

Concrete vs. Abstract Nouns

(Featuring Poetry from Washington State)

Subject: Language Arts
Age Range: Upper elementary (grades 4–6)
Topic: Poetry

Objectives

- Students will identify and use various parts of speech (concrete and abstract nouns)
- Students will develop their skills as becoming knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a literary community

Concept Links

- Poets use concrete language and sensory detail to communicate abstract ideas, emotions, and truths.
- Poetry helps readers see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Adapted from the CLEAR language arts curriculum created by faculty of the University of Virginia, 2016.

Introduction

Invite students to find a comfortable place for listening (this could be at their desks or lying or sitting on the carpet with their eyes closed). Remind students that one very important purpose of reading is for personal enjoyment. Their job during this time is to listen to and enjoy the way the poem sounds, and they might also listen for some of the imagery and details used by the poet.

Read “Tulip Season” by Jess Gigot, a poet from Washington State, aloud (found following the text of this lesson plan).

After the reading, have students spend 5–10 minutes drawing the image or scene that stuck out to them from the poem. Set up a student gallery walk so students can view each other’s images. A gallery walk can be as simple as taping pictures to the walls and asking students to rotate around the room. Lead a brief discussion about the commonalities and differences in each student’s drawing.

Vocabulary

Write the word *imagery* on the board. Then, ask students to suggest words (as many as they can) that might be related to “imagery” and list these on the board as well. Have students think about what meaning these words have in common. After identifying that all the words have something to do with creating a picture or impression of something, introduce the meaning of imagery in poetry, which is what poets create by using details that connect readers to the poem through all of their senses (although mainly sight). Explain to students

that in the earlier activity, when they created a picture in their minds of the “Tulip Season” poem, they were using their *imaginations* to form *images* that they then tried to draw on paper. When poets describe images in detail, like Jess Gigot did with “Tulip Season,” we call this *imagery*.

Definition to share:

Imagery in poetry is the expression of sensory detail (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste). This word originates from Latin and has the same root as words such as *image*, *imagine*, *imagination*, and *imitate*, which are all concerned with creating a picture, impression, or copy of something.

Next, write the words **concrete** and **abstract** on the board. Explain that *concrete* originates from the Latin *concretus*, from *com-* (“together”) and *crescere* (“to grow”). Originally it meant “to grow together,” or to combine, as in the building substance, concrete, which was used as far back as in Ancient Rome and was made by combining water, gravel, sand, and some cement. When these ingredients are mixed together, they turn into a hard, rigid solid. Thus, when we use **concrete** as an adjective, especially when talking about language, it can mean *representing an actual substance or thing*.

In contrast, **abstract** expresses a quality or characteristic apart from any specific object or instance. To illustrate the difference, consider showing the students some examples of “concrete” art, then an example of “abstract” art. The Washington State Arts Commission website hosts collections of art from across the state, and you can find many pieces in online galleries at <https://www.arts.wa.gov/featured-exhibition>.

Explain to or remind students that a **noun** is the part of speech that refers to a person, place, or thing. Explain that during this poetry unit, they will be interested in two special kinds of nouns:

- Some nouns are the names of things or people that you *can* point to, see, or touch (e.g., fence, pickle, fair, hay, fence, boat), or concepts that we can clearly define (e.g., a week is a period of time lasting seven days. These are called **concrete nouns**.
- Some nouns refer to qualities and conditions we *cannot* point to or see or touch (e.g., anger, courage, fear). These are called **abstract nouns**.

Poets most frequently use **concrete nouns** to create imagery.

Group Practice

Next, work together as a class to practice identifying concrete and abstract nouns in the poem “Tulip Season.” Hand each student a copy of the poem. Read the poem aloud as students follow along. Ask them to underline, in pencil, any nouns that they notice in the poem. Then, read through the poem again, phrase by phrase, and help students identify all the nouns. Discuss whether each is concrete or abstract, and invite students to label them as such (“C” for *concrete* and “A” for *abstract*; they could use different-colored highlighters to

distinguish between the two as well). The answer is not always clear, and students may have different opinions about whether certain nouns are concrete or abstract—and that is OK! Talking over the reasons for and against placing words into a given category allows for higher-level thinking and “low-stakes” debate practice.

Individual Practice

Ask students to practice this activity on their own using the handout provided following this lesson plan. Students will cut and paste nouns from the poem “The Forest for the Trees” by Washington poet laureate Rena Priest into columns for concrete and abstract. If students need additional practice (or more of a challenge), provide them with an additional poem of your choice (or have them find one online at a website like poets.org, poetryfoundation.org, or poems.com). Have them underline/highlight the poem’s nouns, then write them under the appropriate headings on a T-chart they draw on a piece of notebook paper.

Tulip Season

Skagit Valley

April is the time of year
When cars flood the fields.

Lookers, cameras, selfie sticks
Huddle under neon umbrellas.

The buried bulbs have waited
Patiently for their brief moment

Of pomp and blossom.
In a few weeks each petal

Will fall into history
Making no noise of their passing.

The green stems will be slashed
Bulbs eventually dug and sold.

The watchers dissipate
Unaware that in the next field
Their next meal is being born.

- Jess Gigot

washingtonpoetlaureate.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/wa1291-digital-chapbook.pdf

Teacher Key

Concrete nouns: highlighted in red

Abstract nouns: highlighted in green

Remember that students may have a different opinion about whether certain words (e.g., *weeks*, *year*, *moment*) are abstract or concrete, and that is fine! The point is to get a general idea of the difference between the two types of nouns, not to label the poem in any certain “correct” way.

Tulip Season

Skagit Valley

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When cars flood the fields.

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The watchers dissipate
Unaware that in the next field
Their next meal is being born.

- Jess Gigot

Concrete: tulip, valley, April, year, cars, fields, lookers, cameras, selfie sticks, umbrellas, bulbs, weeks, petal, stems, bulbs, watchers, meal

Abstract: time, moment, history, noise

The Forest for the Trees

I have seen a tree split in two
from the weight of its opposing branches.
It can survive, though its heart is exposed.
I have seen a country do this too.

I have heard an elder say
that we must be like the willow –
bend not to break.
I have made peace this way.

My neighbors clear-cut their trees,
leaving mine defenseless. The arborist
says they'll fall in the first strong wind.
Together we stand. I see this now.

I have seen a tree grown around
a bicycle, a street sign, and a chainsaw,
absorbing them like ingredients
in a great melting pot.

When we speak, whether or not
we agree, the trees will turn
the breath of our words
from carbon dioxide into air –

give us new breath
for new words,
new chances to listen,
new chances to be heard.

-Rena Priest, poets.org/poem/forest-trees

Take out a sheet of paper and draw a T-chart. Label the left side “concrete nouns” and the right side “abstract nouns.” Cut apart the nouns below and glue them into the appropriate columns.

tree	weight	country	bicycle	air
pot	chances	wind	peace	chainsaw
elder	neighbors	words	breath	arborist

Teacher Key

Concrete nouns: highlighted in red

Abstract nouns: highlighted in green

Remember that students may have a different opinion about whether certain words (e.g., *country*, *breath*, *air*) are abstract or concrete, and that is fine! The point is to get a general idea of the difference between the two types of nouns, not to label the poem in any certain “correct” way.

The Forest for the Trees

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-Rena Priest

poets.org/poem/forest-trees

Concrete: tree, branches, country, elder, willow, bicycle, pot, ingredients, pot, chainsaw, neighbors, words, carbon dioxide, arborist

Abstract: weight, heart, air, chances, wind, peace, words, breath

