

Feeling and reflecting: Concrete and abstract images

Aim of the exercise:

Explore the differences between concrete and abstract images

This is a variation of the 'poetry engine' style of exercise. Choose an object from below.



The first step is to look at the object, or a picture of it, and 'free associate': let words spring spontaneously to mind.

Example

I have before me a picture of a tin tea caddy and spoon. I write down a full side of notes on a sheet of A4 paper concerning any thoughts that come into my head when looking at the picture of the object.

Some of these words and phrases may be obvious: 'tea leaves', 'tin', 'time for tea!' Others may be less obvious: 'clipper ship', 'dark waters', 'swirling'.

Sometimes it may not even be obvious to the writer just why certain words and phrases have come up in relation to that particular object. This is fine, and to be expected. The point is for the writer to fill his or her sheet of paper with words.

The next stage

Once you have your sheet of notes, decide how you could order these into either:

- a sequence of short poems or verses
- a short series of linked prose paragraphs, forming a story

Begin with a concrete verse that is then followed by an abstract one, or a descriptive paragraph that is followed immediately by a paragraph containing abstract images. Continue to alternate concrete and abstract verses or paragraphs.

Concrete and abstract

- A concrete word or image is specific and sensual: it evokes a material reality.
- An abstract word or image is general and communicates an idea; it expresses a connection that is mental rather than sensuous, sometimes one that is not immediately obvious.

Sometimes the most disconnected image of an object can prove to be its most memorable incarnation. For example, describing a tea caddy as a 'tin box' might have less effect on the reader's imagination than describing one first as a 'tin box', but then in more abstract terms as 'swirling a tea brown ocean'.

If you are writing a poem, try numbering your verses, and playing around with the space that they occupy on the page. This will encourage you to think about the shape that the poem makes, rather than taking this for granted. If you are writing in prose, try putting the concrete paragraphs in a normal typeface and putting the abstract paragraphs in italics, in order to highlight the differences between the two.