

## Concrete vs. Abstract Words

### ***A Brief Explanation:***

Concrete words are things that you can demonstrate to other people using the five senses. These things can be seen, felt, tasted, heard, and/or smelt.

Think of your poem as a court case. You need to prove that each word you use exists and is the right word for your poem by bringing a demonstration of it onto the witness stand. This demonstration is your evidence.

- **Things that can be proven by appealing to the physical senses:**  
Animals, people, places, nature, colours, clothes, man-made objects, sounds, tastes, smells, etc..  
Imaginary creatures (like unicorns) are also concrete, although they cannot be proven. This is because they are usually used in stories/poetry about a fantasy land where they could be proven.
- **Things that cannot be proven by appealing to the physical senses:**  
Ideas, beliefs, emotions, and character traits.

### ***Susan Musgrave (Canadian Poet and WiER Writer ) Says:***

“When you use a lot of words that deal with ideas, concepts, and things that we *can't* touch - vague abstract nouns such as “invincible”, “emotion”, “existence”, “obscurity”, “consciousness”, “autonomy”, “despair” and so on, the reader feels a sense of distance from your reality. Abstract comes from the Latin, meaning “removed from”, or moved from concrete reality.

Concrete words on the other hand (like cat, umbrella, rain, wool, stomp, drizzle) appeal to the senses and have more flavour. Perhaps we are taught too relentlessly in school that *summarizing* matters most in our education, when in fact it's *noticing* specific things that enlarges our awareness in the world. Concrete words are what give poems energy and life.

Here are two examples. One stanza of a poem SHOWS us loss (using images) and the other talks ABOUT it (using abstractions).

Which do you think best conveys emotion?

FEARED DROWNED

Suddenly nobody knows where you are,  
your suit black as seaweed, your bearded  
head slick as a seal's.....

or

Lost  
Alone  
Fear Drowning  
In deep water

The first, from a poem by Sharon Olds, uses tangible words and (I think) conveys the feeling rather than states what the feeling is. The second example TELLS us, doesn't SHOW us.”

## Exercises A: Recognizing Concrete vs. Abstract Words

Take the following list of words; put squares around all of the concrete words and circles around all of the abstract words.

Cat	Ball	Dragon	Happiness	Yellow
Fairy	Dust	Rainbow	Rain	Damp
Water	Seaweed	Juice	Hopeless	Itch
Harp	Gold	Warmth	Burning	Helpful
Smile	Anger	Frown	Wish	Sweat
Balloon	Death	Corpse	Alive	Heartbeat
Ice	Fire	Forever	May 5th	Clock
Siren	Sad	Teardrops	Justice	Judge

## Exercise B: Turning Abstract *Ideas* into Concrete *Images*

Take the following sentences and rewrite them to only include concrete words.

*Example:     The young girl was hopelessly sad because she wanted her mother.  
               The 3-year old girl was balling her eyes out and crying for her mother.*

1. I'm so happy I could jump for joy.
2. He was sad because his grandmother lay dead before him. She had suddenly died in his arms, leaving him feeling helpless.
3. War is horrible; there is so much pain, suffering, and death.
4. Spring is a time of gladness, when winter seems to be gone forever.
5. We are best friends and will be forever. We are always happy together.
6. You are my joy and my love.
7. He stood excited and in anticipation before the magic wishing well, ready to watch his dreams come true.
8. He was sad because the girl he loved said he was too ugly to be worth her affections.