

Investigating Student Learning in SWC 100: Writing Practicum
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Sample Module

Below is a screen capture from the CTools Module entitled “Being Specific, Definite, and Concrete.” In Modules, images and video were sometimes used to illustrate key concepts. The concept being highlighted in this case is using concrete language to create “word pictures.”

In addition to making abstract ideas more concrete, as in the poem above, **concrete language makes "word pictures"** for readers and allows them to experience a piece of writing as more "real." That helps to make it more interesting and engaging--the reader feels involved. Here are Strunk and White again:

"If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is this: the surest way to arouse and hold the reader's attention is by **being specific, definite, and concrete**. The greatest writers--Homer, Dante, Shakespeare--are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures" (37).

Here is an artist's depiction of a scene from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Shakespeare's vivid language that describes it:

Lear: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout Till you have drench'd our steeples, down'd the cocks! You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires, Vau't-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts, Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder, Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world, Crack Nature's moulds, all germins spill at once, That makes ingrateful man!



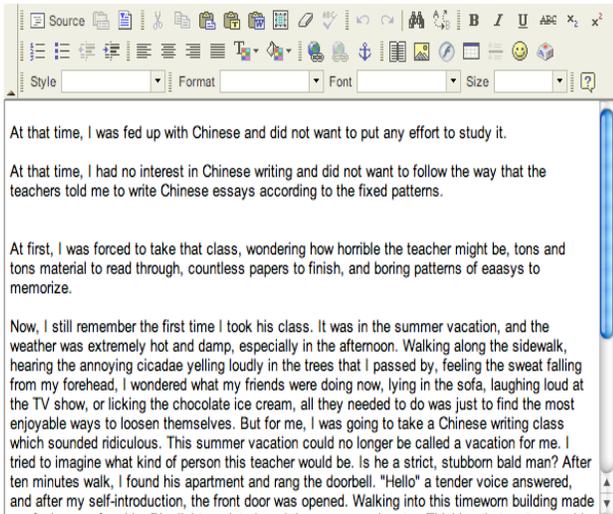
Sample Student Response

After reading the whole module, students were asked to complete a related assignment, in which they revised a sentence and a paragraph from the draft of their first essay. Below is an example of one student's original work and her revision.

Assignment Submission

Submitted Text

Below is the submission from a student. You can insert comments into this text by clicking in the box, then type your comments. Comments surrounded by double curly braces, `{{like this}}`, will appear red to the student.



In the sentence revision, at the top of the text box, the student altered her first sentence to make it more formal (“fed up” → “had no interest”) and adds details to explain why she did not want to work on her writing. In the paragraph revision, the student created a paragraph-long “word picture” based on a single sentence in her original essay.

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Additional examples

Here are some additional student responses to the same assignment, to rewrite a sentence from their first essay to increase its specificity and concreteness.

- Some students used more specific words to elaborate ideas. For example, Student 2 changed “experiences” to “made judgments about, and consequently how I would interact.”
- Other students made their language more concrete. For example, Student 4, changes an adjective—“chaotic”—to concrete verbs that depict the chaos: “the crowd yelled and shouted at the actors on the stage.”

Both elaboration of ideas and vividness of language are often lacking in first-year college writers’ essays.

Student 2

Original: I was supposed to look at how my own ideas, background, and experiences would shape my experiences as a Resident Advisor, namely my interactions with residents.

Revision: I was supposed to look at how my personal beliefs - about religion, gender, equality, politics, class, and sexism - my background - where I grew up, my parents' income, where I went to school - and my all of my life experiences would affect how I made judgments about, and consequently how I would interact with, my residents.

Student 3

Original: I have learned to appreciate personal statements because they help me explain myself.

Revision: After being given the chance to explain my actions to professors and GSI's here at Michigan, I learned to appreciate personal statements and now use them as a tool to allow my voice to be heard in situations where I would usually remain silent.

Student 4

Original: Among the chaotic crowd, a grave face showed up for a moment and then quickly disappeared.

Revision: The crowd yelled and shouted at the actors on the stage, but a tall man in his long black cape was an exception to them—grave-faced, he stood on the square for a moment, and then quickly disappeared in the sea of waving hands.

Student 5

Original: When I started reading the book, I knew I was in for a boring time.

Revision: As I began to read the book, I felt as if I was tied to a chair and forced to watch paint slowly dry. The cringe in my face as I read sentence after sentence was unbearable, boredom easily set in.

Student 6

Original: Since I was quite good at English in Korea, I had confidence and was not afraid of getting used to the life in the U.S.

Revision: I am not a math or science person. When I was in high school, while getting B's on other subjects, I have made A's on English. Moreover, on the university entrance exam, my English test score was higher than other sections. That was the factors that I had confidence and was not afraid of getting used to the life in the U.S.