

Variations in Abstraction

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn more about the use of abstraction in public speaking. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Does It Mean to Be Abstract?
2. Mounting the Ladder of Abstraction
 - a. Advantages of Abstraction
 - b. Disadvantages of Abstraction
3. Abstraction: Use It or Lose It?

1. What Does It Mean to Be Abstract?

Abstractions are ideas that are not described in specifics. They cannot be physically sensed (seen, heard, felt, touched, or smelled).

Abstraction lacks representational qualities. Abstract descriptions are in contrast to concrete descriptions. Concrete descriptions cut through any vagueness or amorphous interpretation of an idea.

Examples of abstract descriptions include:

- A happy child
- A pretty car
- A beautiful night
- An incredible sight

Examples of concrete descriptions include:

- A three-year old boy
- A white Lamborghini Aventador
- A starlit summer evening
- The wide river-cut rust-colored ravines of the Grand Canyon

While most of the time, you want to avoid abstract descriptions in your speech, there are times when it may be stylistically appropriate.

**Abstract**

Difficult to understand; abstruse.

2. Mounting the Ladder of Abstraction

The Ladder of Abstraction, popularized by S. I. Hayakawa, is based on the idea that people are able to achieve four levels of reasoning.

At the bottom of the ladder is concrete thinking. Children tend to start asking concrete questions about the world around them at the age of eight or nine. "Why is the sky blue?" "Where did my baby brother come from?" Once you start hearing questions like these, you know the individual has started to climb the ladder of abstraction.

From that point, humans continue to grow and as they do so, their thinking broadens until they finally reach the top of the ladder: abstraction.

Talented speakers will start at the bottom of the ladder and present a concrete concept to the audience. They will then end on a broader, more abstract note. Thus they will ascend the ladder of abstraction. In doing so, they will generate interest (by use of the concrete point) and then move on to discuss the concept in general.

2a. Advantages of Abstraction

If your audience has a working knowledge of something in your speech, you may not need to get into very finite, concrete detail with them.

Using abstraction in this instance saves you time and doesn't bore your audience with knowledge they may already know.

2b. Disadvantages of Abstraction

The most obvious challenge of using abstraction is assuming that your audience has a certain working knowledge and failing to describe something concretely that may have needed a specific, spelled out description.

In this instance, you will confuse your audience if you speak too broadly or vaguely.

3. Abstraction: Use It or Lose It?

A quick way to test if your speech is too abstract and not specific or concrete enough, share your draft with another person. Ask them to summarize it back to you. If they leave out or gloss over some points, ask them if your speech was clear enough to understand.

If they didn't understand parts, you'll know which sections to go back to and specify in more concrete detail. Similarly, the person reviewing your speech can let you know if it's too detailed.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **to be abstract means** to be vague and not specific. **Abstraction can be an advantage** if your audience already has a working knowledge of any part of your speech. You can save time and keep your audience engaged by not boring them with material or levels of understanding they already have. A **disadvantage** is that you may confuse your audience if you are too abstract. To **determine whether your speech is too abstract**, have another person read your speech draft and summarize your main points back to you.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Abstract

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