The fewer things a word refers to, the more specific it tends to be. *Dog* is more specific than *animal*, less specific than *collie*. *Collie*, in turn, is less specific than *old Rover*, *your uncle's tricolor*.

Very General	Less General	More Specific	Quite Specific
athlete	baseball player	Yankee outfielder	Mickey Mantle
college student	freshman	boy in Comp class	Bill Jones
vegetation	tree	apple tree	the new apple tree
criminal wallet	thief	pickpocket	man who stole my wallet

The student writer must learn not only to choose his or her words wisely but also specifically. The reader soon becomes confused and frustrated if he is not given detail. The true meaning of what the author intends is obscured by general statements.

General	Specific
He is an accomplished athlete.	He is a skilled golfer.
He drives an old car.	He drives a 1950 Buick.
The boy has a serious disease.	The boy has leukemia.
I have been reading a Shakespearean play.	I have been reading <i>Hamlet</i> .
Her grades at midsemester were poor.	She received two failing grades.

The bold words in the following sentences are so vague that the sentences fail to communicate any precise meaning. The words reveal either fuzzy or lazy thinking and should never be allowed past the first draft. **The way to revise them is, first, to sharpen the idea to be expressed and, second, to choose words specific enough to express it exactly.** Note the possible revisions making the sentences more meaningful.

1. It had been an **awful** day and we felt **awfully** tired.

REVISED

After such a frustrating day, we felt emotionally exhausted.

OR

It had been a day of repeated shocks which has finally left us numb.

OR

We had been under such a strain all day that we were on the point of collapse.

2. It was such a **nice thing** to do. It made me feel **grand**.

REVISED

It was such a friendly gesture that I felt immediately at home.

OR

It was such a generous remark that it brought tears to my eyes.

OR

It was flattery, of course, but I flushed with happiness.

3. It was a **strange sensation** to see the **odd** look on his face.

REVISED

It was pathetic to watch the hurt in his eyes.

OR

It was amusing to observe his evident embarrassment.

OR

The vindictiveness of his look terrified me.

## Practice Exercise B

The following sentences are vague because of the bold general words. Even though you may not always know exactly what the writer intended to say, revise the sentences to give them some specific meaning.

1. It gave me a **funny feeling** to hear him say that another war was inevitable.

2. It was an **awful** trip. The car **acted up**. It rained **like everything**.

3. That kind of publicity is always **bad business** for an **organization**, and the boys in our chapter felt **pretty bad** about it.

4. His wife always is a **smooth dresser**. Today she wore a **lovely outfit**. It was a **nice shade of blue**. She also wore a **cute little** white hat with a matching blue ribbon.

5. She has a **marvelous figure** and **gorgeous** red hair.

6. The homecoming party was a **terrific success**. The decorations and the refreshments were **wonderful**, and everybody thought the favors were **great**. It was the **sort of affair** I'll remember for years.

7. When I said that, a **peculiar light** came into his eyes and I had a **strange sensation** that I had said the wrong thing.

**SENSORY WORDS:**

A number of specific words refer to sensory experiences, to what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Because these words call up sensory images, they are particularly effective in description. In the following list, some words could fit into more than one sensory category.

**TOUCH:** chill, clammy, cold, corrugated, grainy, gritty, harsh, jarring, knobby, moist, nubby, numb, plushy, rough, satiny, slimy, slithering, smooth, sting, tingle, tickly, velvety

**TASTE:** bland, biting, bitter, brackish, briny, metallic, minty, nutty, peppery, salty, sour, spicy, sweet, tainted, vinegary, yeasty

**SMELL:** acrid, fetid, greasy, mouldy, musky, musty, pungent, putrid, rancid, rank, reek, stench, sulphurous, woody

**SOUND:** bellow, blare, buzz, chatter, chime, clang, clatter, clink, crackle, crash, creak, gurgle, hiss, hum, murmur, pop, purr, rattle, rustle, screech, snap, splash, squeak, swish, tinkle, whine, whisper

**SIGHT:** blaze, bleary, bloody, burnished, chalky, dappled, ebony, flame, flash, flicker, florid, foggy, gaudy, glare, glitter, glossy, glow, golden, grimy, haze, inky, leaden, lurid, muddy, roiled, sallow, shadow, smudged, spark, streak, tawny, turbid

Sensory words help the reader feel the experience that the writer is recalling.

Consider the following paragraphs:

**General:**

Certain biological changes which occur as we grow older are apparent whenever you look at an old person. These age changes in the surface of the body are gradual and vary according to diet, genetic factors, even climate. Like all other aspects of aging, it is not the biological changes themselves (because they are quite natural) but the subsequent changes in self-regard which have the most impact on the individual.

**More Specific:**

Certain biological changes which occur as we grow older are apparent whenever you look at an old person. The hair becomes thin, brittle, dull, and gray. The skin becomes paler and may become blotchy; it takes on a parchment-like texture and loses its elasticity. The loss of subcutaneous fat and elastic tissue leads to a wrinkled appearance. Sweat gland activity and oil secretion decrease and the skin may look dry and scaly.

