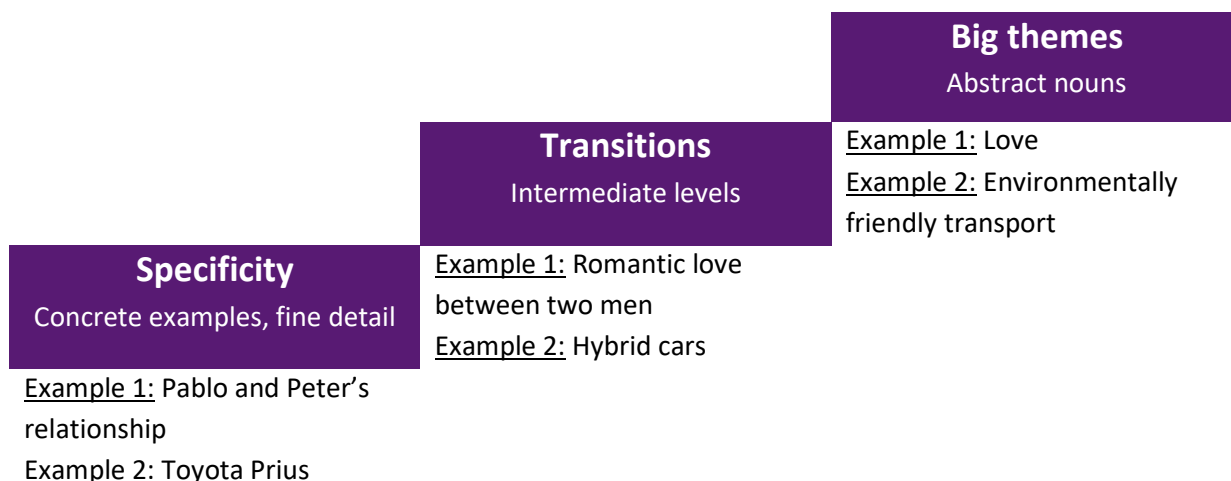


Levels of abstraction

Good writing – that is, writing that takes its readers on a journey – masterfully moves up and down the ladder of abstraction. It knows what grand themes it wants to embody, and it knows which telling detail will illustrate those grand themes. Jacqui Banaszynski, one of the greatest story tellers and journalists of our time, who won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for her “Aids in the Heartland” series (an intimate look at the life and death of a gay farm couple in the US), describes the strength of her writing as follows:

The story’s specificity – Dick Hanson and Bert Henningson, farmers and political activists – sits at the bottom of the ladder of abstraction. What these two men represented – commitment, love, death and family struggle – is at the top of the ladder. Many newspaper stories are boring because they stay in the middle. There are no specific people, but no great themes, either. These stories have nothing to ground them, and nothing to raise them above the mundane. (Jacqui Banaszynski, taken from 2003 Nieman Conference, “Profiles in Journalism,” Session 44)

The ladder of abstraction:



Text analysis: guiding questions and tools

If you want to analyse a text with regard to its degree of generality (abstraction) or specificity (concrete detail), here are some guiding questions:

- Where does the text “sit” on the ladder of abstraction? (Mostly abstract and generic, or very detailed and specific?)
- How will this text speak to people with different learning styles and information processing preferences?
- Is there a concrete story hook (an example, an anecdote, a metaphor, etc.) that triggers mental images or emotional responses to the text?

Some disciplinary “cultures” foster more abstract discourse, whereas others allow for extended immersion in concrete detail. More often than not, academic texts offer too few examples, anecdotes, metaphors, or concrete information. The result? A less engaging story.



If this is true of your own text, **here are some tools for you to try** – courtesy of Helen Sword, author of *Stylish Academic Writing* (Harvard University Press 2012, pp. 108–111):

Examples:

For every sentence that you write about an abstract concept or principle, follow up with the words “For example...” This technique can lead to stylistic monotony when overused; however, if you are stuck for ideas, it is a good way to get you started thinking concretely. (Rule of thumb: Use the phrase “for example” no more than once per paragraph or, better yet, once per page. Cultivate other, more subtle ways to introduce examples.)

“Each of these techniques relies on a breathtakingly simple formula: abstract concepts become more memorable and accessible the moment we ground them in the material world, the world that our readers can see and touch” (Helen Sword, p. 108).

Your turn: _____

Anecdotes:

Start a file of anecdotes – mini stories no more than a few sentences or paragraphs long – that relate to your research area. Weave them into your research writing at key points, whether to assist your readers’ understanding of simply to regain their attention. If you don’t know where to start, try using an anecdote as your opening hook.

Your turn: _____

Case studies:

If your research involves human subjects, consider framing it as a case study: that is, an exemplary story.

Your turn: _____

Scenarios:

A scenario presents a hypothetical situation and explores its possible outcomes. As a prompt, start by addressing your readers directly with an imperative verb such as *imagine*, *picture*, or *suppose*. You can later remove this direct address and present the scenario on its own.

Your turn: _____

Figurative language:

Stylish writers employ similes, metaphors, analogies, and other figurative language to capture their readers' attention, aid their understanding, appeal to their physical senses, and generate new ideas. If figurative language does not come naturally to you, try the following steps:

- Choose a bland, abstract sentence from your book, thesis, or article. (Example: "Speech errors occur frequently in human conversation, but the many different varieties of errors have not yet been adequately analysed and categorized by scholars.")

Your turn: _____

- Identify the subject of the sentence and come up with some concrete similes. ("Speech errors are like: sprouting weeds, lost children, swarming insects.")

Your turn: _____

- Choose one of those similes and expand it into an analogy. ("If speech errors are like swarming insects, then the people who study them are like entomologists, and the act of studying them is like catching and classifying insects.")

Your turn: _____



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- Get playful with the analogy: push its limits, explore its shadow side. (“If speech errors are like swarming insects, studying them is like intentionally walking into a cloud of mosquitoes. If linguists are like entomologists, classifying speech errors is like dipping butterflies in formaldehyde and pinning them to a board.”)

Your turn: _____

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- Now work the analogy into your original sentence, as linguists Douglas Hofstadter and David Moser do when they invoke the “speech errors are like insects” analogy in a statement about error making and human cognition: “speech errors of all kinds swarm in our linguistic environment like hordes of variegated insects waiting to be caught, labelled, and categorized.”

Your turn: _____

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- Finally, try out your metaphorically enriched writing on a few colleagues – the conservative ones as well as those who are stylistically adventurous. Do they like it? Do you?