

Lesson 14

name:

date:

We Had Fun and stuff!

You know that one sure way to frustrate your parents is to give them a nonspecific response to the question: "How was school today?" You may answer, "Fine." Maybe your parents also ask, "What did you do in school today?" Then you say, "We did the same old stuff." When you use words like "fine" and "stuff," you're avoiding details and hoping that your parents will not ask more questions. Readers, though, aren't always there to ask you questions about vague language in your writing or to request more details. They'll just sit there wondering what you are trying to say.

Sharing Examples: The Cake Mix Doctor and Jim the Boy

Here are two short examples of writing. As you read each passage, underline any words or phrases that are examples of clear, specific, or vivid word choice. Then add to each of the lists that follow the passages three of the underlined words or phrases.

Deeply Chocolate Almond Cake

1. Place a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 350°F. Generously grease two 9-inch round cake pans with solid vegetable shortening, then dust with flour. Shake out the excess flour. Set the pans aside.
2. Heat the chopped chocolate and water in a small saucepan over low heat until melted, stirring constantly. Set the pan aside to cool for 10 minutes.
3. Place the cake mix, buttermilk, oil, eggs, almond extract, and melted chocolate mixture in a large mixing bowl. Blend with an electric mixer on low speed for 1 minute. Stop the machine and scrape down the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula. Increase the mixer speed to medium and beat 2 minutes more, scraping the sides down again if needed. The batter should look thick and combined. Divide the batter between the prepared pans, smoothing it out with the rubber spatula. Place the pans in the oven side by side.

Anne Byrn, *The Cake Mix Doctor* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 26–27.

Jim the Boy

Eventually they drove out of the swamps and plantations and entered a desolate barren in which there was nothing at all to see except pine trees. When they crossed finally out of the pines, they discovered the wide sea. Jim's breath caught up in his throat like it was afraid to come out. He tried to breathe several times, but drew no air. He wished that just for a moment, until he grew used to the sight, the ocean would simply *hold still*. But the waves lined up and bore down on the wide, white beach like a gang of boys intent on jumping a gully. Each wave rose up and took a running go and rushed toward South Carolina and cast itself down on the sand. And each wave when it crashed and broke sounded to Jim like the angry breath of God.

Tony Earley, *Jim the Boy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), p. 66.

Deeply Chocolate Almond Cake: Clear, Specific Word Choice

1. *stirring constantly* _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

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Jim the Boy: Vivid, Colorful Word Choice

1. *desolate barren* _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Warming Up

Revise the three sentences below. Carefully read and circle any nonspecific language you find. Then revise each sentence by replacing the words you circled with clear, specific language. An example has been completed for you.

Example Sentence—

Before: The girl went down to the lake and saw some things.

After: At dawn Leslie walked quietly down to the edge of the small mountain lake to watch the trout jumping.

1. Before: We had a fine time at the big thing the other night.

After: _____

2. Before: There was this one animal at the place that was pretty cool.

After: _____

3. Before: At school, we did many neat, fun things.

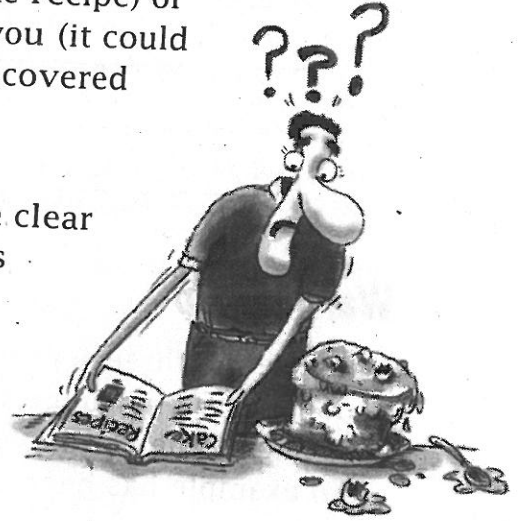
After: _____

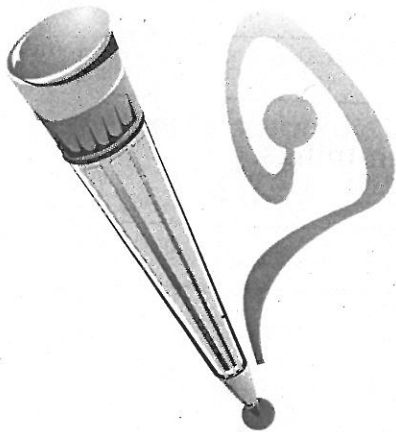
Clear and Precise Writing

Write a short "how to" piece (like the cake recipe) or a description of an important place for you (it could be about the first time you visited or discovered this place).

If you choose the "how to" piece . . .
Write at least five to seven steps. Provide clear and specific word choices to help readers understand the process.

If you choose the *description* . . .
Write at least seven sentences. Use strong and vivid word choices to help readers connect to your feelings.





A Writer's Question

When it comes to keeping language lively and specific, which is easier for you to write, informational or descriptive/narrative writing?