

## DETAIL

### WHAT IS IT?

Compare the following passages, each depicting the same scene, a visit to the local pizza parlor following a high school football game:

*Everyone there was happy that we had won the game. It was great to be with all my friends. We ordered pizza and talked, as several hours passed by . . . I smiled as friends and mere acquaintances hugged me and repeated over and over, "Great game tonight, wasn't it!" I heard someone calling for me to come and eat my share of the pizza I had. forgotten in my excitement. The cheese was hot, yellow and stringy as I took my first bite. . .*

The second passage is more interesting. Why? A good writer can "show" his reader, using concrete, specific details, what he is talking about rather than just tell him about it. In the second passage we are not just told that everyone was happy--we see them hugging and hear them calling each other. We can almost taste the pizza

as the narrator takes her first bite. Generally speaking, concrete, specific detail is anything a writer uses to create an overall impression for his reader using vivid, convincing imagery, as in the following passage:

*The sun has not yet cast its light over the high canyon walls. The air is fresh. The wind chills my nose and ears; my legs are covered with goose bumps. I hear only the sound of the engine and the lap of the water against the hull of the boat. My feet are gently massaged by the vibration of the engine. My stomach feels as though it is tied in a knot.*

Notice how the writer has helped you see, hear and feel what he wanted you to, how he has carefully provided the parts of a total sensory experience.

However, in actual practice, concrete detail may take many forms. It may involve any of the Senses--sight (which usually dominates), hearing, smell, taste and touch. In a broader sense, it also includes almost anything that enables a writer to say, "Look for yourself--you'll come to the same conclusion I did."

Thus, it can also include facts, data, statistics, etc. It may also include direct quotations. Two other forms for detail are the illustrative example which uses a specific incident or thing to describe a whole idea or system and the extended explanation which utilizes increasingly specific ideas of explanation.

#### WHY IS DETAIL IMPORTANT?

Because most readers will not have witnessed or experienced what the writer is writing about, the writer must use details to aid his reader's credibility, understanding and memory. It is difficult to understand and remember abstract principles when specific supporting details are used by the writer.

Remember, detail is always controlled by purpose. This means that although details are good, they should only be details that lead to and support the desired purpose--any details that do not do this are distracting!

#### HOW IS IT OBTAINED?

Effective detail in writing is a result of a conscientious search for facts, or basic,

demonstrable truths. From these facts, generalizations may later be drawn, first by the writer himself, later by his reader. Most detail is obtained by direct experience and accurate observation or by research. Writing a rough draft and then filling in the parts that need more emphasis with detail is a good way to ensure that your paper gets your desired message across.

To summarize, detail is the raw material (or logic) a writer uses to recreate an experience for his reader to convince him of a more abstract point. An effective writer obtains detail by careful observation or by research, then selectively uses it to serve his reader according to the purpose of his paper.