

ABSTRACT VS CONCRETE VOCABULARY

ABSTRACT LANGUAGE

Abstract words deal with thoughts, feelings, or qualities like freedom, equality, love, anger, danger, wisdom, power, beauty. These words convey broad general concepts and are good for setting out your main ideas. However, because they leave only a vague impression, readers may find it hard to get a grip on your meaning. You need to flesh them out with concrete words.

Writing that contains lots of abstract language can sound bland and meaningless. It fails to capture the reader's attention because it's difficult to imagine or picture.

To stimulate the reader's senses, use more concrete words than abstract words. Be specific. For example, if we say 'he got off his vehicle and gave his pet some food' readers will have only a hazy picture of what we mean; but if we say 'Captain Hook got off his Harley Davidson motorbike and gave his black Labrador puppy two chocolate chip cookies', the image becomes clearer.

CONNECT ABSTRACT WORDS WITH CONCRETE IMAGERY

Give the reader something to see, hear or feel – connect abstract concepts to concrete images that reflect or symbolize them. One good way of doing this is by using similes and metaphors:

- **Cold** (abstract word) as the **spray** of the **rock-beating surf** (concrete words and image) - *The Destruction of Sennacherib* by Lord Byron
- **Secret** and **self-contained**, and **solitary** (abstract words) as an **oyster**. (concrete word and image) – *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens
- Though I walk through the **valley** of the **shadow** (concrete words and image) of **death** (abstract word). – Psalm 23: 4
- They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their **strength** (abstract word); they shall **soar on wings as eagles**. (concrete words and image) – Isaiah 40:31

MOVING UP AND DOWN THE LADDER OF ABSTRACTION

Good writers move up and down the ladder of abstraction, using abstract words for a broad-brush approach and filling in the details with concrete words - as in these examples:

- Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold; The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass. – *The Eve of St Agnes* by John Keats
- She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam. – *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- A handsome, well-made powerful youngster he was; with eyes that sparkled like the red-hot droppings from a furnace fire. – *The Chimes* by Charles Dickens
- Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day – *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee