

# Levels of Abstraction

---

## Overview

A successful essay will include sentences that focus on different levels of abstraction. Five ascending levels of abstraction are listed below and rated on a scale from 1 (for least abstract) to 5 (for most abstract):

- Level 1: Some sentences should just give the raw, concrete, unmediated data from the text.
- Level 2: Some sentences should describe individual pieces of evidence through a plain or interpretive summary.
- Level 3: Some sentences should provide broader summaries that draw two or more pieces of evidence together or that provide a broad example.
- Level 4: Some sentences should orient the reader on a problem to be solved or on pulling abstract concepts together to help solve that problem.
- Level 5: Some sentences will be general and broadly oriented toward a solution or a conclusion.

## Example

For instance, if you were writing about the implications of one of the female characters wearing a particular dress in a particular scene, you should try to use all five levels of abstraction:

- Level 1 (raw data): You could quote the text or provide the details of a particular image in the text, such as by providing a detailed description of a particular dress featured in the text.
- Level 2 (summary description of specific evidence): You could summarize generally what the dresses are like that other women in the crowd are wearing.
- Level 3 (draw pieces of evidence together): You could summarize how the first dress you described in detail fits in (or does not fit in) with the other dresses you described generally.
- Level 4 (orient reader to problems and abstract concepts): You could suggest to the reader what the implication are of whether this dress matches the kinds of dresses other women are wearing. Are there abstract concepts (like freedom, peer pressure, or social class) that might be relevant? How? What problems do the details suggest for the characters involved, the reader, or society?
- Level 5 (provide a general conclusion): What is your conclusion about the implications of the dress?

## The “Uneven U”

Often, a good way to write a paragraph that mixes all these types is to write what Eric Hayot describes as an “Uneven U”: start with sentences that are more abstract (level 4), move through summary (level 3) to go down to the most concrete (levels 1 & 2), and then rise back up from the text toward the abstract (levels 4 & 5). If you are using the “analysis sandwich” technique, you will be writing paragraphs that generally do this pattern. However, you should still think about whether you are hitting every level of abstraction in your paper.

## Beyond Paragraphs

You could also use the Uneven U pattern to provide a suggested pattern for sections of your paper or even for the entirety of your paper:

- Introductory paragraph introducing some interesting problem related to a particular text (level 4);

- A paragraph summarizing a particular text (level 3);
- A paragraph summarizing an important feature within the text (such as a particular character's growth as the story progresses (level 2);
- A paragraph doing a close reading with quotes of a specific instance of the feature you are focusing on (level 1);
- A paragraph summarizing the evidence about the important feature in the text, but this time with some additional insight gained from the close reading (level 2);
- A paragraph summarizing the text in general, but now in light of the new insights you have gained (level 3);
- A paragraph reorientation the text in relation to the problem you introduced previously, but now in light of the new insight you have gained (level 4);
- Your concluding paragraph summarizing your solution/thesis in light of the new insight you have gained (level 5).

### **Common Problems**

I often find that students write papers that are mostly filled with just level 3 sentences: broad summaries of what can be found in the text. To write a good paper, you should extend in both directions of abstraction. You should provide more raw, concrete "data" from the text (levels 1 & 2) while also orientating what you find to larger ideas, theories, problems, and solutions to those problems (levels 4 & 5). Do not just summarize the plot of the story. Constantly situate evidence that you draw from the text within the framework of your argument on how you can address a pressing problem you see.

If you are having trouble writing a paper that meets the page requirements of the assignment, it is probably because you are summarizing too much (abstraction level 3). There are two things you can do. First, slow down and "zoom in" on particular details of the text that support your argument (abstraction levels 1 and 2). Take your time and discuss the details of a particular scene, for instance, or the way that a poet arranged the words in a particular line, rather than just summarize the text. Second, periodically reorient your reader toward abstract ideas, problems, and your solutions and conclusions (abstraction levels 4 and 5).

### **Finding Interesting Details**

I suggest you start read your selected primary work while writing down a list of themes, details, words, phrases, ideas, questions, or anything else that seems interesting or notable to you. While you are doing this, you should keep track of relevant page or line numbers, such as the page you were on when you noticed an interesting detail or had an insight about the text.

Example:

1. Sexism: 1, 5, 9, 54, 89, 100, 355, 200, 250
2. Red: 5, 58, 85, 98
3. Money: 8, 198, 250
4. Nobility: 1, 7, 55, 89, 99, 101, 151, 252
5. Who can you trust?: 4, 8, 89, 105
6. Big Bird: 1, 5, 8, 85, 855

After you have reread the text while making this list, reread just your list. Doing so will help you see what themes and details stick out for you in the text. If you are lost on what to write your paper about, you can look over this list to see if there are any significant aspects of the text that might be interesting to focus on. Your rough thesis could start as just whatever sentence you can think up that draws what you think are the most interesting details together.