

Writers' Workshop

Creating a Strong Image

In this Writers' Workshop you will:

- Replace abstract expressions with concrete words.

Creating a Strong Image

Mini-Lesson: Cast for the Concrete

What do you think of when someone mentions cheer practice? Most people picture cheerleaders, mostly female, building three-human high pyramids on the lawn after school. They may hear the staccato “Go. Go. Go team. Go,” or smell grass and remember the ache of tight hamstrings.

When words create images and appeal to one or more of the five senses, they are probably concrete. Abstract words on the other hand call up fewer clear images in your audience's mind. *Precipitation* is a more abstract term that includes rain, hail, sleet, snow and dew.

Notice that *rain*, *hail*, *sleet*, *snow* and *dew* are all one syllable words. All come from Old English. You have probably experienced most or all of these. “Short words are best,” said Winston Churchill, “and old words when short are the best of all.”

Precipitation, all five syllables of it, comes from Latin roots, specifically from the present participle of *praecipitare*, to throw headlong and *atio*, which makes a verb into a noun. Academic language uses words from Latin to describe classes of things, so Latin-based words are often abstract.

Though you need a mastery of academic vocabulary to understand the world you report, when you write as a journalist, you use the most concrete words available. (No one ever complained when a journalist makes the complicated too clear and interesting.) Concrete words give Charo Chicken's *Fast, Fresh, Flame-broiled* the power to make you hungry. *Don't mess with Texas* creates images of lean, tough Texans in an untamed landscape. While people may steel themselves against the pain of “the loss of an infant,” *Baby shoes, never worn* can reach into our chests and twist something.

Abstract words may cause your attention to slide like a car on an icy turn. The City of Hope, with its dense *We live to cure cancer* also uses a second

motto: *Their purpose is to achieve one goal, cure cancer. Purpose, achieve and goal* do not give most readers any traction and our minds skid over them. What would you tell their public relations department?

With your group, discuss how to arrange these words or phrases from the most concrete to the least concrete. (There may be several intelligent ways to arrange them.)

1. gift, emotion, box of chocolates, love
2. acceleration, race car, speed, Maserati
3. phenomena of nature, water, weather, rain, science, precipitation
4. respect, honors, flag folding, patriotism

What does this knowledge of concrete and abstract words mean as you write headlines, tweets, leads and in each paragraph of longer pieces? Journalists listen for vague or abstract words and edit them out.

1. Avoid, if possible
 - factor;
 - aspect;
 - area (unless you are measuring something);
 - situation;
 - consideration;
 - concept;
 - extent;
 - case; and
 - idea.
2. Make sure each *this*, *which* or *that* refers back to something you can underline. In this sentence, you know *which* refers to four more points.

Their rally seconds before the buzzer gave them four more points, which proved an insurmountable advantage.

If, however, you write three paragraphs about problems with team unity, including a paragraph about nasty Facebook photos and comments, it is unwise to begin the next paragraph with *This caused late-season losses*. Does *this* refer to Facebook photos, nasty comments or a lack of team unity? If you cannot underline what *this* refers to, recast your sentence so *this* points to something concrete or you may lose your audience. One slick spot and they may be gone for good.

3. Watch for words of more than two or three syllables, especially those ending in *ious* or *ion*. They are probably abstract words from Latin. Research shows that one or two syllable words are more readable and memorable than longer ones. They also make for shorter writing.

Apply It!

1. Shorten and clarify these academic sentences into shorter and more concrete prose:
The prognosis for generally reduced precipitation indices will result in decreased saturation of permeable soil and a diminished aquifer. In addition, soil salinity will increase.
2. With your group, look in student publications such as those published or archived online, for examples of language that could be improved by more concrete words. (Editorial pages and columns are good sources.) Look for
 - vague words such as factor and aspect;
 - abstract or Latinate vocabulary that weakens the writing; and
 - unclear references for this, which and that.
3. Try rewriting several. Did you find you needed more information to make the writing concrete and short? That may be what Blaise Pascal meant when he wrote in 1657, *Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte*. I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter.
4. Revise something you have written to avoid vague or abstract wording. Is it now shorter or longer than it was before?