SUPPORTING GENERALIZATIONS

Introduction

Although generalizations are important, there are times—many times—when generalizations are either an inadequate development of one's ideas or a deliberate attempt to be vague. Statements like "It was a great movie," or "I'm for capital punishment," are reasonable generalizations, but if examples or evidence of some kind is not forthcoming, then the individual making the statement is either not thinking the matter through or is intentionally equivocating. The stereotypical politician who says "I'm for lower taxes," but doesn't go on to explain how much lower or doesn't show how taxes can be lowered is attempting to stay politically alive by being vague. Politicians often avoid specific points, and that is understandable. However, to avoid specific points in serious communication is inexcusable. Specific examples help a reader "to see" or understand a point the writer is trying to make. Most well-written paragraphs have a generalization (topic sentence) and points (specific examples) that are made about the generalization. The specific points help readers to see clearly and to gain an understanding of ideas presented by a writer.

Explanation

Consider an idea on a ladder of specificity, moving from the general to the specific:

leisure activities (general)
  | sports (specific)
  | outdoor sports (more specific)
  | golf (most specific)

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If someone tells a friend that leisure activities are the high point of his day, he is reporting a generalization. If he says that golf is a leisure activity he enjoys, then, according to the above ladder of specificity, he is speaking about a "specific" sport. Many paragraphs can be written according to a general to specific "ladder" with the most specific ideas occurring last. Read the following paragraph and trace the ladder of specificity diagrammed above:

Nature Loves a Golfer

After working hard all day long, there are a variety of leisure activities I could choose. I could read or I could watch TV. Although reading and television are often enjoyable for me, there is no type of leisure-time activity I enjoy more than sports. Sports help me to keep in shape physically and mentally. There was a time when I preferred indoor sports as basketball and bowling, but now I prefer my sports outdoors. I like the steady warmth or brisk coolness of fresh outdoor air. I've tried a number of outdoor sports such as skiing, football, and swimming outdoors, but golf, to me, is the perfect sport for having a reason to walk and play in an idyllic surrounding, while allowing me to get rid of the day's or week's frustrations. Walking in the sunshine (sometimes rain) and slamming or putting a golf ball around a beautiful green is truly my favorite leisure activity.

One of the major faults in student writing is the lack of development. English 28 students often write unsatisfactory papers and English 31 students write "C-" to "E" papers because they are not specific about the idea stated in their topic sentences. Often, these students fall into the trap of circular reasoning, for they will state the topic sentence of a paragraph, and instead of adding specific proof points, they repeat the topic sentence once, twice, and three times in different words.

An example of a paragraph developed by circular reasoning:

After working hard all day long, there are a variety of leisure activities I could choose. Hard work often makes me think of things I can do during my leisure time. Also, it is important to have leisure time activities after putting in a good day's work. Without leisure activities, we could get frustrated with the hard work we do all day long.
Boring? Certainly. No specific points have been made to develop the topic sentence. There is no development of the general idea.

The following is a sample of four versions of a paragraph on the movie 10. The first paragraph is general, the next two include a few specific points, and the fourth moves right down the ladder of specificity. Of the four which one do you think is the most interesting?

Original

The movie 10 has been very popular because it shows a real-life situation about an aging man and what he goes through. Because of this movie, I now realize what a "middle-aged" man goes through.

1st Revision

The movie 10 has been very popular because it shows a real-life situation about a middle-aged man, and what he goes through. A middle-aged man, about forty, feels that he has entered the twilight years of his life, and that the only two main events that are going to happen to him are old age and death.

2nd Revision

The movie 10 has been very popular because it shows a real-life situation about a middle-aged man and what he goes through. A middle-aged man of about forty feels that he has entered the twilight years of life, and that the only two main events that are going to happen to him are old age and death. George Webber, portrayed by Dudley Moore, enters a deep depression when he realizes he has reached the summit of life. In addition to showing a real-life situation, the movie had the best supporting actress.

Final Revision

The movie 10 has been very popular because it shows a real-life situation about a middle-aged man and what he goes through. A middle-aged man of about forty feels that he has entered the twilight years of life, and that the only two main events that are going to happen to him are old age and death. George Webber, portrayed by middle-aged Dudley Moore, plummets into a state of deep depression when he realizes he has entered his declining years. Not only does the middle-aged man worry about old age and death, but he misses the feeling of youth. He sees young people having fun and wishes he were part of it. In addition to showing a real-life situation, the movie has an attractive supporting actress.
A diagram of the fourth version might look like this:

entertainment
  movie
    "10"
      middle-aged man
        Dudley Moore/George Webber
          depression
            missing youth and fun

**Exercise**

Directions: Try developing a paragraph of about six to ten sentences on one of the following eleven ladders of specificity. Show the paragraph to a Lab instructor when you are finished. The exercise should provide you with a graphic approach to writing well-developed paragraphs. A sample exercise and paragraph follow:

**Sample Exercise**

education
  English
    high school English
      12th grade English class

**Sample Paragraph**

Education has been very important to me all my life. It was important in elementary, in jr. high, and high school. As with most people, some of the classes were boring or interesting depending on the teacher and my attitude, but I must admit that I have always enjoyed English. It was my favorite subject in elementary and jr. high, and I especially liked it in high school, probably because I had good English teachers in every grade except one—my twelfth grade class. In that class we had a very young teacher who had just graduated from college, and he didn't seem to know the difference between a verb and his Aunt Susie. We didn't read much. And what is worse, we learned "zero" about writing.
Exercises
1. clothes
   pants
   jeans
   cords
2. entertainment
   movie
   "Victor Victoria" (or any movie)
   woman dressed like man
   singing sensation
   return to normal life
   marriage
3. transportation
   car
   Ford (or any car)
   Mustang
4. mass media
   reading material
   magazines
   Time (or any magazine)
5. fast foods
   hamburgers
   McDonald's
   Big Mac
6. physical fitness
   outdoor exercise
   jogging
7. entertainers
   movie stars
   male movie stars, female stars
   Paul Newman (or any star)
   Goldie Hawn
8. entertainment
   musical groups
   rock musical groups
   "The Effects"

9. activity
   sports
   skiing
   snow skiing, water skiing

10. food
    breakfast food
    cereal
    wheaties

11. violence
    street crime
    mugging, rape, murder