These age changes in the surface of the body are gradual, and vary according to genetic factors, even climate. Like all other aspects of aging, it is not the

biological changes themselves (because they are, after all, quite natural) but the subsequent changes in self-regard which have the most impact on the individual. Gray hair can be softening and becoming to a woman; and look quite distinguished on a man. Yet the individual may resent the change, and regard gray hair as the external sign of all internal effects--slowness, muscular weakness, waning sexual powers.

--Sharon R. Curtin

Also, notice how the following description (from *The Octopus* by Frank Norris, copyright 1903 by Doubleday and Company, Inc.) makes the reader feel, hear, see, and smell the details of ploughing. Then notice what happens to the paragraph when most of the sensory words are removed.

### **Specific:**

The ploughing, now in full swing, enveloped him in a vague, slow-moving whirl of things. Underneath him was the jarring, jolting, trembling machine; not a clod was turned, not an obstacle encountered, that he did not receive the swift impression of it through all his body; the very friction of the damp soil, sliding incessantly from the shiny surface of the shears, seemed to reproduce itself in his finger-tips and along the back of his head. He heard the horse-hoofs by the myriads crushing down easily, deeply, into the loam, the prolonged clinking of trace-chains, the working of the smooth brown flanks in the harness, the clatter of wooden hames, the champing of bits, the click of iron shoes against pebbles, the brittle stubble of the surface ground crackling and snapping as the furrows turned, the sonorous, steady breaths wrenched from the deep, labouring chests, strap-bound, shining with sweat, and all along the line the voices of the men talking to the horses. Everywhere there were visions of glossy brown backs, straining, heaving, swollen with muscle; harness streaked with specks of froth, broad, cup-shaped hoofs, heavy with brown loam; men's faces red with tan, blue overalls spotted with axle-grease; muscled hands, the knuckles whitened in their grip on the reins, and through it all the ammoniacal smell of the horses, the bitter reek of perspiration of beasts and men, the aroma of warm leather, the scent of dead stubble--and strong and *more* penetrating than everything else, the heavy, enervating odour of the upturned, living earth.

### **More General:**

He abandoned himself to his ploughing to such an extent that he became a part of the total process and identified himself with the machine beneath him. He could detect the resistance of the damp soil to the impact of the plough, and whenever an obstacle of any sort was encountered, he felt the repercussion in his own body.

He was conscious too of the noises that the team and the harness produced as the work continued, and of the appearance of the horses and their immediate environment. All around him was a confusion of sensory impressions, the strongest of which was the odor of the horses and the characteristic smell of upturned earth.

### Practice Exercise C

Choosing sensory words from the list above, write a description of a favorite place. Make sure it is a place that you have definite feelings about. Revisit the place, if possible, to observe specific detail so that you can completely recall your special spot.

### Practice Exercise D

Decide which word in each group is more general, which next, etc. Number the words, marking the most general word 1, the next general 2, etc.

Example:    4                    1                    3                    2  
                   nasturtium, living thing, flower, plant

1. book, publication, Huckleberry Finn, novel
2. clothing, men's wear, jeans, trousers
3. food, apple, fruit, Winesap
4. tools, equipment, wrenches, crescent wrenches
5. animal, human being, Indian, Sitting Bull
6. mammals, living things, females, Mae West
7. Protestantism, Christianity, religion, Presbyterianism
8. music, art, Beethoven's Fifth, piano concerto
9. bongos, drums, musical instruments, noisemakers
10. transportation, Volkswagen, automobile, four-wheeled vehicle

## Practice Exercise E

Make a list of more specific words for the following general terms.

Example: Say--mumble, mutter, whisper, shout, yell, state, utter, drawl

1. look—
2. sit—
3. ask—
4. walk—
5. good—
6. bad—
7. entertainment—
8. person—
9. vegetation—
10. land—

## Practice Exercise F

Rewrite the following sentences, making general words more specific.

1. A man was looking through a store window.
2. I did a lot of things during my vacation.
3. Several aspects of the room made it unattractive.
4. The injury that our best player had suffered was serious enough to keep him out of the game.
5. After eating, we had some really good entertainment.

6. One member of the group was irresponsible about some of her duties.
7. During the last part of the trip, we encountered several difficulties.
8. Many items around the place needed to be repaired before the people could move in.
9. It's an interesting book.
10. The actions of the people represented both a test of strength and an effort to gain prestige for the cause.

### **Practice Exercise G**

For each of these generalizations, write a specific example that illustrates it. Make sure that your example shows specific people doing specific things in specific situations with specific results.

Example:      Eating candy is bad for your teeth.

**My sister Ann, who ate a candy bar every day for lunch, had eight cavities by the time she was ten years old.**

1. Driving on ice is dangerous.
2. Music cheers people up.
3. The police are kind and considerate to motorists.
4. Telephones are a nuisance.