

Choose the Appropriate Level of Abstraction

Brief: Using abstract words can make a concept easier to communicate, but it breaks the connection to the specific meaning that we want to convey.

Learning Objective: Understand how to choose the appropriate level of abstraction.

Key Terms:

- **Abstraction:** The process of perceiving similarities from our direct, specific observations of things around us, organizing the similarities, and then assigning a word label for the more general concept.
- **Abstraction Ladder:** A concept developed by communication theorist S.I. Hayakawa, who compared levels of abstraction to a ladder, with the most specific concept at the bottom rung and the most abstract concept at the top rung.

What is Abstraction?

One of the ways we can attempt to make difficult information easier to understand is to simplify our word choices. To make our words more general, we use a higher level of abstraction.

Abstraction is the process of perceiving similarities from our direct, specific observations of things around us, organizing the similarities, and then assigning a word label for the more general concept.

From Granny Smiths to Produce

Apples, oranges, bananas, pears.... Imagine how time consuming and confusing it would be to name each of these ingredients every time you talked about a fruit salad. Thankfully, you can use the general term fruit when you describe this dish.

Now, imagine you're trying to direct someone where to find fruit in a supermarket. Instead of using the name for each individual fruit or the general category of fruit, you'll probably suggest they look in the produce department. Produce is an even more general term than fruit, referring to freshly grown, uncooked items.

Next, imagine you're asking that same person to go to the supermarket to purchase apples so you can bake a pie. You specifically want Granny Smith apples. But, instead of using the specific name of the type of apple you want, you simply say, "Please get me some fruit from the produce department." What are the chances that they'll get you the apples you want? Not very good. Using the word that describes a more generalized category is quicker and makes it easier to talk about, but it can also break the connection to the specific meaning that you want to convey.

The Abstraction Ladder

Communication theorist S.I. Hayakawa was the first to compare levels of abstraction to a ladder, with the most specific concept at the bottom rung and the most abstract concept at the top rung:



Rung 5 (Top): Food
 Rung 4: Produce
 Rung 3: Fruit
 Rung 2: Apples
 Rung 1 (Bottom): Granny Smith Apples

Almost anything can be described in relatively abstract, general words or in relatively concrete, specific words. The trick is to tailor the level of abstraction to the specific content and the audience's level of understanding.

Use the Appropriate Level of Abstraction

Concrete words can help your audience understand precisely what you mean. For example, if you say that you want to produce television shows for a younger demographic segment, do you mean teenagers or toddlers? In this case, you need to be more specific.

In other cases, such as when you are delivering a speech about a specialized topic to a general audience, it might confuse them if you are too specific; rather, it might be more useful for the audience if you speak using more abstract language. Your objective when choosing words is not to avoid abstract general words altogether, but rather to avoid using them when your audience needs more specific, concrete connections to the ideas you are trying to convey.

From Concept to Action

A quick way to test to discover if the words you're using in your speech are too abstract—and not specific or concrete enough—is to practice your speech with another person. Ask them to summarize it back to you. If they leave out or gloss over some points, ask them if your speech was clear enough to understand. If they didn't understand parts, you'll know which sections to go back to and specify in more concrete detail. Similarly, the person reviewing your speech can let you know if the language you're using is too detailed.

OER IMAGE SOURCES:

"Alphabet Word Images Big Industrial." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/en/alphabet-word-images-big-industrial-1293460>. Accessed 5 December 2018. [CC0]

OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Tailor Abstraction to Your Audience." Lumen Learning. <https://lumen.instructure.com/courses/218897/pages/linkedtext54296>. Accessed 17 May 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]