

Uncle Steve: Levels of Abstraction Computer Lab Assignment

1. “That’s interesting!”
 - a. Take two minutes to make a list of people that you would describe as “interesting”.
 - b. Take two more minutes to list next to each person the reasons why s/he is interesting. Specific adjectives are good!
 - c. Select one item/person from your list as your topic and write (for 10 minutes or so) an “interesting” description or story about that person. You will be sharing this writing.
2. Share some “interesting” writings. As you read and listen, think/talk about what it is that makes a piece interesting. Is it the character him/herself or the writing?
3. Display/Discuss this crappy example:

*My Uncle Steve is cool. He always takes us to do fun stuff.
When I am around Uncle Steve, I feel happy. He is the greatest
uncle I could ever hope to have. Uncle Steve rocks!*

What’s wrong with it? Why does it suck? What strategy would improve it?

4. Discussion: What do you notice about writing that is “interesting”? What elements does it include? How does a character or scene come to life?

The Lesson: Here are some words you will hear me use when I am talking about writing:

- a. **Abstract** terms (abstractions) refer to ideas, not physical manifestations that can be perceived by the senses: *love, success, freedom, democracy* (nouns); *good, moral* (adjectives)
- b. **Concrete** terms refer to objects, events, or activities that can be perceived by the senses: *book, zebra, water bottle, nose ring, green tea, walking*.
- c. **General** terms refer to vague groups; **generalizations** are unsupported statements that tell rather than show: *Uncle Steve is interesting*.
- d. **Specific** terms refer to individuals; specific examples and details support generalizations by showing rather than telling: *Uncle Steve’s long graying beard billows back, and the tip of the thin cigar balanced on his lip glows hotter as he twists the throttle and the Harley bursts to the front of the pack*.

The more abstract or general your writing is, the more unclear and boring it will be. The more concrete and specific your language is, the more clear and vivid it will be. Abstractions and generalizations are okay in your thesis statement and topic sentences, but make the body of the writing mostly concrete details and specific examples.

Let’s meet Uncle Steve, shall we?

Levels of Abstraction: Uncle Steve

| Level | Writing | Explanation |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| 8 <i>(Why?)</i> | Uncle Steve is interesting. | Complete abstraction; practically meaningless |
| 7 <i>(Why?)</i> | He has a contradictory nature. | Generalization about the character |
| 6 <i>(Why?)</i> | He doesn't look the way he acts. | Still a generalization, but focused on a character trait |
| 5 <i>(Why?)</i> | He is a scary-looking biker, but he has a good heart. <i>(This generalization would make a good topic sentence for a paragraph about Uncle Steve.)</i> | <i>biker</i> = concrete; <i>scary-looking</i> and <i>good heart</i> are still generalizations, but they suggest more specific traits |
| 4 <i>(Why?)</i> | He wears black leathers and rides a Harley chopper in all the charity rides. | <i>black leathers, Harley chopper</i> = concrete details; <i>charity rides</i> = specific example that supports previous generalization |
| 3 | Uncle Steve's long graying beard billows back, and the tip of the thin cigar balanced on his lip glows hotter as he twists the throttle and the Harley bursts to the front of the pack. Through the faceplate on the helmet he made me wear (though he abstains), I can see his face reflected in the handlebar mirror. He is weathered and craggy from years guiding this "hawg" over hot asphalt on charity rides like this one he has organized. His skin is as leathery as his chaps, but I'm sure his blue eyes, now hidden behind sunglasses, are alight with joy and purpose as we rumble toward the sunset. | Many specific examples and concrete details are present to support previous generalizations. This <i>shows</i> more than it <i>tells</i> . This is effective writing. Aspire to this level! |
| 2 |  | This is Uncle Steve as I perceive him in the part of my mind where there are no words. This is my mental conception of Uncle Steve, that particular guy described by the writing above. |
| 1 | Uncle Steve is a multi-cellular life form of the genus <i>Homo sapiens</i> . He is made up of billions of cells and fluids. Uncle Steve is about 75% water, 20% proteins, and trace amounts of inorganic salts, lipids, carbohydrates, and nucleic acids. | So specific as to be meaningful only to a very particular audience |

Now use the template to analyze the level of abstraction for your own character.