

Concrete Language

Concrete language gives readers a clear understanding of what you are writing about, whether it is a place, event, person, or other topic, by providing **precise details and specific identifying information**. Without concrete language, writing can seem vague, unclear, or uninteresting.

There are many ways to incorporate concrete language into your writing, whether it is a story, a review, a formal essay, or other assignment.

This handout introduces you to several strategies for introducing concrete detail that readers need to understand your subject as you do. Note that some strategies may work better in a narrative essay (such as poetic devices), while others can apply to more technical disciplines. Consider the field you are writing in when choosing what kinds of concrete language to employ. In any area of study, learning to use precise information and word choice will strengthen your writing.

Avoid “Empty” Words

Many beginning writers use words such as “really,” “basically,” “very,” “just,” “a lot,” “great,” and “cool,” which do not provide any concrete detail. Ask yourself what meaning your word choice adds to the sentence; if it does not add meaning, delete it or replace it with concrete detail if more information is necessary. Adverbs like many of the words above are often offenders, though “empty” words can be found in other parts of speech, such as vague nouns and verbs. When identifying vague nouns and verbs, consider whether they are general or specific. No matter what kind of paper you are writing, “empty” words should be avoided.

Avoiding “Empty” Words

Vague: I basically failed the class for many reasons.

Concrete: I failed my Introduction to Business class because I didn’t turn in any homework and left early every day.

The empty adverb (“basically”) has been deleted, and the reader now knows which class and specific reasons due to additional concrete nouns.

Avoiding “Empty” Words

Vague: I am in the symphony orchestra.

Concrete: I play second-chair violin in the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

The vague verb “am” has been replaced with a concrete verb, and the writer has added specific nouns to show which instrument he or she plays and with what specific group.

Avoiding “Empty” Words

Vague: That movie was awesome.

Concrete: The actors in *The Great Gatsby* gave believable performances, and the costumes were exquisitely made and historically accurate.

The vague adjective (“awesome”) has been removed in favor of concrete information, and the writer replaced the vague noun (“movie”) with a specific film title.

Add Identifying Details

A writer writes precisely because he or she enjoys a perspective on the subject that readers lack. The writer knows specific details and information about the subject that the reader might not know. Especially if the subject is personal to you or particular to a specific field, it is necessary to incorporate identifying details such as locations, place names, people’s names, and chronological information to share with readers your specific view of the subject. This is important in any discipline.

Adding Identifying Details

Vague: The study was about asthma.

Concrete: The study, conducted by Dr. Anna Stevens from the University of Washington, surveyed 200 adult asthma patients over one year.

With the added detail of proper nouns and numbers in the second sentence, readers now know about a specific study conducted to study asthma.

Adding Identifying Details

Vague: The sales proposal was a flop at the conference.

Concrete: The sales proposal failed to offer the CEOs at the conference this year any convincing numbers.

Again, specific identifying information will ensure that readers picture the same event and result that the writer has in mind.

Adding Identifying Details

Vague: My team was excited when we won the big game.

Concrete: Members of my hockey team, the Badgers, were excited when we won our quarter-final game yesterday by three points.

The first sentence leaves readers with an incomplete picture: what team, which game? The details provided in the revised sentence answer these questions.

Use Sensory Details

One of the most effective ways to generate concrete language, especially in descriptive writing, is to include information based on the five senses: **sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch**. Be sure not to rely only on adjectives for this information; verbs, nouns, and other parts of speech can also communicate sensory details. This strategy is applicable to narrative, evaluative, and creative writing, but it can also be useful in adding concrete information to formal projects (such as case studies, lab reports, and technical writing).

Using Sensory Details

Vague: The sunset was beautiful.

Concrete: The sunset glowed with orange light.

Vague: She has a terrible singing voice.

Concrete: Her singing voice reminds me of a litter of angry cats scratching a chalkboard.

Vague: I enjoyed the pie.

Concrete: The sweet and spicy pumpkin pie makes our house feel like Christmas.

Vague: This sweater is so uncomfortable.

Concrete: This itchy sweater is giving me a rash.

In each of these examples, the details added in revision offer readers the kind of concrete sensory information that appeals directly to the senses.

Incorporate Comparisons Using Poetic Devices

Poetic devices such as **similes** and **personification** add another layer to descriptive language by comparing a subject with something else that the reader may already understand. The reader then applies that understanding to the topic you are discussing.

Note: A **simile** is a comparison using “like” or “as.” **Personification** gives human qualities to an inanimate object.

This technique works well for narratives, stories, reviews, and even in technical and scientific writing, for the purpose of making the information understandable to a general audience. For example, see Lewis Thomas’s scientific text *Lives of a Cell*, which makes dense, technical information palatable for a non-scientific reader:

We live in a dancing matrix of viruses; they dart, rather like bees, from organism to organism, from plant to insect to mammal to me and back again, and into the sea, tugging along pieces of this genome, strings of genes from that, transplanting grafts of DNA,

passing around heredity as though at a great party. They (viruses) may be a mechanism for keeping new, mutant forms of DNA, in the widest circulation among us.

By comparing viruses to bees, the unknown to the known, Thomas helps his readers imagine an invisible element in their day-to-day world.

Incorporating Comparisons Using Poetic Devices

Vague: That is a brightly colored dress.

Concrete: The fabric of that dress looks like a circus tent.

Vague: Mr. Smith is an excellent teacher.

Concrete: Mr. Smith's teaching technique is as effective as Socrates'.

Vague: The car engine wouldn't start.

Concrete: The engine whined and complained, but it refused to turn over.

In each of these examples, adding similes or using verbs that personify has made concrete an abstract or general impression.

Activity

Rewrite each sentence of the following Yelp review to include concrete, descriptive language and specific details that allow a reader to make an educated decision about whether to visit this establishment. You may break up each sentence into multiple sentences.

- Add **identifying details** where they are lacking.
- Delete all **empty words** and replace them with descriptive words.
- Use at least one **sensory detail** in *each sentence*.
- Use at least one **simile** or instance of **personification** in the exercise.

“Trials Pub is my favorite place in town. They have a great beer selection, and the bartenders are cool. The bar also has fun activities on certain nights, and I love the décor. The only drawback is the slightly inconvenient location. As far as pubs go, it's definitely better than others nearby.”

Sentence 1:

Sentence 2:

Sentence 3:

Sentence 4:

Sentence 5: