

Using Specific and Concrete Diction

"The difference between the almost-right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." —Mark Twain

Writing teachers often tell their students to "show--don't tell." To make your writing effective, "show" something to readers that they can imaginatively experience; don't just "tell" readers an abstract idea. Notice, for example, the two sentences below, both conveying the same basic idea. (The second sentence is from Craig B. Stanford's "Gorilla Warfare," published in the July/August 1999 issue of The Sciences.)

- **Abstract "Telling"**
Even a large male gorilla, unaccustomed to tourists, is frightened by people.
- **Concrete "Showing"**
"A four-hundred-pound male [gorilla], unaccustomed to tourists, will bolt into the forest, trailing a stream of diarrhea, at the mere sight of a person."

The second sentence is memorable and brings the experience to life, whereas the first sentence is rather dull, telling readers that a large gorilla is frightened but not showing readers a frightened gorilla. The second sentence gives readers a vivid and specific "picture" of a frightened gorilla. Notice that the writer of the first sentence cannot be sure of what readers will imaginatively "see," but the writer of the second sentence can be assured that all readers will "see" the same frightened gorilla. Notice as well that the writer of the second sentence does not even need to tell readers that the gorilla is frightened; the specific and concrete description of the gorilla's behavior "shows" readers how frightened the gorilla is.

This web page offers suggestions to help you use concrete and specific diction in your writing, the kind of diction that can make your writing vivid and engaging.

1) Abstract and Concrete Diction

Abstract Diction

Abstract diction refers to words that do not appeal imaginatively to the reader's senses. Abstract words create no "mental picture" or any other imagined sensations for readers.

Abstract words include . . .

Love, Hate, Feelings, Emotions, Temptation, Peace, Seclusion, Alienation, Politics, Rights, Freedom, Intelligence, Attitudes, Progress, Guilt, etc.

Try to create a mental picture of "love." Do you picture a couple holding hands, a child hugging a mother, roses and valentines? These are not "love." Instead, they are concrete objects you associate with love. Because it is an abstraction, the word "love" itself does not imaginatively appeal to the reader's senses.

Some abstract diction will probably be inevitable in your papers, but you need to give readers something that they can imaginatively see, hear, feel, smell, or taste. If you remain on an abstract level, your readers will most likely lose interest in what you are saying, if your readers can even figure out what exactly you are talking about.

For example . . .

"Ralph and Jane have experienced difficulties in their lives, and both have developed bad attitudes because of these difficulties. They have now set goals to surmount these problems, although the unfortunate consequences of their experiences are still apparent in many everyday situations."

What is this writer trying to say? It's hard to tell. The diction is so abstract that it is likely to mean something different to each reader. Writing that is overly abstract and general is also not pleasant to read. I remember well, too well, a student whose writing would remain on this level from the beginning to the end of each essay. Reading her essays became quite a chore. The world of ideas and abstractions has its place, but readers need something they can hold on to in essays.

Concrete Diction

Concrete diction refers to words that stimulate some kind of sensory response in the reader: as we read the words, we can imaginatively use our senses to experience what the words represent.

Concrete words include . . .

Dog, Cat, Computer, Classroom, Tree, Candy Bar, Car, Chair, Department Store, Radio, Pencil, Hat, Clock, Rain, Ice Cube, Beer, etc.

Now, try to picture a dog. Because "dog" is a concrete word, you are able to form a mental picture of it. Because concrete diction imaginatively appeals to the senses, it tends to involve readers more than abstract diction does.

2) General and Specific Diction

General Diction

What do you imaginatively "see" when you read the following sentence: "The dog jumped on top of the car"?

The concrete diction should stimulate some "mental picture," but what exactly do you "see"? You should imagine a dog jumping on top of a car, but what kind of dog? And what kind of car do you imagine? Most likely, you see your dog jumping on top of your car, but is this what the writer intended you to "see"? Probably not. The sentence uses concrete diction, thus allowing you to create a mental picture, but that diction is general and not specific.

Specific Diction

Now, what do you imaginatively "see" what you read this sentence: "The Saint Bernard jumped on top of the red corvette"?

The concrete and specific diction in this sentence ensures that you are "seeing" exactly what the

writer wants you to see. In general, specific and concrete diction is a characteristic of strong writing, whereas general and abstract diction is a characteristic of weak writing.

3) Be Specific!

What do I mean by this brief comment that I often write on papers? I mean that the diction in a paper could be more concrete and/or more specific. Specific diction will help ensure that the meaning you intend is exactly the meaning that readers receive.

Consider the following sentence: "Mary walked into the restaurant." The diction in this sentence may at first seem specific, but it is not. Aren't there different ways to "walk"? And what restaurant did Mary enter? Because the sentences below use more specific diction, they answer both of these questions.

Mary **staggered** into Denny's.
Mary paraded into Red Lobster.
Mary shuffled into McDonald's.
Mary sashayed into Oogies.
Mary **strutted** into The Red Door.
Mary limped into Burger King
Mary waddled into Oink's Gourmet Bar-B-Que.
Mary **sauntered** into Subway.
Mary crept into Monari's 101.
Mary marched into Kentucky Fried Chicken.
Mary tiptoed into Pizza Hut.
Mary **strolled** into Hardee's.
Mary slinked into Uptown Bar & Grill.
Mary swaggered into Verucchi's Ristorante.
Mary trudged into Wendy's.
Mary pranced into Taco Bell.

Get the point?

Notice that the more specific diction not only makes the sentences more vivid, but the diction conveys meaning not suggested in the simple "Mary walked into the restaurant." After all, "Mary staggering into Denny's" is certainly much different than "Mary parading into Red Lobster." In the first example, Mary might have had one too many drinks, and it's probably about, what, 3:00 a.m.? In the second example, Mary obviously is feeling good about herself because she is going to be spending her money on a nice meal.

Admittedly, a few of the sentences above sound ridiculous: I can't think of any reason why someone would "prance." Still, you sure would get your reader's attention if you had Mary prancing into Taco Bell instead of just walking into a restaurant.

Here is where a thesaurus may be helpful. You should not use a thesaurus to find fancier words, longer words, or more impressive sounding words to stick into your essays. When a writer does

this, it's usually obvious to the reader. However, you should use a thesaurus to help you find more specific words, those words that convey the exact meaning that you intend.

Check the verbs and nouns you are using in your papers. Are there more specific verbs and nouns that would more accurately convey your exact meaning?

4) Use the Right Words, not the Almost-Right Words!

Some composition and writing experts argue that writers should write with verbs and nouns, avoiding the use of adverbs and adjectives (those words that "modify," or change, verbs and nouns). If you use the right verbs and nouns, there should be no need to modify them into something else.

For instance, consider the following sentence: "Mary walked proudly and confidently down the hallway." The word "walked" is not quite the right word here, so the writer is trying to make it into the right word by adding "proudly and confidently," but don't we have a word that means "to walk proudly and confidently"? How about "Mary strutted down the hallway"? When the right word is used, the adverbs become useless. Notice that none of the sentences in the list above uses adverbs or adjectives, just specific verbs and specific nouns.

Finally, "very" is a word to avoid. When you use the word "very," you are most likely doing what is described above: trying to change the wrong word into the right one. Why not get rid of "very" and use the right word instead?

For example, "I was very happy" could become "I was overjoyed," and "I was very scared" could become "I was terrified." When you choose the right word, "very" often sounds strange in front of it. For example, you probably would not say, "I was very overjoyed" or "I was very terrified," right? If you have chosen the right word, there is no need to try to turn it into something else with the word "very."

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