I will examine just three textbooks, chosen not as bad examples—they seem to me lively, serious, and honest—but for these reasons: They are current (1978). They are second editions, an indication of acceptance in the market. Their authors teach in a large city university, a community college in a large northern city, and two community colleges in a southern town and a southern city; such institutions are close to the center of the freshman composition industry. All three textbooks give unusually ample attention to style, and in particular to the matters I am concerned with here.

I will look first at the recently published second edition of David Skwire and Frances Chitwood, Student’s Book of College English (Glencoe Press), and refer to a section in it on “Specific Details” (pp. 347–349). Skwire and Chitwood introduce the section by saying “The use of specific details is the most direct way to avoid abstract writing.” (And students should avoid it, since “abstract writing is the main cause of bored readers” [p. 346].) Detail is a plus. In fact, “within reason, the more specific the details, the better the writing.” “Within reason” means that the detail must be relevant and neither obvious nor trivial. To illustrate, they offer three passages, labeled “Abstract (weak),” “More Specific (better),” and “Still More Specific (much better).” Here are the first and third.

1. Abstract (weak)
The telephone is a great scientific achievement, but it can also be a great inconvenience. Who could begin to count the number of times that phone calls have come from unwelcome people or on unwelcome occasions? Telephones make me nervous.

3. Still More Specific (much better)
The telephone is a great scientific achievement, but it can also be a great big headache. More often than not, that cheery ringer in my ear brings messages from the Ace Bill Collecting Agency, my mother (who is feeling snubbed for the fourth time that week), salaried employees of newspapers and magazines, solicitors for the Police and Ball’s Disease of the Month Foundation, and neighbors complaining about my dog. That’s not to mention frequent wrong numbers—usually for someone named “Alm.” The calls always seem to come at the worst times, too. They’ve interrupted my sleep; my night parties, and Saturday morning sleep-ins. There’s no escape. Sometimes I wonder if there are any telephones in padded cells. (pp. 348–349)

Consider now how revision has transformed the style of the first passage. Most obviously, one generalization—“unwelcome people”—disappears entirely, to be replaced by a list of eight people or types of people the writer doesn’t want to hear from; and another generalization—“unwelcome occasions”—is changed to “worst times,” then amplified in another list. Sensitivity has become the main principle of structure. When items are placed in a series, the writer implies that they are alike in some respect. But in what respect? Here the angry neighbors and possessive mother are placed on par with salesmen and others connected to the writer only through the cash nexus. Are the callers unwelcome because the writer does not get along with his or her family and neighbors, or for a less personal reason: that businesses and other organizations in pursuit of money use the phone as a means of access to it? The answer may be both, of course, but in expanding the idea of “unwelcome people,” Skwire and Chitwood add no insight to it. The specific details close off analysis.

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1. The other is, avoid padding. The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 188–90.
The same holds for their treatment of “unwelcome occasions.” An occasion is a time that is socially defined and structured: a party or a steak dinner, yes, but sleep and a bath are more private activities, hardly occasions. Of course a phone call is usually as unwelcome in the middle of a bath as during a party. My point is that in changing “occasions” to “times” and letting detail do the work, the germ of an idea has been lost: the idea that we like to control our own social time, and that the telephone allows other people to intervene and impose their structure. What the details communicate instead is a loose feeling of harassment—easier to visualize, more specific, but certainly not more precise in thought.

Other changes have a similar effect. “Headache” is more sensory than “inconvenience,” but less exact, and personal rather than social. The phrase, “cheery ringing in my ears,” is a distraction, from the perspective of developing an idea; the point is not the sound, but the fact, of the intrusions and their content, the social relations they put the writer into or take him or her out of. And where the final sentence of the original implicitly raised a fruitful question (why “nervous”?), the new conclusion—“Sometimes I wonder if there are any telephones in parked cells”—closes off inquiry with a joke and points up the writer’s idiosyncrasy rather than the social matter that is under discussion.

On the level of speech acts, too, the rewrite personalizes, moves away from social analysis. In the first passage, emphasis falls on the general claims made about phones and the people who use them and are used by them. The rewrite buries those claims in a heap of reports of “my” experience, reports for which only the writer need vouch. The speaker of an assertion must be in a position to make it, or it isn’t “felicitous,” in Austin’s terms. (I cannot felicitously assert that there is life in the next galaxy.) The writer of the second passage risks less by moving quickly from generalizations that require support from history and social analysis, to those that stand on private terrain. This reduction in scope accords well with the impression given by the rewrite of a person incapable of coping with events, victimized by others, fragmented, distracted—a kind of likable schlemiel. He or she may be a less “boring” writer, but also less venturesome and more isolated person, the sort who chatters on in a harmless gossip way without much purpose or consequence: a character.

