

Principle of Concreteness in Business English Writing

杨伶俐

Writing concretely means being specific, definite, and vivid rather than vague and general. The specific words are accurate and clear; while generalizations may be misleading or confusing. Concrete words are not only specific; they also refer directly to one or more of our five senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell) or to tangible objects and individuals, thus helping readers visualizing the messages conveyed. They contrast with abstract words. The following guidelines should help you write concretely:

- ✓ Use specific facts and figures.
- ✓ Put action in your verbs.
- ✓ Choose vivid, image-building words.

1. Use Specific Facts and Figures

Whenever you can substitute an exact fact or a figure for a general word to make your message more concrete and convincing, do so.

Vague, general and indefinite

These brakes stop my car within a short distance.

Concrete and convincing

These Goodson power brakes stop my car travelling 100 km an hour, within 75 meters.

Please send your check for the full amount soon.

Please send your check for \$800 on or before June 5, 2014.

Our raincoats are very special.

Our raincoats are made of high-tech materials and have undergone special treatment, which can prevent shrinkage, color-fading and is durable. With the latest designs and varieties of colors, our raincoats are warmly welcome by our customers.

I have a lot of transportation experience.

My experience in the field of transportation includes two years as a clerk for the CAAC and almost three years as a dispatcher for Transcontinental Freightways.

Often vague, general words are opinion words; they may have different meanings to the sender and the receiver. For instance, how fast is fast? How large is large? Different people have different interpretations. The list that follows gives words which can lead to uncertainty, misunderstanding, or confusion.

a few	how	most	several	small
high	many	nice	short	soon

large more quick slow tall

Using plenty of examples, prefixed by phrases like “for instance,” “for example,” “such as,” also helps make your writing concrete as well as clear.

In certain cases it is, of course, permissible and even desirable to use general expressions. Exceptions to the “facts and figures” rule occur:

1. When it is not possible to be specific, for you may not have nor be able to get definite facts or figures.
2. When you want to be diplomatic. Thus, instead of writing “We have sent you five notices of your overdue payment,” you may be more tactful (to a usually prompt paying customer) by writing “We have sent you several reminders of your overdue payment”.
3. When you want to allow the reader to form his or her own opinion, or when exact figures are unimportant, as in “A few of our employees attended the parade.”

2. Put action in your verbs

Strong verbs can activate other words and help make your sentences definite. To write strong sentences, you should (1) use active rather than passive verbs most of the time and (2) put action in your verbs instead of in nouns or infinitives.

Active versus passive voice

When the subject performs the action which the verb expresses, the verb is said to be in the active voice. When the subject benefits from or otherwise receives the action the verb expresses, the verb is said to be in the passive voice. Generally, in business English writing, you should use active rather than passive verbs, because active verbs help make your sentences more:

- Specific. “The board of directors decided” is more explicit than “A decision has been made.”
- Personal. “You will note” is both personal and specific; “It will be noted” is impersonal.
- Concise. The passive requires more words and thus slows both the writing and reading. Compare “Figures show” with “It is shown by figures.”
- Emphatic. Passive verbs dull action. Compare “The child ran 50 m” with “Fifty meters were run by the child.”

Occasionally, however, you may prefer the passive voice instead of the active, as the following situations:

- When you want to avoid personal, blunt accusations or commands. “Attendance at the meeting is required” is less harsh than “You must attend...”
- When you want to stress the object of the action. In “Your savings account is insured up to \$20,000,” you have intentionally stressed “your account”. Also,

“You are invited” is better than “We invite you”

- When the doer isn’t important in the sentence. In “Three announcements were made before the meeting started,” the emphasis is on the announcements, not on who gave them.

Action in verbs, not in nouns

Eight verbs – be, give, have, hold, make, put, undertake and take might be designated as “deadly” because the action they introduce is hidden in a “quiet noun.” The examples below show how these “deadly” verbs can be changed to active verbs which shorten the sentences.

Action hiding in a “quiet noun”

The function of this office is the collection of accounts and the compilation of statements.

Action in the verb

This office collects accounts and compiles statements.

Mr. Jones will give consideration to the report.

Mr. Jones will consider the report.

The contract has a requirement that ...

The contract requires that ...

He made his first installment payment.

He paid his first instalment.

The chairperson puts her trust in each committee member.

The chairperson trusts each Committee member.

The manager undertook implementation of the rules.

The manager implemented the rules.

Watch for nouns that end in –ion, -tion, -ing, -ment, -ant, -ent, -ence, -ance, and –ency. These endings often hide verbs. Using verbs can help you to present the information more forcefully.

Action in verbs, not in infinitives

Action can also be concealed by infinitives. For example:

- The duty of a stenographer is to check all incoming mail and to record it. In addition, it is his or her responsibility to keep the assignment book up to date. (Action hiding in infinitive)
A stenographer checks and records all incoming mail and keeps the assignment book up to date.

3. Choose vivid, image-building words

Among the devices you can use to make your messages forceful, vivid, and specific are

figurative language, and well-chosen adjectives and adverbs.

Figures of speech often express an idea more vividly than literal language. For example:

- She is usually the one who gets things started in the organization. (Literal)
Jean Jones is the spark plug of the organization. (Figurative)
- X product helps you lose your double chin in four weeks, if you use X as directed. (Literal)
If two chins quarrel constantly for a place on your collar, X product helps settle the argument. Only one chin remains after you use X just four weeks as directed. (Figurative)

However, you must be careful not to use figurative speech which can be interpreted negatively or which sounds confusing or inappropriate.

In addition, you can often build a more realistic and interesting word picture by adding well-chosen adjectives and adverbs. Examples:

Colourless

The camera has a system that gives you good pictures.

Realistic, vivid, interesting

The Poney camera has an uncannily precise metering system that assures you properly exposed, true-colour pictures.

The cookware is guaranteed to withstand changes in temperature.

Because Creston cookware can withstand extreme changes in heat and cold, the guarantee assures you that you can safely move any piece from your freezer to your microwave oven.

In your search for vivid, picture-building words, be careful not to go to extremes with adjectives and be careful with superlatives such as “the most,” “the largest,” “the greatest,” and “the best” to avoid over exaggeration.