

BEING SPECIFIC (PODCAST 27 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss the art of specificity.

When I was in the sixth grade, I had a fabulous language arts teacher named Mrs. Walters, who was my first true writing mentor. Every Friday was “Free Write Friday,” a time during which the class was free to write about anything and in any form one wanted. I looked forward to Free Write Friday every week, and even now, so many years later, I can recall one of the best pieces of writing advice I’d ever been given. “Remember,” Mrs. Walters told me, “To be terrific, you must be specific.” I’ve written that advice on umpteen index cards, tacking it to the wall where I wrote in every place I’ve lived.

To be terrific, you must be specific. This is not your run-of-the-mill cutesy sixth grade teacher advice. This is to-the-bone true writing advice. It’s the same idea that Mark Twain was driving at when he said “The difference between the right word and the almost right word, is the difference between lightening and lightning bug.” There’s a big difference between the two, right? Clearly. The point Twain is getting at is that you need to use the most precise word for what you are trying to convey, for being off can make a huge difference. In fact, the other day my daughter said that she needed a new pair of ear buds for her iPod, so I hopped onto eBay and saw a listing for “cheap” earbuds. Now I am not sure if the seller meant “cheap” or if he meant “inexpensive,” but I wasn’t going to bother to find out, so I went on to the next seller. Words matter.

To be terrific, you must be specific. Consider this: The fundamental purpose of any form of writing—be it an advertisement, a recipe, or an essay—is to communicate meaning to an audience. In order to be successful, you need to think carefully about what you are trying to say and to whom, and you need to select the most accurate language to communicate your meaning. You can’t use loosey-goosey language. You need to be specific and say precisely what you mean. My wife and I once had an argument over what we now laughingly refer to as the Purple Shirt Incident. When my daughter was much younger, my wife asked me to go get Haley’s “nice purple shirt.” Easy enough, right? Well, when I opened Haley’s shirt drawer, I actually found several shirts that looked “purple” to me. And that’s when the argument started. Apparently, the “nice purple shirt” my wife wanted was lavender with buttons shaped like flowers. The dark purple shirt with the beautiful yellow and green sunflower—the “nice purple shirt” that I retrieved—was not what she had in mind. I wanted to tell my wife “to be terrific, you must be specific,” but I thought otherwise and simply went back and got the shirt she wanted.

It’s important to keep in mind what being specific means. The writer Barry Lane puts it this way: the writing becomes beautiful when it is specific. Why is the writing “beautiful when it is specific”? Because the ideas are sharp and precise and convey meaning. Being specific means . . . recognizing



one's audience. Who are you writing for? What is that particular group's needs? Is the information specific enough to convey your ideas? Is your language precise? Being specific means . . . using details, facts, examples, quotes, and the like to develop ideas. Don't stop short—sustain the writing with your audience in mind and offer commentary on the details, facts, examples, quotes, and the like as appropriate. It's the writer's job to convey meaning to an audience; it's not the audience's job to figure out what the writer is trying to say. In order to reach your audience, ideas need to be developed with ample specificity. Being specific means . . . using precise language. The right word is like a dart hitting the bull's eye, so consider carefully the words you use because words matter.

Let me try to illustrate what being specific means by reading to you my grocery list. Let's see, I need coffee, juice, and bread—just three items. With my grocery list, I can go to the grocery and get precisely what I need. Those words have precise meaning to me. However, not one of you listening to this podcast could get me exactly what I want. The word coffee has only a general meaning to you. Oh, sure, you could get me coffee, but you wouldn't possibly be able to get me the exact kind of coffee that I want: Starbucks whole bean house blend. The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and the lightning bug. Words have power because they have the potential to communicate meaning to others, but you will only be successful in this endeavor if you choose your words wisely and are specific in what you compose.

Listen to this contrast that will further illustrate what it means to be specific: What's better: A. There are not a lot of job opportunities in my field. Or, B: There are not a lot of job opportunities for structural engineers? B, right? Of course! The phrase "in my field" could mean just about any field of work whereas "structural engineer" names a specific field. Often being specific is just a matter of identifying language that is not precise enough and transforming it into phrasing that is specific. Imagine a composition chock-a-bloc full of language like "in my field"? What would such a reading experience be like? How successful do you think the writer would be in conveying meaning to readers? Why just hit the dart board when you can hit the bull's eye, right?

I think you understand the concept of being specific, so the next step is doing what you can on your end to root out the generalities and imprecise language and transform it to writing that is concrete and specific and full of meaning. The writing becomes beautiful when it is specific. Thus your job is to morph caterpillars into butterflies. But you've got to take the time and do the leg work—that is, you need to review your paper, pen in hand, and circle content that is not specific enough. And you can do this easy enough, but you have to take the time to do it, and if you do, my sense is your composition will be all the better for the effort.

Thanks everyone, happy writing.

