

Abstractions

If we are reading an article that is full of abstractions with very few concrete referents, then our evaluation of it is governed by the fact that it holds very little actual meaning. Or more precisely, it could, in fact, mean anything. **The information content of an argument is directly proportional to the range of possibilities it excludes – the more it excludes the more information content it has.** Using concrete language excludes possibilities, it forbids certain things from happening, so that we can assess how probable it is that the argument is true.

But if the argument is largely composed of abstractions, we cannot do this: it could mean anything. It doesn't forbid anything, therefore, we cannot test it in the same way, so we have to conclude that the argument is meaningless. All that we read will prompt unanswered philosophical questions. If the writer fails to address these, we are left with the conclusion that it all depends what he means by concepts, like 'freedom' and 'equality'.

Example: Adorno

In the following example it all depends on what is meant by abstractions like 'negation', 'our present immanent', 'autonomous artwork' and 'the unknown of our social present':

Adorno's quote 'art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived', asks us through negation, to reject the past of the Kantian point of universality, and through the particular dialectical workings of Adorno, understand our present immanent with, the historical i.e. Kant's subjectivity and his pure aesthetic judgement, Adorno's reflexive objectivity and his 'fluid' conception of an autonomous artwork and the unknown of our social present.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that an article that uses abstractions is not worth reading. Isolated concrete facts are meaningless on their own without abstractions, generalisations and theories to make sense of them. As I argued in *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*, these are important concepts: they have the power to elevate an argument, lifting it beyond our particular concerns to important levels of significance that help us to advance our knowledge and solve fundamental problems. But they must be grounded in the concrete reality of our lives by being backed by references to actual people, things and events. Otherwise the author will be free to say what he likes.

So the important questions to ask yourself as you use abstractions are those in Chapter 35:

- 1 Are you using them as if they are real in themselves?
- 2 Are you assuming that other people share the same meaning?

Example: Political culture

This passage is taken from a newspaper article in which the writer is discussing the Tea Party and its impact on American politics:

In a political culture where basic, verifiable facts cease to matter, political debate is inevitably debased. Add to that a polarised media, in which people access the truth they seek, rather than the one that exists, and it has given rise to bespoke realities: people don't just think different things, they know different things. And some of the things they think they know are just wrong.

You may think that there was something quite odd about his use of the abstraction 'truth' and, therefore, the conclusions he draws from it. He seems to be using it in a way that doesn't reflect our understanding of the concept. When he says, 'people access the truth they seek, rather than the one that exists', does he mean that we should be satisfied with what we know, rather than search for the answers to problems and thereby improve our understanding of the world? Or perhaps he means that we search only for those truths that we want to find? Still, if they are true, what, you may ask, is the problem? If something is true, then it is true regardless of the way we come by it.

He appears to be using the concept of 'truth' to suggest that there are different types of truth, different grades perhaps, some not so true as others, which conflicts with our understanding of the concept. By 'truth', we mean something that is absolute, beyond doubt. At the risk of framing a trivial tautology, by definition a 'truth' is not something that may or may not be true. There are not grades of truth, some more true than others: either something is true or it isn't.

He then develops his argument by claiming that this has 'given rise to bespoke realities: people don't just think different things, they know different things'. Either this amounts to the trivial statement that all of us just know different things, or he's saying that there are different realities, in which there are different truths and different knowledge. In this sense truth is relative, which is not what we normally mean by the concept. Truth is more than mere 'belief' or what we might just 'think' compared with what others think.

Of course he may be developing a postmodernist argument that our knowledge is inescapably determined by the culture in which it is pursued. As Richard Rorty argues, truth is merely what it is better in our interests to believe: 'the notion of "accurate representation" is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do'.¹ In effect, knowledge amounts to just our attempt to present the beliefs, values and assumptions that rule our culture as reality.

Still, no one seriously doubts that well supported theories, like Einstein's theory of relativity, are true in all possible worlds and are not just a reflection of our culture. What's more, postmodernists appear to be harbouring a paradox when they say that there is not truth or that truth is relative, because, if there is not truth, they are in effect inviting you not to believe what they say.

Nevertheless, in this article, devoted to discussing the Tea Party and its impact on American politics, it is doubtful whether the author is, in fact, proposing anything quite so speculative as this postmodernist argument. If he is, then he really ought to explain this. Otherwise we have little choice but to dismiss the argument, because he hasn't made clear the meaning of these abstractions.

This illustrates just how difficult it is to negotiate abstractions that haven't been grounded in explanations that reflect the concrete reality of our lives. To be fair on the writer we cannot put



ideas into the argument that are not his, but if he leaves the abstractions without this content we have to dismiss the argument as meaningless.

Exercise

The Founding Fathers

In this exercise identify the abstraction and explain the problem that is created by the writer's use of it.

The time has come for us to realize that our founding fathers had some mistaken ideas. For example, in the Preamble to the Constitution we read that 'all men are created equal.' But this is obviously false. Some are stronger than others. Some have more intelligence than others. Some have drives which lead to success, whereas others seem to lack these drives. All men are not created equal.

The use of abstractions for propaganda

Of course, in many cases what is written is created with no intention of having any objective meaning or cash value at all. Instead, the abstractions have just subjective value in their capacity to evoke certain emotional reactions. Political propaganda, speeches and editorials can be full of abstractions with not a concrete word in sight. Their aim is to evoke a certain type of response.

Exercise

The following passage is taken from the first issue of *The Freeman* a magazine for American conservatives. Read it through and identify all the concrete words in it. In other words, look for pronouns that indicate a particular person and names, numbers and dates.

In terms of current labels, *The Freeman* will be at once radical, liberal, conservative and reactionary. It will be radical because it will go to the root of questions. It will be liberal because it will stand for the maximum of individual liberty, for tolerance of all honest diversity of opinion, and for faith in the efficacy of solving our internal problems by discussion and reason rather than suppression and force. It will be conservative because it believes in conserving the great constructive achievements of the past. And it will be reactionary if that means reacting against ignorant and reckless efforts to destroy precisely what is most precious in our great economic, political and cultural heritage in the name of alleged 'progress'.²

In fact there are no concrete words in this passage at all. With passages like this, which are full of abstract, general, metaphorical language, there is nothing to argue with. All that you read will prompt unanswered philosophical questions. If the author fails to address these, you are left with the conclusion that it all depends what he means by 'honest', 'constructive', 'ignorant' and all the rest.

In your own work, get into the habit of analysing the abstractions you use; translate them into everyday language. We have to ask what difference they make to our lives: how will our readers come to understand the way they work in their experience. Above all, be constantly vigilant against the tendency to view abstractions as something in their own right.



¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 10.

² Quoted in Rudolf Flesch. *The Art of Clear Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 57.