If a student showed me the first passage (as the outline of a composition or the beginning of a draft), I would want to say that it expresses an interesting idea, inadequately handled to be sure, but begging for a kind of development that amplification by detail, alone, can never supply. The contradiction with which it begins is familiar but perplexing: How is it that so many of our scientists’ “achievements,” with all their promise of efficiency and ease, turn out to be inconvenient or worse in the long run? Why does an invention designed to give people control over their lives make many of us feel so often in the control of others? Why does a device for bringing people together (as its proprietors are constantly telling us in commercials) in fact so often serve as the carrier of frictions and antagonisms?

To make any headway with such questions, it is necessary to stay with the abstractions a while, penetrate them, get at the center of the contradictions they express, not throw them out in favor of lists of details. “Achievement”: By whom? Who calls “science” into being and engineers its discoveries into commodities? The telephone as we have it is a hundred-year-long achievement, of patent lawyers and corporate planners more than of Alexander Graham Bell. “Inconvenience”: For whom? Not for the salesmen and bill collectors, presumably. And certainly not for executives barricaded behind secretaries making sure the boss talks only with people he wants to talk with, and at a time of his choosing. The telephone represents a network of social relations embedded in history. In order to gain any leverage on the badly expressed contradiction of the first passage, it is necessary to unpack some of those relations. Piling on the details, as in the rewrite, may create a kind of superficial interest, but no gain in insight. The strategy, as exemplified here, is a strategy for sacrificing thought to feckless merriment.

Skwire and Chitwood are concerned with added detail. In the section I wish to consider from Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester’s The New Strategy of Style (McGraw-Hill), the authors show how to make detail more specific. They do this under the heading of “Texture” (pp. 135–144), explaining that different subjects call for different textures: the simpler the subject, the more elaborate the texture. The maxim begs the question to an extent, since whether or not a given subject is simple or complex depends partly upon the diction used in exploring it. But apparently the first passage below is about a simple subject, since as the authors take it through four revisions their instructions all advise elaboration of texture. (“Make your nouns more specific.” “Make your adjectives more specific.”) Passage 2 is the second of the rewritings.

1. The country store was an interesting place to visit. In the very heart of the city, it had the air of a small town grocery store combined with a feed and hardware supply house. There were flower seeds and milk churns, coal buckets and saddle blankets, all mixed together. Walking down the crowded aisles, you felt you had gone back to the past—to the time of pot-belly stoves and kerosene lamps and giant pickle jars. You could smell the grain, you could touch the harnesses, you could even sit down in the old wooden chair. When you finally left the store and were once more in the activity of the city, you felt as you sometimes do when you come out of an old movie into the bright light of reality.

2. Charlie’s Country Store was a spell-binding emporium. In the very heart of Minneapolis, Charlie’s had the dubious charm of a smalltown grocery combined with a feed and hardware supply house. There were zimia seeds and milk churns, shiny coal buckets and garish saddle blankets, all mixed together. Walking down its quaint passageways—narrow, poorly lighted, but nevertheless immaculate—you felt you had gone back to nineteenth-century America—to the last years, the faintly remembered days of squar pot-belly stoves and sturdy kerosene lamps and rotted, ceramic crocks—meant for pickles or pastries. You could smell the cornmeal, you could touch the leather harnesses, you could even sit in the steer wooden rooker. And when you finally left this anachronism—and were once more in the bustle of the city—you felt as you sometimes do when you come out of an old cinema into the blinding glare of a rocket-age reality. (pp. 135–138; emphasis in original)

Passage 2 is the result of making nouns and adjectives more specific and also (though Weathers and Winchester don’t say so) of adding adjectives. Setting aside some words that might be criticized as elegant variations (e.g., “emporium,” which suggests a grander establishment than is implied by the rest of the passage), consider the ways the description has become more specific.
chapter on forming a style, the first from Fielding’s Tom Jones, and the second from Nevil Shute’s On the Beach:

1. The charms of Sophia had not made the least impression on Blifil; not that his heart was pre-engaged, neither was he totally insensible of beauty, or had any averse 
   sion to women; but his appetites were by nature so moderate that he was easily abit 
   by philosophy, or by study, or by some other method to subdue them; and as to the 
   passion which we have treated of in the first chapter of this book, he had not the less 
   tincture of it in his whole composition.

