

CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC LANGUAGE

Effective writers use and mix language at all levels of abstraction, so we must learn to use language on all levels. But first, it's important to understand what is meant by **abstract** and **concrete** language and also by **general** and **specific** language. In brief, we conceive the abstract through our mental processes and perceive the concrete through our senses.

Abstract vs. Concrete Language

Abstract words refer to intangible qualities, ideas, and concepts. These words indicate things we know only through our intellect, like "truth," "honor," "kindness," and "grace."

Concrete words refer to tangible, qualities or characteristics, things we know through our senses. Words and phrases like "102 degrees," "obese Siamese cat," and "deep spruce green" are concrete.

ABSTRACT: To excel in college, you'll have to work hard.

CONCRETE: To excel in college, you'll need to do go to every class; do all your reading before you go; write several drafts of each paper; and review your notes for each class weekly.

General vs. Specific Language

General words refer to large classes and broad areas. "Sports teams," "jobs," and "video games" are general terms.

Specific words designate particular items or individual cases, so "ISU Bengals," chemistry tutor," and "Halo" are specific terms.

GENERAL: The student enjoyed the class.

SPECIFIC: Kelly enjoyed Professor Sprout's 8:00 a.m. Herbiology class.

The Ladder of Abstraction

Most words do not fall nicely into categories; they're not always either abstract or concrete, general or specific. Moreover, the abstract and general often overlap, as do the concrete and specific. Therefore, it can be easier to classify words by placing them on a scale or continuum: a **Ladder of Abstraction**. On this scale, we place a word on a higher or lower level of abstraction. The lower on the scale, the more concrete and specific the word is.

8. food
7. junk food
6. dessert
5. ice cream
4. premium ice cream
3. Ben and Jerry's ice cream
2. Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream
1. a double-scoop waffle cone of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream

Although abstract discussion can have an important place in college writing, **concrete** and **specific** word choices are essential to clear, memorable, and effective communication. Consider the following sentences:

ABSTRACT: Americans must be willing to protect our freedoms.

CONCRETE: Voters must be willing to give up some individual protections against wiretapping so that the government can track down terrorists and protect the nation as a whole.

CONCRETE: Voters must protect their fourth amendment right against illegal searches and seizures by calling or writing their representatives to protest the administration's warrantless wiretapping program.

Since the writer of the abstract sentence above might very well mean **either** of the--completely opposite!--ideas below it, the first sentence fails to clearly communicate its meaning. Moreover, most readers have read sentences like this abstract one so many times that they're unlikely to find it interesting or memorable.

Practice

Take each of these general or abstract terms down three levels of abstraction.

Ex.	<i>Junk food</i>	<u><i>Dessert</i></u>	<u><i>Ice Cream</i></u>	<u><i>Chunky Monkey</i></u>
1.	Students	_____	_____	_____
2.	Nature	_____	_____	_____
3.	Cars	_____	_____	_____
4.	Injustice	_____	_____	_____
5.	Healthy	_____	_____	_____
6.	Pretty	_____	_____	_____
7.	Boring	_____	_____	_____
8.	Sports	_____	_____	_____
9.	Nice day	_____	_____	_____
10.	Work	_____	_____	_____