

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Descriptive writing has a unique power and appeal, as it evokes sights, smells, sounds, textures, and tastes. Using description in your writing brings the world within your text to your reader.

Creating A Dominant Impression

The first step in using effective description is to focus on a dominant impression. A dominant impression creates a mood or atmosphere in your paper. This mood can be conveyed through effective descriptive writing. For example, pay attention to the mood in the following paragraph.

My family ate dinner at Merrymeade Diner every Friday night while I was a child. We huddled close in a large, red booth as we scanned the familiar menu. The aroma of gravy over creamy mashed potatoes lingered in the air. I snuggled close to my mom's arm as she ordered our drinks. The waitress brought our thick milkshakes out on a tray and placed them in front of us on a paper doily. The jukebox in the back played songs that we all knew the words to, and we sang along until our food arrived, hot and enticing on the table. Outside I shivered in the cold air, but in the diner I was cosy, munching on crispy French fries and enjoying a hot, juicy cheeseburger.

Can you feel the mood of this paragraph? The author is trying to convey a feeling of safety, comfort, and happiness. Notice how the author does not tell the reader she feels safe and happy. She shows the reader through descriptive detail. Her dominant impression is one of comfort and happiness.

Sensory Details

Sensory description uses sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste to sketch an impression in writing. Consider a paragraph without sensory description.

My sister and I walked along the boardwalk each afternoon of our vacation. We watched the ocean and listened to the waves. Usually we stopped for a snack at one of the many stores that line the boardwalk. Afterwards, we walked along the beach and let our feet get wet.

Now, consider this paragraph with all five sensory descriptors: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

My sister and I walked along the boardwalk one afternoon on our vacation. The hot boards warmed our bare feet. We watched the foam-covered waves topple over each other and then slide back into sea. The crashing water competed with the exuberant yells from the seagulls. We bought a perfectly oval fluff of pink cotton candy that dissolved sweetly in our mouths. Afterwards, we walked along the edge of the water, letting the warm salty air blow our hair away from our necks as the cool water lapped over our toes.

Vivid vs. Vague Language

The sensory details you select in your writing should create for your reader the same picture you have in your mind. Instead of using vague, general words, your sensory language should be concrete and sensory-packed. This makes the difference between vivid and vague language. Take a look at the comparison between vague and vivid sentences.

Vague	Vivid
The food was unappetizing.	The pale turkey slices floated limply in a pool of murky fat.
The sprinkler was refreshing.	The cool water from the sprinkler sprayed our hot faces.
The traffic was heavy.	Our old car puffed as Main Street became clogged with a line of clamoring motorists.

Vary Sentence Structure

When using descriptive language, it is important to vary your sentence structure. Try to avoid using the same subject-verb pattern in all sentences. Embedding descriptive elements and combining sentences can help to avoid the routine subject-verb structure.

The hall was empty. She ran towards the classroom. She entered right after the bell rang.

Varying this sentence structure by embedding descriptive detail breaks the monotonous tone and the clipped, subject-verb style.

Racing down an empty hall, she skidded into the classroom, breathless, just as the bell clanged above her.

What to Avoid When Using Sensory Detail

- Too many adjectives—retain only the most powerful words in your writing, deleting any unnecessary words
- Too many adverbs—verbs are stronger than adverbs. She strolled into the room is more powerful than She walked casually into the room.
- Clichéd figures of speech—overused language, such as green with envy, signals a lack of imagination. Use fresh, descriptive words that go against rote thinking.

5 Examples of How to Write a Good Descriptive Paragraph

By Richard Nordquist (Updated June 06, 2020)

A good descriptive paragraph is like a window into another world. Through the use of careful examples or details, an author can conjure a scene that vividly describes a person, place, or thing. The best descriptive writing appeals to multiple senses at once—smell, sight, taste, touch, and hearing—and is found in both fiction and nonfiction.

In their own way, each of the following writers (three of them students, two of them professional authors) have selected a belonging or a place that holds special meaning to them. After identifying that subject in a clear topic sentence, they proceed to describe it in detail while explaining its personal significance.

