

Abstract, Concrete, General, and Specific Terms

Abstract and Concrete Terms

Abstract terms refer to ideas or concepts; they have no physical referents.

[Stop right here and reread that definition. Many readers will find it both vague and boring. Even if you find it interesting, it may be hard to pin down the meaning. To make the meaning of this abstract language clearer, we need some examples.]

Examples of abstract terms include *love, success, freedom, good, moral, democracy*, and any *-ism (chauvinism, Communism, feminism, racism, sexism)*. These terms are fairly common and familiar, and because we recognize them we may imagine that we understand them—but we really can't, because the meanings won't stay still.

Take *love* as an example. You've heard and used that word since you were three or four years old. Does it mean to you now what it meant to you when you were five? when you were ten? when you were fourteen (!)? I'm sure you'll share my certainty that the word changes meaning when we marry, when we divorce, when we have children, when we look back at lost parents or spouses or children. The word stays the same, but the meaning keeps changing.

If I say, "love is good," you'll probably assume that you understand, and be inclined to agree with me. You may change your mind, though, if you realize I mean that "prostitution should be legalized" [heck, love is good!].

How about *freedom*? The word is familiar enough, but when I say, "I want freedom," what am I talking about? divorce? self-employment? summer vacation? paid-off debts? my own car? looser pants? The meaning of *freedom* won't stay still. Look back at the other examples I gave you, and you'll see the same sorts of problems.

Does this mean we shouldn't use abstract terms? No—we need abstract terms. We need to talk about ideas and concepts, and we need terms that represent them. But we must understand how imprecise their meanings are, how easily they can be differently understood, and how tiring and boring long chains of abstract terms can be. Abstract terms are useful and necessary when we want to name ideas (as we do in thesis statements and some paragraph topic sentences), but they're not likely to make points clear or interesting by themselves.

Concrete terms refer to objects or events that are available to the senses. [This is directly opposite to *abstract terms*, which name things that are *not* available to the senses.] Examples of concrete terms include *spoon, table, velvet eye patch, nose ring, sinus mask, green, hot, walking*. Because these terms refer to objects or events we can see or hear or feel or taste or smell, their meanings are pretty stable. If you ask me what I mean by the word *spoon*, I can pick up a spoon and show it to you. [I can't pick up a *freedom* and show it to you, or point to a small *democracy* crawling along a window sill. I can measure sand and oxygen by weight and volume, but I can't collect a pound of *responsibility* or a liter of *moral outrage*.]

While abstract terms like *love* change meaning with time and circumstances, concrete terms like *spoon* stay pretty much the same. *Spoon* and *hot* and *puppy* mean pretty much the same to you now as they did when you were four.

You may think you understand and agree with me when I say, "We all want success." But surely we don't all want the same things. Success means different things to each of us, and you can't be sure of what I mean by that abstract term. On the other hand, if I say "I want a gold Rolex on my wrist and a Mercedes in my driveway," you know exactly what I mean (and you know whether you want the same things or different things). Can you see that concrete terms are clearer and more interesting than abstract terms?

If you were a politician, you might prefer abstract terms to concrete terms. "We'll direct all our considerable resources to satisfying the needs of our constituents" sounds much better than "I'll spend \$10 million of your taxes on a new highway that will help my biggest campaign contributor." But your goal as a writer is not to hide your real meanings, but to make them clear, so you'll work to use fewer abstract terms and more concrete terms.

General and Specific Terms

General terms and specific terms are not opposites, as abstract and concrete terms are; instead, they are the different ends of a range of terms. **General terms** refer to groups; **specific terms** refer to individuals—but there's room in between. Let's look at an example.

Furniture is a general term; it includes within it many different items. If I ask you to form an image of furniture, it won't be easy to do. Do you see a department store display room? a dining room? an office? Even if you can produce a distinct image in your mind, how likely is it that another reader will form a very similar image? Furniture is a concrete term (it refers to something we can see and feel), but its meaning is still hard to pin down, because the group is so large. Do you have positive or negative feelings toward *furniture*? Again, it's hard to develop much of a response, because the group represented by this general term is just too large.