But though he was so entirely free from that mixed passion of which we there treated 
and of which the virtues and beauty of Sophia formed so notable an object, yet was 
he altogether as well furnished with other passions that promised themselves for 
full gratification in the young lady’s fortune. Such were averses and ambition, which 
divided the dominion of his mind between them. He had more than once consider 
the possession of this fortune as a very desirable thing, and had entertained some dis 
tant views concerning it, but his own youth and that of the young lady, and inde 
expressly a reflection that Mr. Weston might marry again and have more children 
and did not restrain him from too hasty or too eager a pursuit.

2. He went back to bed. Tomorrow would be an anxious, trying day; he must give 
his sleep. In the privacy of his little curtained cabin he unlocked the safe that held the 
confidential books and took out the bracelet; it glowed in the synthetic light. She would 
love it. He put it carefully in the breast pocket of his uniform suit. Then he went 
back again, his hand upon the fishing rod, and slept.

They surfaced again at four in the morning, just before dawn, a little to the north of 
Gray Harbor. No lights were visible on the shore, but as there were no towns or 
few roads in the district that evidence was inconclusive. They went down to perisoc 
depth and carried on. When Dwight came to the control room at six o’clock the di 
was bright through the periscope and the crew off duty were taking turns to look 
the desolate shore. He went to breakfast and then stood smoking at the chart table 
looking at the minefield chart that he already knew so well, and the well-remembered 
entrance to the Juan de Fuca Strait. (p. 390)

The authors have couched their discussion of style in historically relative terms 
Change, and students will want to choose from among styles suited to center 
porary life. Eighteenth-century readers could “idle” over “long sentences,” “leisure 
at a premium” now, Stovall and his colleagues do not absolutely value Shute’s sty 
over Fielding’s, but since they say that the earlier style would strike the modern read 
as awkward, stilted, colorless, complex, plodding, tedious and wordy, their counsel 
the student is reasonably plain.

They direct their judgment partly against Fieldings’s long and complex sentence 
particulantly against the quality of his diction. The latter is my concern. Stovall et. al. ob 
phrases like “entertained some distant view” and “had not the least tincture,” a 
especially to Fielding’s dependence on the big abstractions, “passion,” “vice 
avor,” “ambition,” words which elicit no emotional response from the reader. They 
praise Shute for “concrete words” that give life to the passage, citing “curtain 
cabin,” “glowed in the synthetic light,” “surfaced,” and “desolate shore.” Later in 
chapter they urge the student to “Strive for the concrete word” (pp. 390-391).

Abstract nouns refer to the world in a way quite different from concrete nouns. Th 
are not tied to a set of particulars—all curtained cabins—or to any one cabin. Th
are relational. For instance, in speaking of Blish’s “avarice,” Fielding calls up at least the relation of a series of acts to one another (a single act of acquiring or hoarding is not enough); of Blish’s feelings to these actions and to the wealth that is their goal; of those acts and feelings to a scale of values that is socially established (avarice is a sin, and so related to salvation and damnation); and of Blish to other people who make such judgments, as well as to people whose wealth he might covet and who would become poorer were he to become richer. The term also evokes a temporal relationship: an avaricious person like Blish seeks to become wealthy over time, and it is this future goal that informs his conduct. Abstract nouns that characterize people do so through bundles of relationships like these.

In short, no one need not adopt an eighteenth-century faculty psychology, or expect Nevil Shute to adopt it, to see that Fielding’s abstract nouns give a rich social setting to Blish’s sordid intentions. This setting is made more rich as, in context, Fielding humorously brings avarice into parity with love, under the higher-level abstraction of passion. (Herein another relationship, that of the narrator to his subject and his reader.) Abstractions are for Fielding a speculative and interpretive grid against which he can examine the events of the novel, and which themselves are constantly tested and modified by those events.

