

Language

Abstract and Concrete Terms

Abstract terms refer to ideas or concepts; they have no physical referents.

Examples of abstract terms include *love, success, freedom, good, moral, democracy*, and any *-ism* (*chauvinism, Communism, feminism, racism, sexism*). These terms are fairly common and familiar, and because we recognize them we may imagine that we understand them—but we really can't, because the meanings won't stay still.

Take *love* as an example. You've heard and used that word since you were three or four years old. Does it mean to you know what it meant to you? The word stays the same, but the meaning keeps changing as you change.

Does this mean we shouldn't use abstract terms? No—we need abstract terms. We need to talk about ideas and concepts, and we need terms that represent them. But we must understand how imprecise their meanings are, how easily they can be differently understood, and how tiring and boring long chains of abstract terms can be. Abstract terms are useful and necessary when we want to name ideas (as we do in thesis statements and some paragraph topic sentences), but they're not likely to make points clear or interesting by themselves.

Concrete terms refer to objects or events that are available to the senses. [This is directly opposite to *abstract terms*, which name things that are **not** available to the senses.] Examples of concrete terms include *spoon, table, velvet eye patch, nose ring, sinus mask, green, hot, walking*. Because these terms refer to objects or events we can see or hear or feel or taste or smell, their meanings are pretty stable. If you ask me what I mean by the word *spoon*, I can pick up a spoon and show it to you. [I can't pick up a *freedom* and show it to you, or point to a small *democracy* crawling along a window sill. I can measure sand and oxygen by weight and volume, but I can't collect a pound of *responsibility* or a liter of *moral outrage*.]

While abstract terms like *love* change meaning with time and circumstances, concrete terms like *spoon* stay pretty much the same. *Spoon* and *hot* and *puppy* mean pretty much the same to you now as they did when you were four.

You may think you understand and agree with me when I say, "We all want success." But surely we don't all want the same things. Success means different things to each of us, and you can't be sure of what I mean by that abstract term. On the other hand, if I say "I want a gold Rolex on my wrist and a Mercedes in my driveway," you know exactly what I mean (and you know whether you want the same things or different things). Can you see that concrete terms are clearer and more interesting than abstract terms?