

Nouns: Abstract and Concrete

A **noun** is a word used to name a **person, place, thing, idea** or **quality**.

A **concrete noun** names something you can experience with one of your five senses; that is, a concrete noun names something you can **see** (like the moon), **touch** (like a blanket), **smell** (like a rose), **hear** (like laughter), or **taste** (like sugar).

An **abstract noun** names **feelings** (such as jealousy and attraction), **ideas** (such as peace and freedom), and **qualities** (such as generosity and determination). Abstract nouns do not exist as physical objects in the world; we cannot see, touch, smell, hear or taste our feelings, ideas, and qualities.

When you use abstract nouns in your writing, you can never be sure that your reader will know exactly what you mean; this is because different abstract words mean different things to different people. Think about the word **love**. To some people, this word may mean romance and fun; to others it may mean self-sacrifice and dedication. A reader cannot know what you mean when you use a word like love unless you follow it up with an explanation or bring it to life using concrete nouns.

For Example:

Abstract: The storm was a thing of beauty. (*Beauty is an abstract noun. The writer needs to follow this with concrete nouns to explain how the storm was beautiful*).

Concrete: The storm was a thing of beauty. The **waves** were tall and foaming as they rolled toward the shore. The wind bent the **palm trees** on the **cliffs** into graceful curves, and **clouds** raced across the gray expanse of **sky**. (*Waves, palm trees, cliffs, clouds, and sky are all concrete nouns. The concrete nouns create a picture of the storm for the reader, showing the reader how the storm was beautiful*).

Abstract: You've given me love like I never had before. (*Love is an abstract noun*).

Concrete: You've given me love like I never had before. You leave chocolate under my pillow, roses on my dashboard, and poetry in my garden. You scrub my bathroom floor, drive my nauseous poodle to the vet, and tell me every day that your life has no meaning without me. You've given me everything—your soft smile, your strong arms, and your ATM PIN number.

Note that effective writing makes use of both concrete and abstract nouns. In the above examples, the passages that include concrete nouns each begin with an abstract concept to communicate an overall mood or idea.

Practice with Abstract and Concrete Writing

A/ Here are some sentences that are too abstract or general to create a clear picture for the reader. **Next to each sentence below, write a detailed description including some concrete nouns to bring the sentence to life.**

Example: I was having a really bad day.

→ I had trouble finding my car keys that morning, so I had to speed to make it to work on time. I had almost made it to the office when a police officer stopped me to give me a speeding ticket. The officer looked at my insurance slip and said that it had expired; she proceeded to have my vehicle impounded. I walked into the office over an hour late and got yelled at by my boss.

1. Maria was the best friend I could ever hope to have.

2. It was the happiest day of my life.

3. There was no denying that Eric was a cool guy.

B/ For each of the concrete phrases below, write an overall idea or feeling that might show a reader what this concrete image means to you.

Example: My mother's smile → *Approval*

1. **A puppy dog** _____
2. **A dozen roses** _____
3. **A lottery ticket** _____
4. **An empty house** _____
5. **A million dollars** _____
6. **A crying child** _____