A Friendly Clown

On one corner of my dresser sits a smiling toy clown on a tiny unicycle—a gift I received last Christmas from a close friend. The clown's short yellow hair, made of yarn, covers its ears but is parted above the eyes. The blue eyes are outlined in black with thin, dark lashes flowing from the brows. It has cherry-red cheeks, nose, and lips, and its broad grin disappears into the wide, white ruffle around its neck. The clown wears a fluffy, two-tone nylon costume. The left side of the outfit is light blue, and the right side is red. The two colours merge in a dark line that runs down the centre of the small outfit. Surrounding its ankles and disguising its long black shoes are big pink bows. The white spokes on the wheels of the unicycle gather in the centre and expand to the black tire so that the wheel somewhat resembles the inner half of a grapefruit. The clown and unicycle together stand about a foot high. As a cherished gift from my good friend Tran, this colourful figure greets me with a smile every time I enter my room.



Observe how the writer moves clearly from a description of the head of the clown to the body to the unicycle underneath. More than sensory details for the eyes, she provides touch, in the description that the hair is made of yarn and the suit of nylon. Certain colours are specific, as in cherry-red cheeks and light blue, and descriptions help the reader to visualize the object: the parted hair, the colour line on the suit, and the grapefruit analogy. Dimensions overall help to provide the reader with the item's scale, and the descriptions of the size of the ruffle and bows on the shoes in comparison to what's nearby provide telling detail. The concluding sentence helps to tie the paragraph together by emphasizing the personal value of this gift.

The Blond Guitar



My most valuable possession is an old, slightly warped blond guitar—the first instrument I taught myself how to play. It's nothing fancy, just a Madeira folk guitar, all scuffed and scratched and fingerprinted. At the top is a bramble of copper-wound strings, each one hooked through the eye of a silver tuning key. The strings are stretched down a long, slim neck, its frets tarnished, the wood worn by years of fingers pressing chords and picking notes. The body of the Madeira is shaped like an enormous yellow pear, one that was slightly damaged in shipping. The blond wood has been chipped and gouged to grey, particularly where the pick guard fell off years ago. No, it's not a beautiful instrument, but it still lets me make music, and for that I will always treasure it.

by Jeremy Burden

Here, the writer uses a topic sentence to open his paragraph then uses the following sentences to add specific details. The author creates an image for the mind's eye to travel across by describing the parts of the guitar in a logical fashion, from the strings on the head to the worn wood on the body.

He emphasizes its condition by the number of different descriptions of the wear on the guitar, such as noting its slight warp; distinguishing between scuffs and scratches; describing the effect that fingers have had on the instrument by wearing down its neck, tarnishing frets, and leaving prints on the body; listing both its chips and gouges and even noting their effects on the colour of the instrument. The author even describes the remnants of missing pieces. After all that, he plainly states his affection for it.

Gregory

Gregory is my beautiful gray Persian cat. He walks with pride and grace, performing a dance of disdain as he slowly lifts and lowers each paw with the delicacy of a ballet dancer. His pride, however, does not extend to his appearance, for he spends most of his time indoors watching television and growing fat. He enjoys TV commercials, especially those for Meow Mix and 9 Lives. His familiarity with cat food commercials has led him to reject generic brands of cat food in favour of only the most expensive brands. Gregory is as finicky about visitors as he is about what he eats, befriending some and repelling others. He may snuggle up against your ankle, begging to be petted, or he may imitate a skunk and stain your favorite trousers. Gregory does not do this to establish his territory, as many cat experts think, but to humiliate me because he is jealous of my friends. After my guests have fled, I look at the old fleabag snoozing and smiling to himself in front of the television set, and I have to forgive him for his obnoxious, but endearing, habits.



by Barbara Carter

The writer here focuses less on the physical appearance of her pet than on the cat's habits and actions. Notice how many different descriptors go into just the sentence about how the cat walks: emotions of pride and disdain and the extended metaphor

of the dancer, including the phrases the "dance of disdain," "grace," and "ballet dancer." When you want to portray something through the use of a metaphor, make sure you are consistent, that all the descriptors make sense with that one metaphor. Don't use two different metaphors to describe the same thing, because that makes the image you're trying to portray awkward and convoluted. The consistency adds emphasis and depth to the description.

Personification is an effective literary device for giving lifelike detail to an inanimate object or an animal, and Carter uses it to great effect. Look at how much time she spends on the discussions of what the cat takes pride in (or doesn't) and how it comes across in his attitude, with being finicky and jealous, acting to humiliate by spraying, and just overall behaving obnoxiously. Still, she conveys her clear affection for the cat, something to which many readers can relate.

