Abstract and Concrete Language

Words that do not refer to specific entities or instances are abstract. Words that do refer to particular entities or instances are concrete. Abstract words provide a structure, plan, or frame in which concrete words can be understood. Concrete words help the reader picture, feel, and experience an abstract concept.

Words can be organized on different levels of abstraction, from abstract or general to concrete or specific.

Abstract    Wealth
            Material Asset
            Farm Animal
            Cow
            Hereford
            Bessie

Concrete

Each level moves from a word that has many possible interpretations to words that are increasingly specific and have fewer or only one interpretation within a given context.¹

In order for us to think, to learn, or to communicate, we must and do use both abstract and concrete concepts. In fact, neither has meaning without the other. For example, Bessie, our cow, has meaning because we understand she comes from the larger category of cow.

The same principle applies to the concrete structure of a house. Before we can build a house, we create the abstract idea of a house in our minds. This idea might be drawn on paper. From this drawing, we can then physically construct the even more concrete structure of the house. The interaction of abstract and concrete applies to many different areas of life. Let's look at some examples of how Abstract and Concrete ideas are used interactively.

![House](image1.png)

![House](image2.png)

Same Concrete Level

Just as abstract and concrete principles are represented in the physical world, they are also depicted through words and phrases that signify the actual principle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simon</th>
<th>Allison</th>
<th>Same concrete level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Same abstract level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Comparison of different levels of abstraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To love as Simon</td>
<td></td>
<td>Different levels of abstraction used interactively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract and Concrete principles can also be seen on a sentence level.

Simon washes the dishes  Allison eats fruit  Same concrete level

Love is the sustenance of life  Eating well is good for the body  Same abstract level

Love is the sustenance of life  Simon washes the dishes  Comparison of different levels

Simon shows his love by washing the dishes  Different levels of abstraction used interactively

Abstract and Concrete language play an important role in the forming of paragraphs. The abstract language creates the frame, the central claim; the concrete language exemplifies, illustrates or describes the central claim.

Simon washed the dishes in the morning. He then washed his car and cleaned the garage. Simon ended his day by vacuuming his room and washing the clothes.

Allison ate some pineapple for breakfast. She then had an apple and a tuna fish sandwich for lunch. For dinner Allison made whole wheat bread and she ate noodle soup.  Same concrete level

Love is a necessity of life. We show our love by the little things we do. Love can affect the activities we do each day.

Being aware of our eating habits can make a difference in how our bodies feel. Eating good food makes our bodies healthy. Eating well is good for the body.  Same abstract level

Allison ate some pineapple for breakfast. She then had an apple and a tuna fish sandwich for lunch. For dinner Allison made whole wheat bread and she ate noodle soup.

Being aware of our eating habits can make a difference in how our bodies feel. Eating good food requires being conscious of what we eat. Eating well is good for the body.  Comparison of different levels

Being aware of our eating habits can make a difference in how our bodies feel. Allison Hill is conscious of what she eats. Allison ate some pineapple for breakfast. She then had an apple and a tuna fish sandwich for lunch. For dinner Allison made whole wheat bread and she ate noodle soup. Allison says since she has been watching what she eats she feels better. Allison is an example that eating well is good for the body.  Different Levels of abstraction used interactively
Practice

1. To practice identifying abstract and concrete ideas and how they are used interactively, indicate the abstract ideas that build a frame for the concrete ideas in the following paragraph, by numbering the sentences according to Christensen’s method demonstrated in the handout Structure: Idea Levels and Relationships.

The iniquities sampled above are maintained in order to carry on a foreign administration, demonstrably the most expensive in the world. Take your own salary. It is over Rs. 21,000 per month, besides many other indirect additions. The British Prime Minister gets £ 5,000 per year, i.e., over Rs. 5,400 per month at the present rate of exchange. You are getting over Rs. 700 per day against India’s average income of less than annas 2 per day. The Prime Minister gets Rs. 180 per day against Great Britain’s average income of nearly Rs. 2 per day. Thus you are getting much over five thousand times India’s average income. The British Prime Minister is getting only ninety times Britain’s average income. On bended knees I ask you to ponder over this phenomenon. I have taken a personal illustration to drive home a painful truth. I have too great regard for you as a man to wish to hurt your feelings. I know that you do not need that salary you get. Probably that whole of your salary goes for charity. But a system that provides for such an arrangement deserves to be summarily scrapped.²

2. Construct your own frame for the concrete words by using the following abstract and concrete words interactively in a sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Monkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Cage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Combine abstract and concrete ideas within a paragraph by using the following sentences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wise use of finances makes one happy.</td>
<td>John bought a new car stereo with the money he had saved throughout the school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We all felt that justice was served.</td>
<td>The man found guilty of armed robbery was sent to jail for six months and fined $1000 dollars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her anger was evident.</td>
<td>The lady scowled and threw down her keys.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>