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# The Secret to Good Writing: It's About Objects, Not Ideas

By John Maguire

*It's all too easy for students to float away on abstract words. Here's how to get them back on solid ground.*



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In her article "[The Writing Revolution](#)," Peg Tyre shows the teachers at New Dorp High School beginning to ask the question too few writing teachers ask: What skills do these students lack? She quotes Nell Scharff, an instructional expert brought in by the school, as saying, "How did the kids in our target group go wrong? What skills were missing?"

It's a crucial question for those who want to reform the teaching of writing, because once you ask what skills are missing, you can make a list and start a counter-attack. The alternative to listing missing

skills is to settle into a belief that today's kids are dumb or just not interested in ideas -- which is what usually happens these days.

As a college writing instructor, I have seen many students show up in a freshman comp class believing they can't write, and their opinion is valid. They don't realize that it's because they lack certain skills that were common among college freshmen 40 years ago.



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Tyre points out how small some of the important skills are, and how conscious instruction in them can make a difference. When New Dorp discovered that students didn't know how to use such words as "although" or "despite," the school consciously set out to teach them, and the kids began to write better. When New Dorp discovered kids didn't know how to say "I disagree" or "Can you explain your answer?" in discussions, the phrases were posted as prompts at the front of the classroom and much smarter-sounding discussions resulted.

*"What is a concrete noun?" a student might ask. "It's something you can drop on your foot," I always answer. "It's that simple."*

Like the teachers at New Dorp, I believe in conscious skill instruction and over the years have made my own list of missing skills. One is the skill of *giving specific concrete examples in an essay*. One might naturally assume that giving good concrete examples is unteachable, that it's just an aspect of a student's thinking, and that a student with good mind will use good examples in his or her essays. But it's much more useful to regard the *giving of examples* as a skill, because then you can find ways to train for it.

I'm going to explain one way to do it.

How should one train students to give good, vivid examples in their writing? Should you tell them, *Be more specific*? I used to do that but I don't any more, because it's too vague, not operational. Today I give students a shortcut. I say, "Write physically. Write with physical objects. Put physical objects in your essay."

As I recounted in a [recent article](#) for the National Association of Scholars, when I try to talk to other freshman comp teachers about object-based writing, I usually see their eyes glaze over. I'm obsessed with the importance of writing with objects, and know it works, but it's hard to get the idea across. It goes against the conventional teacher wisdom that says students have to handle abstract ideas, and what the heck does writing physically have to do with that? One fellow instructor, Bernadette--and she's a very good teacher--said as much one time when I was trying to talk about the topic of writing with objects in freshman comp. I think we were in the corridor of the fourth floor of the Engineering Hall at U Mass Lowell a couple of years ago, between classes.

"Ideas are what matter," Bernadette said confidently. "Getting them to define and handle ideas is what's important, not things."

Students were streaming by, and I had no time to counterargue. But I knew where she was coming from, and I wanted to say: *When you boil it down, Bernadette, all abstract ideas derive from objects. You can approach them in that concrete way and teach students to do the same.* I wanted to remind

her what she knew but had forgotten: that abstractions are what you get when you pull back from (or *abstract* from) concrete reality -- from the world of things. But she was on her way to class, and we never did finish the discussion.

Student papers are often unreadable not only because their grammar is bad and their sentences incomplete, but also because they are way, way too abstract. Assigned to write about some idea, students can't think of examples easily and get caught in the sphere of ethereal ideas and stay there. Abstract words multiply on the page in unpleasant clusters. If you ask freshmen to write about, say, *The relationship between wealth and productivity in a market society*, watch out. Few will notice that the terms *relationship*, *wealth*, *productivity* and *market society* need definition or examples. They will just move those vague terms around like checkers on a board, repeating them, and hoping that through repetition something will be said. The resulting paper will be mush.

The classic writers on style have talked about this abstraction problem going on a hundred years. Henry Fowler coined the term "abstractitis" for this multiplication of abstractions, about which he said:

A writer uses abstract words because his thoughts are cloudy; the habit of using them clouds his thoughts still further; he may end by concealing his meaning not only from his readers but also from himself.

In "[Politics and the English Language](#)" George Orwell restates the theme, but explains how concrete objects are involved:

When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing you probably hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit. When you think of something abstract, you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.

Fowler's advice to the writer was to strike out all the "-ion" words possible, to put every such word on trial. Orwell went a step further than Fowler, actually advising writers to start wordlessly, to think of a visual thing, and then to try to find words that fit it.

If the professional writers whom Fowler and Orwell addressed had to be warned away from over-*abstraction*, how much more do our students need that advice? Yet the writing textbooks on the whole say nothing about abstractitis, mentioning it at most only in passing. And instructors do not focus on over-*abstraction*, even though that's the major problem young writers have.

An alternate approach might be to start the course with physical objects, training students to write with those in mind, and to understand that every abstract idea summarizes a set of physical facts. I do, in fact, take that approach. "If you are writing about markets, recognize that *market* is an abstract idea, and find a bunch of objects that relate to it," I say. "Give me concrete nouns. Show me a wooden roadside stand with corn and green peppers on it, if you want. Show me a supermarket displaying six kinds of oranges under halogen lights. Show me a stock exchange floor where bids are shouted and answered."

"What is a concrete noun?" a student might ask.

"It's something you can drop on your foot," I always answer. "It's that simple."

"So if I am writing about markets, productivity and wealth, I am going to...."

"Yes indeed -- you are going to write about things you can drop on your foot, and people, too. Green peppers, ears of corn, windshield wipers, or a grimy mechanic changing your car's oil. No matter how abstract your topic, how intangible, your first step is to find things you can drop on your foot."

From a teacher's perspective, the lovely thing about this technique of *writing with things you can drop on your foot* is that both the skilled and the unskilled can do it. Both kinds of students find the assignment intriguing. Students led into writing this way at the start of a course--writing about abstract ideas in terms of concrete objects--find it strange at first, but they are pleased that the task is actually doable. They start to write with good examples, though they don't think of them as examples, but as objects.

They don't understand why this bias toward the physical matters nor why it works. But they will learn after six or eight weeks of practice that it does work. And about that time, they will start to smile because their thinking on paper is clearer, their writing has become vivid, and they themselves can finally *see* what they are talking about.

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