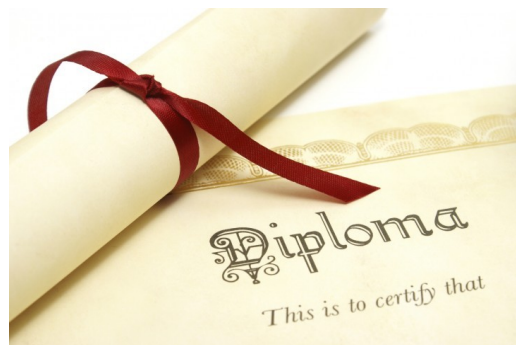
The Magic Metal Tube

Once in a long while, my mother brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma.

On the tube are gold circles crossed with seven red lines each—"joy" ideographs in abstract. There are also little flowers that look like gears for a gold machine. According to the scraps of labels with Chinese and American addresses, stamps, and postmarks, the family airmailed the can from Hong Kong

in 1950. It got crushed in the middle, and whoever tried to peel the labels off stopped because the red and gold paint came off too, leaving silver scratches that rust.

Somebody tried to pry the end off before discovering that the tube falls apart. When I open it, the smell of China flies out, a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain.

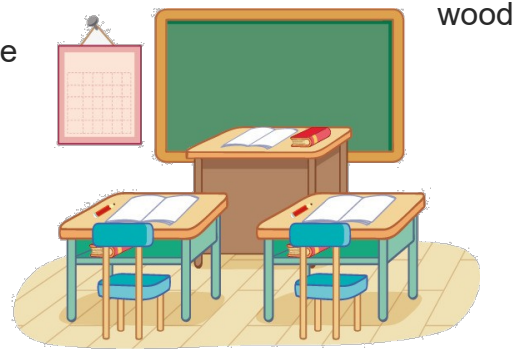


by Maxine Hong Kingston

This paragraph opens the third chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts," a lyrical account of a Chinese-American girl growing up in California. Notice how Kingston integrates informative and descriptive details in this account of "the metal tube" that holds her mother's diploma from medical school. She uses colour, shape, texture (rust, missing paint, pry marks, and scratches), and smell, where she has a particularly strong metaphor that surprises the reader with its distinctness. The last sentence in the paragraph (not reproduced here) is more about the smell; closing the paragraph with this aspect adds emphasis to it. The order of the description is also logical, as the first response to the closed object is how it looks rather than how it smells when opened.

Inside District School #7, Niagara County, New York

Inside, the school smelled smartly of varnish and smoke from the potbellied stove. On gloomy days, the windows emitted a vague, gauzy light, not much reinforced by ceiling lights. We squinted at the blackboard, that seemed far away since it was on a small platform, where Mrs. Dietz's desk was also positioned, at the front, left of the room. We sat in rows of seats, smallest at the front, largest at the rear, attached at their bases by metal runners, like a toboggan; the wood of these desks seemed beautiful to me, smooth and of the red-burnished hue of horse chestnuts. The floor was bare wooden planks. An American flag hung limply at the far left of the blackboard and above the blackboard, running across the front of the room, designed to draw our eyes to it avidly, worshipfully, were paper squares showing that beautifully shaped script known as Parker Penmanship.



by Joyce Carol Oates

In this paragraph (originally published in "Washington Post Book World" and reprinted in "Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art"), Joyce Carol Oates affectionately describes the one-room schoolhouse she attended from first through fifth grades. Notice how she appeals to our sense of smell before moving on to describe the layout and contents of the room. When you walk into a place, its overall smell hits you immediately, if it's pungent, even before you've taken in the whole area with your eyes. Thus, this choice of chronology for this descriptive paragraph is also a logical order of narration, even though it differs from the Hong Kingston paragraph. It allows the reader to imagine the room just as if he were walking into it.

The positioning of items in relation to other items is on full display in this paragraph, to give people a clear vision of the layout of the place as a whole. For the objects inside, she uses many descriptors of what materials they are made from. Note the imagery portrayed by the use of the phrases "gauzy light," "toboggan," and "horse chestnuts." You can imagine the emphasis placed on penmanship study by the description of their quantity, the deliberate location of the paper squares, and the desired effect upon the students brought about by this location.

Sources:

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