

A Cave Of Questions Without Answers: Two Concrete/Abstract Exercises

The following two exercises, dealing with the concrete/abstract concept, have been successful with students of all ages. While the two approaches differ only slightly, the first exercise is recommended for use with all grades, and the second is more workable in grades five and up.

Exercise 1:

- 1) Ask students to choose an animal. It could be a wild animal that lives in or visits their area. Have them write the word naming the animal. Demonstrate the beginning of this exercise putting an animal word on the board. Let's say you choose "Deer." Write it on the board.
- 2) Pass out the Concrete/Abstract Noun word list. Project your copy on the screen. Tell students you are going to consider what it would be like to look into a deer's eyes, and you will select a word from the abstract column (on the right side of the sheet) that connects with that feeling. You might choose "stillness," noting the way deer seem to lock their eyes as if frozen when looked at. Circle that word in the list.
- 3) Go to the first column (concrete nouns) and choose a word. Your selection could be almost any of those words. Let's say it is "glass." Circle the word. Draw a line from "glass" to "stillness" then write the word "of" on the line. Note that you have created a phrase, *glass of stillness*.
- 4) Tell students you are going to create a "what it is like" poem by starting with the experience: *Looking into a deer's eyes...* Write that line on the board.
- 5) Start the next line with *is like...* Tell them this line will contain the phrase, but you want to think about what you do with a glass before writing the line. Hold, wash, drink from, etc. Your brief poem would end, perhaps, this way: *holding a glass of stillness*.
- 6) Choose a title. It could be something like "Encounter."

Encounter

Looking into a deer's eyes
is like holding a glass of stillness.

- 7) Inform students that the poem could be longer, but encourage them to avoid ruining the strength of the image with too many words. Tell them the strong image eliminates the need to say where they saw the deer or what kind of a day it was, etc. The image stands alone in its brevity, somewhat like a haiku.
- 8) Invite them to write another poem with a person in mind. Invite them to share.

Exercise 2: This exercise is basically the same but differs somewhat by using the phrase closer to the beginning of the poem and starting it with an action the writer might do with the concrete noun.

- 1) Create the phrase following the method in the first exercise. Let's say it is *tree of solitude*. Write the phrase on the board.
- 2) Ask students to tell what comes to mind when thinking about their experiences with trees: climb, plant, sit in their shade, swing from their branches, etc. Show them how the poem is started with that action combined with the phrase: *I climb the branches of the tree of solitude*.
- 3) Finish off the poem with whatever might come next: *and overhear the conversation of leaves*. (Surprisingly, the last part of the poem, "conversation of leaves," becomes, not only a phrase, but a phrase reversing the placement of concrete/abstract to abstract/concrete!) A happy accident in the process of discovering as you go along writing your poem.
- 4) In addition to the concrete/abstract two-column list, it would be helpful to give students the other list containing only abstract words. Let them know they are not limited to the words in the lists as long as they make sure the words they want to use are either concrete or abstract.

Sample Poems:

Looking Into A Horse's Eyes

Looking into a horse's eyes
is like going inside a cave of questions
without answers.

Scott, 3rd grade

Looking Into A Deer's Eyes

Looking into a deer's eyes
is like listening to music
in my ipod of stillness.

Ian, 3rd grade

Looking Into Mom's Eyes

Looking into my mom's eyes
feels like wearing a warm sweater
of safety.

Sara, 2nd grade

Mornings

I open the door
to my closet of anxiety
and scan the shelves
for the day's afflictions.

Eric, 10th grade

Concrete Nouns	Abstract Nouns
Drawer	Silence
Rock	Rebellion
Kite	Loneliness
Tree	Friendship
Cave	Hope
Pencil	Emptiness
Window	Forgiveness
Compass	Questions
Flute	Courage
Book	Desire
Knife	Loyalty
Skateboard	Confidence
House	Solitude
Envelope	Trust
Flame	Security
Cup	Stillness
River	Laughter
Highway	Anxiety
Key	Patience
Ship	Curiosity
Door	Comfort
Wings	Loss
Notebook	Freedom
Lamp	Regrets
Flower	Absence
Cloud	Secrets
Pocket	Safety

