

Lesson 4.3

Getting Precise

When you hear the word *car*, what do you picture? Make a quick sketch in your mind—no need for paper. How big is it? What color? Old or new? Shiny or half rusted out? Now let's say you hear the words "cherry red, ground-hugging

Italian sports car." Did those words change the image in your mind—even a little? If so, you know the power of precision. General, vague language leaves readers to fill in the blanks, making their own sketches. That's fine—if you want them to call on their imaginations. But if you want readers to see, hear, and feel what *you* see, hear, and feel, then only precise wording will do.



First Sketches

Following are two short writing examples, each depicting a scene. Read each one aloud, softly, to yourself. Then use scratch paper to create a sketch of what you see in your mind. Your sketch can be

- a drawing.
- a quick list of details.

Example 1

I love the desert where I grew up. There were trees, interesting creatures—and amazingly enough, even some water.

Example 2

The ocean is different from everywhere else on Earth. Even lying in bed, you can hear and smell things you don't notice anywhere else.

Share and Compare

Share your personal responses and mental sketches with those of a partner. Did you have the same impressions? Discuss the passages. How much work did you have to do as a reader—and how much did each writer do for you?

Check the response that matches how you felt as you created your own sketch of each passage:

- ☐ I was inspired. Each writer helped me see the scene perfectly!
- ☐ The descriptions were helpful, though I had to invent a few details.
- ☐ I had to make almost everything up myself! The writers hardly told me a thing!

Reviewing Examples: *The Secret Knowledge of Water* and *The Hungry Ocean*

Following are the actual nonfiction examples on which we based our previous very-sketchy descriptions. As you will see, in describing their real-life experiences in the desert and on the ocean, these two writers are considerably more precise than we were. Carefully read each passage aloud. Underline the words or phrases you think are particularly precise or vivid—the words that help you make a detailed sketch in your mind.

**Example 1**

An early memory of the low Sonoran Desert where I was born is of my mother walking me out on a trail. I remember three things, each a snapshot without motion or sound. The first is lush, green cottonwood trees billowing like clouds against the stark backdrop of cliffs and boulders. The second is tadpoles worrying the mud in a water hole just about dry. Each tadpole, like the eye of a raven, waited black and moist against the sun. The third is water streaming over carved rock into a pool clear as window glass. These three images are what defined the desert for me. At an early age it was obvious to me that water was the element of consequence, the root of everything out here. Even to say the word *Sonoran* required my lips to form as if I were about to take a drink, and the tone of the word hovered in the air the same as *agua* or *water*.

The Secret Knowledge of Water
by Craig Childs

Example 2

I woke up one morning, at the age of twelve, to the smell of low tide. The scent of seaweed and tidal pools crept through my open bedroom window and tiptoed around the room, not overpowering, but arousing interest. Usually awakening to the faint smell of pine and the rush of wind in the trees, that day I was intrigued with the thick, musty odor of sun-baked salt and

mussel-covered rocks. My ears strained to pick up the slight sloshing of the tide as it swept in and out around the low-water-mark rocks and ledges. It seemed strange that having been surrounded by the ocean my entire life, this was the first time I noticed the screeching of the gulls and the drone of a diesel-powered lobster boat nearby.

The Hungry Ocean
by Linda Greenlaw

Share and Compare

Meet with your writing circle to discuss the words and phrases you underlined. Did you notice the same precise, vivid, energetic language? Rate each of the passages on a scale from **1** to **6**.

The Secret Knowledge of Water

1

Can't really
see it yet . . .

2

3

4

5

6

So precise,
I feel I'm there!

The Hungry Ocean

1

Can't really
see it yet . . .

2

3

4

5

6

So precise,
I feel I'm there!

After rating both, choose one or two favorite words or expressions of your own from each passage and record them here. (Make your choices individually.)

Favorites from *The Secret Knowledge of Water*

1. _____

2. _____

Favorites from *The Hungry Ocean*

1. _____

2. _____

Verbs: The Engine of Writing

Verbs make writing both precise and energetic. Look at the passages one more time and identify two verbs from each that you feel are especially well-chosen.

Verbs from *The Secret Knowledge of Water*

1. _____

2. _____

Verbs from *The Hungry Ocean*

1. _____

2. _____

Quick Questions: If you could read a chapter from one of these books tonight, which book would you pick? Why?

Vague to Vivid = Verbs + Details

The wonderful thing about flat, dull language? It can be revised! And you're in the right place at the right time to do that. The following sentences are vague. Use energetic, precise details and strong verbs to bring each one to life.

We've completed one to show you what we mean.

(**Hint:** Create a clear picture and make it move.)

Vague: The boy had fun in the sand.

Precise: *After the tide went out, Andrew scooped up bleached shells and gray driftwood sticks and assembled them into a fortress—then he sat back on the warm sand and waited for the ocean waves to attack.*

Vague: The food was unusual.

Precise: _____

Vague: A stranger approached.

Precise: _____

Vague: It was cold.

Precise: _____

Vague: She seemed upset.

Precise: _____

Vague: He ran a hard race.

Precise: _____

Share and Compare

Meet with your writing circle to share and discuss your revised sentences. Do you have favorites? Choose one or two to share aloud with the whole class. Then rate your own revisions here.

My revisions

- ☐ used details + strong verbs to make the writing precise.
- ☐ added some detail, but still made readers fill in a lot of blanks.
- ☐ were still way too vague. I needed more precise language!

A Precise Poem or Paragraph

It's time for you to create some precise, vivid writing of your own—a poem or paragraph. For this practice, focus on any place that holds strong memories for you. Come up with your own idea or use our list to jog your memory.

- Our old tree fort
- A room in my old elementary school
- Our first house
- The old barn
- The back yard
- Our street
- My favorite place to eat/hike/fish/hang out

Spend some time prewriting. Make a sketch, do a word web, list details—or whatever works for you.

When you feel ready to write, take 15 minutes or more to draft a poem or paragraph. Remember: Create a clear picture—and make it move.

Share and Compare

Before you meet with your writing circle, quietly read through your writing aloud. Are there any vague words or phrases you could replace? Do that now. Add details—or strengthen verbs. Then, with your group, take turns sharing. As you listen to each writer, jot down your favorite word or phrase on an index card, fold it, and hand it to the writer after he or she finishes sharing. Open cards when everyone is finished sharing.



A Writer's Questions

Some people prefer books without pictures. They say they like to make their own mental pictures of what the writer is describing. Do you feel like that, too? Does this put extra pressure on writers to be precise with word choice?



Putting It to the Test

Using precise language is partly a matter of avoiding vague language. What are some weak, general words you know will make your writing too vague? Brainstorm a list. How can you keep their use to a minimum?