Shute’s language in this passage, by contrast, sets his hero’s actions against a background mainly of objects and of other people treated more or less as objects. The moral implications of the passage will have to be supplied by the reader. And there is no way for the narrator, given his style, to place that moral content in a dynamic relationship with social values, at least within the passage cited. This may be appropriate enough in a story from which society has literally disappeared; I do not mean to disparage Shute’s diction, only to question the wisdom of commending it to students as plainly superior (for the twentieth-century reader) to Fielding’s. Some important kinds of thinking can be done only with the help of abstractions.

In sum, as this textbook teaches the skill of using definite, specific, concrete language, it joins the other two in preferring realism to more abstract inquiry about realia, and to the effort to connect them. In doing so, it seems to me, the authors convey a fairly well-defined ideological picture to students. I would characterize this picture in these terms:

1. Ahistoricism. The preferred style focuses on a truncated present moment. Things and events are frozen in an image, or they pass on the wing, coming from nowhere.
2. Empiricism. The style favors sensory news, from the surfaces of things.
3. Fragmentation. An object is just what it is, disconnected from the rest of the world. The style obscures the social relations and the relations of people to nature that are embedded in all things.
4. Solipsism. The style foregrounds the writer’s own perceptions: This is what I saw and felt.
5. Denial of conflict. The style typically pictures a world in which the telephone has the same meaning for all classes of people, a world whose “rocket-age reality” is just mysteriously there, outside the country store, a world where avarice is a superficial and tedious concept.

Furthermore—and I think this, too, a matter of the ideology of style—the injunctions to use detail, be specific, be concrete, as applied in these books, push the student writer always toward the language that most nearly reproduces the immediate experience and away from the language that might be used to understand it, transform it, and relate it to everything else. The authors privilege a kind of revising and expanding that leaves the words themselves unexamined and untransformed. Susan Wells has suggested that Christensen’s rhetoric does not open “to investigation the relations among language, vision, and their objects,” but takes those relations for granted. Her comment applies well to the use of detail recommended in these textbooks.

In an epoch when so much of the language students hear or read comes from distant sources, via the media, and when so much of it is shaped by advertisers and other corporate experts to channel their thoughts and feelings and needs, I think it a special pity if English teachers are turning students away from critical scrutiny of the words in their heads, especially from those that are most heavily laden with ideology. When in the cause of clarity and liveliness we urge them toward detail, surfaces, the sensory, as mere expansion of ideas or even as a substitute for abstraction, we encourage them to accept the empirical fragmentation of consciousness that passes for common sense in our society, and hence to accept the society itself as just what it most superficially seems to be.

Yes, it is good to keep readers interested, bad to bore them. Like Hirsch’s principle of readability, the injunction to be interesting is on one level a bit of self-evident practical wisdom, not to mention kindness. Whatever you are trying to accomplish through a piece of writing, you won’t achieve it if the reader quits on you, or plods on in resentful tedium. But mechanically applied, the principles of interest and readability entail accepting the reader exactly as he or she is. The reader’s most casual values, interests, and capacities become an inflexible measure of what to write and how to write it, a Nielsen rating for prose. What happens to the possibility of challenging or even changing the reader? If keeping readers’ attention is elevated to the prime goal of our teaching, the strategies we teach may well lead toward triviality and evasion.

Yes, I also realize that most students don’t handle abstractions and generalizations well. I know that they often write badly when they try, and how depressing an experience it can be to read a batch of compositions on free will or alienation or capital punishment. And I am aware of the pressure many English teachers now feel to teach basic skills, whatever they are, rather than critical inquiry. But I can’t believe that the best response to this pressure is valorizing the concrete, fragmented, and inconsistent world-views that many of our students bring to college with them. Jeffrey Youdelman refers to colleagues he has heard say, “They can’t handle abstraction . . . and therefore I always give them topics like ‘describe your favorite room.’” Youdelman continues: “Already stuck in a world of daily detail, with limited horizons and stunted consciousness, students are forced deeper into their solipsistic prison.” Like him, I am concerned that in the cause of improving their skills we may end up increasing their powerlessness.

3. Obviously critical inquiry requires both abstractions and details, and a fluid exchange between them. I hope not to be taken as merely inverting the values I have criticized and recommending the abstract and general over the concrete.
4. “Limiting Students: Remedial Writing and the Death of Open Admissions,” College English, 39 (1978), 563-64. Anyone interested in the politics of rhetoric and composition should read this excellent article and that of Susan Wells, cited earlier. I consider the present essay a supplement to theirs.