

Excerpt from William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's
THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE (Third Edition)

II. Elementary Principles of Compositions; Rule 16: Use specific, definite, concrete language.

Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.

A period of unfavorable weather set in.	It rained every day for a week.
He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward.	He grinned as he pocketed the coin.

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

Jean Stafford, to cite a modern author, demonstrates in her short story “In the Zoo” how prose is made vivid by the use of words that evoke images and sensations:

...Daisy and I in time found asylum in a small menagerie down by the railroad tracks. It belonged to a gentle alcoholic ne'er-do-well, who did nothing all day long but drink bathtub gin in rickys and play solitaire and smile to himself and talk to his animals. He had a little, stunted red vixen and a deodorized skunk, a parrot from Tahiti that spoke Parisian French, a woebegone coyote, and two capuchin monkeys, so serious and humanized, so small and sad and sweet, and so religious-looking with their tonsured heads that it was impossible not to think their gibberish was really an ordered language with a grammar that someday some philologist would understand.

Gran knew about our visits to Mr. Murphy and she did not object, for it gave her keen pleasure to excoriate him when we came home. His vice was not a matter of guesswork; it was an established fact that he was half-seas over from dawn till midnight. “With the black Irish,” said Gran, “the taste for drink is taken in with the mother’s milk and is never mastered. Oh I know all about those promises to join the temperance movement and not to touch another drop. The way to Hell is paved with good intentions.”

We were still little girls when we discovered Mr. Murphy, before the shattering disease of adolescence was to make our bones and brains ache even more painfully than before, and we loved him and we hoped to marry him when we grew up. We loved him, and we loved his monkeys to exactly the same degree and in exactly the same way; they were husbands and fathers and brothers, these little ugly, dark, secret men who minded their own business and let us mind ours. If we stuck our fingers through the bars of the cage, the monkeys would sometimes take them in their tight, tiny hands and look into our faces with a tentative, somehow absent-minded sorrow, as if they terribly regretted that they could not place us but were glad to see us all the same. Mr. Murphy, playing a solitaire game of cards called “once in a blue moon” on a kitchen table in his back yard beside the pens, would occasionally look up and blink his beautiful blue eyes and say, “You’re peaches to make over my wee friends. I love you for it.” There was nothing demanding in his voice, and nothing sticky; on his lips the word “love” was jocose and forthright, it had no strings attached. We were sit on either side of him and watch him regiment his ranks of cards and stop to drink as deeply as if he were dying of thirst and wave to his animals and say to them, “Yes, lads, you’re dandies.”

“I recommend you acquire a copy of this book if your aim is to master the art of writing.” Iván Brave

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If the experiences of Walter Mitty, of Dick Diver, of Rabbit Angstrom have seemed for the moment real to countless readers, if in reading Faulkner we have almost the sense of inhabiting Yoknapatawpha Country during the decline of the South, it is because the details used are definite, the terms concrete. It is not that every detail is given—that would be impossible, as well as to no purpose—but that all the significant details are given, and with such accuracy and vigor that the readers, in imagination, can project himself into the scene.

In exposition and in argument, the writer must likewise never lose his hold upon the concrete; and even when he is dealing with general principles, he must furnish particular instances of their application.

In his *Philosophy of Style*, Herbert Spencer gives to sentences to illustrate how the vague and general can be turned into the vivid and the particular.

In proportion as the manners customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of its penal code will be severe.	In proportion as men delight in battles, bullfights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack.
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To show what happens when strong writing is deprived of its vigor, George Orwell once took a passage from the Bible and drained it of its blood. On the left, below, is Orwell's translation; on the right, the verse from Ecclesiastes (King James Version).

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.	I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.
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