We can make the group smaller with the less general term, *chair*. This is still pretty general (that is, it still refers to a group rather than an individual), but it's easier to picture a chair than it is to picture *furniture*.

Shift next to *rocking chair*. Now the image is getting clearer, and it's easier to form an attitude toward the thing. The images we form are likely to be fairly similar, and we're all likely to have some similar associations (comfort, relaxation, calm), so this less general or more specific term communicates more clearly than the more general or less specific terms before it.

We can become more and more specific. It can be a *La-Z-Boy rocker-recliner*. It can be a *green velvet La-Z-Boy rocker recliner*. It can be a *lime green velvet La-Z-Boy rocker recliner with a cigarette burn on the left arm and a crushed jelly doughnut pressed into the back edge of the seat cushion*. By the time we get to the last description, we have surely reached the individual, a single chair. Note how easy it is to visualize this chair, and how much attitude we can form about it.

The more you rely on general terms, the more your writing is likely to be vague and dull. As your language becomes more specific, though, your meanings become clearer and your writing becomes more interesting.

Does this mean you have to cram your writing with loads of detailed description? No. First, you don't always need modifiers to identify an individual: *Bill Clinton* and *Mother Teresa* are specifics; so are *Bob's Camaro* and *the wart on Zelda's chin*. Second, not everything needs to be individual: sometimes we need to know that Fred sat in a chair, but we don't care what the chair looked like.

Concrete and Specific Language

Re-write the statements below to make them more concrete and specific.

- (1) John is incredibly intelligent.
- (2) I am upset by his lack of concern.
- (3) The weather in Seattle is inclement.

Share your answer with group members.

Which sentence, among your peers was the most specific? (Write it)

Precise and Clear Language

How many ways could one be more precise in his/her use of the following terms? List them.

1. cheap
2. hot
3. intelligent
4. good
5. spicy

Identify two different ways one could interpret each of the sentences below.

1. He's an *interesting* individual.
2. It is difficult to estimate the number of people affected by AIDS.

Focus on concrete and specific language

Rewrite each sentence with more concrete and specific language

1. For many people, the sounds and smells of a cookout mean that summer has finally arrived.
2. At many cookouts, the main attraction is a meat course.
3. Other popular main courses include many different kinds of meat and seafood.
4. For people who don't eat meat, corn-on-the-cob and baked potatoes are often available.

5. Many other kinds of dishes are also served at barbecues.

Now, rewrite the specific passage with general, imprecise language

6. There is more to a good cookout than hot dogs and lemonade.

7. People also like to gossip and tell stories when they are gathered together for a meal.

8. Some people also like to play baseball at a cookout.

9. A bat, a ball, and a few gloves are all that is needed for a pickup game of baseball.

10. Sticky plates and soda cans are no fun to clean up.

Concise Language

Re-write each of the sentences below to eliminate excessive wordiness.

(1) There can be no denying the fact that when the two people began their relationship they didn't know each other well enough to get married and make a lifetime commitment to each other, which has caused them a lot of problems and resulted in their divorce.

(2) In my personal opinion, I believe that the body's ability to fight off disease is only as strong as the person's ability to maintain a positive attitude and keep thinking positive thoughts when faced with serious health problems.

(3) It is absolutely, positively essential and necessary for the city council to think ahead and plan in advance for the poor road conditions that will be caused during the winter months of December, January and February when the weather changes for the worse.

Familiar Language

Re-write the following examples to make the language more familiar to the reader.

(1) An assignment given to a class of business students by their philosophy professor:

"The presently assigned paper necessitates an eloquently articulated analysis of the Existentialist perspective as it pertains to contemporary living. You should adumbrate the points which represent the essential elements of your analysis."

(2) A letter sent to high school students warning them of the risks of an unhealthy diet:

"Individuals who maintain a diet of high fat content are exposed to an increased risk of developing atherosclerosis, which is a buildup of fat deposits on the inner walls of the arteries. This condition can reduce or cut off the flow of blood in the arteries serving the major organs of the body. This can lead to poor health."