

THE EXAMPLE ESSAY

Why do your composition teachers keep harping on the use of specific, concrete examples in your writing? They learned early on that examples make a paper *clearer, more interesting, and more persuasive*. The hints offered in this handout can help you impress those teachers.

To be more specific, make sure that you have enough examples to support your thesis. As a general rule for a paper of five hundred words or so, choose a thesis that can be supported adequately. Don't use fewer than three examples unless you are supremely confident about the virtues of your paper. Remember, too, that the fewer the examples, the more fully each needs to be developed.

Test your examples for specificity by asking yourself whether they can be reduced to an even more concrete form. A **general** word is all-inclusive, indefinite, sweeping in scope.

| <u>General</u> | <u>Specific</u> | <u>More Specific</u> | <u>Concrete</u> |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Food | fast food | pizza | Domino's |
| Prose | fiction | short stories | "Livvie's" |
| Clothes | leisure | slacks | Levi's 501 |

An abstract word deals with concepts, with ideas, with what cannot be touched, heard, or seen. A **concrete** word has to do with particular objects, with the practical, with what can be touched, heard, or seen.

| | | |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Abstract Words: | democracy | loyalty |
| Concrete Words: | Bill of Rights | Ollie North |

To test whether or not your writing is specific, ask one or more of these questions about what you want to say:

1. Exactly who?
2. Exactly what?
3. Exactly when?
4. Exactly where?
5. Exactly how?

Be sure you have a specific thesis and that you stick to it.

In the sample essay below, titled “How I Spent My Summer Vacation,” notice how “Version A” differs from “Version B.” The second version is superior to the first because it has a purpose (thesis) and because that purpose is clearly defined (illustrated through specific details).

How I Spent My Summer Vacation (Version A)

I couldn't find a job this summer, and it's hard to write much about my summer vacation.

Every morning I would get up early. I would then have the same old boring breakfast.

For a couple of weeks, after breakfast I would mow some neighbors' lawns, but after a while I got bored with that, and mostly I just hung around. Usually, I read the paper and then I hung around some more.

For lunch I had a sandwich and a glass of milk. I remember once my mother and I had a real argument because there wasn't anything for a sandwich.

After lunch, if my mother didn't need the car, I'd usually drive over to the big shopping center with some of my friends. We'd walk around to see what was happening, mostly to mess with the girls.

In the middle of the summer, my older sister and her family came to visit from out of town. That was fun because I like my two little nephews a lot, and we fooled around in the backyard. My brother-in-law kept asking what I was doing with my time, and my mother said at least I was staying out of trouble.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation (Version B)

I couldn't find a job this summer, and most people would probably say that I spent my summer doing nothing. However, these people are sadly mistaken. In fact, I spent most of my summer practicing very hard to be a pest, particularly at home, at the local mall, and at other hot spots around town.

To start with, I developed hanging around the house into an art. My behavior drove my mother to the brink of insanity. After breakfast, I'd read the morning paper, spreading it out over the entire living room. Then I'd take my morning nap, leaving my mother to rearrange her living room. Refreshed by my rest, I'd then ask my mother what was available for lunch. Once, when there was no Italian salami and pumpernickel bread, I looked at her sadly and sighed a lot and kept opening and closing the refrigerator. Like most mothers, my mom can't stand to see the refrigerator door open for more than ten seconds; therefore, she didn't take my suffering too well. As I recall, the expression she used in reference to me was “no good bum” or something on that order. In the evenings, I'd sigh a lot over having to watch television reruns. When my mother asked me why I watched if I didn't enjoy myself, I sighed some more.

The other main center of my activities as a pest was the big shopping center a short drive from home. My friends and I—we figured we needed protection—would stand in people's way, forcing mothers carrying screaming children and old ladies clutching bundles of goods to walk around us. We'd try on clothes we had no intention of wearing and then complain about the price to the poor salespersons, who were left to restack the heaps of clothing we made. We would also make eyes and try to flirt with any pretty girls we passed. We'd practice swaggering and strutting and any other means of looking obnoxious that occurred to us.

Our behavior at miscellaneous spots around town was equally distasteful. At the beach or the local pool, we would belly flop in the water so as to splash young girls who had just lathered up with tanning lotion. While at the theater, we'd laugh in the middle of love scenes and bawl at funny moments. Perhaps our finest stunt was honking the car horn at pedestrians as they started to cross the street.

Basically, I had myself a good summer. It's always a pleasure to master a set of skills, and I think I've come close to being an expert pest. I wonder what new thrills lie in wait next summer.