

Description

A description is a verbal picture of a person, place, or thing. When you describe someone or something, you give your readers a picture in words. To make the word picture as vivid as possible, observe and record specific details that appeal to all of the reader's senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. A descriptive paper needs sharp, colorful details.

Writing a Good Thesis for a Descriptive Essay

- ⇒ Begin with a subject that interests you
- ⇒ For example, if you are asked to describe an important place in your life, you could write about your hometown.
- ⇒ Narrow your subject until you could cover it within your page/word limit
- ⇒ In the paper about your hometown, you clearly could not cover every bit of it in 2-3 pages or 400-500 words. Instead, begin to think about one small part of your hometown that was important to you. It could be your bedroom, the woods, a football stadium...anything you want.
- ⇒ Make sure that your thesis states a dominant impression about what you are describing. Don't worry about refining the sentence right away.
- ⇒ The statement "The subject of this paper will be my childhood bedroom" is not a good thesis statement. To check if your thesis has a point, ask yourself "so what?" Why does it matter that the subject of your paper is your bedroom? Instead, you should write something *about* your bedroom. For example, "My childhood bedroom was a warm, safe place."

Proceeding with a Descriptive Essay

After you have a good thesis statement, these guidelines will help you to develop your ideas into an essay:

- ⇒ Make a list of as many details as you can that support the general impression.
- For example:
- Bright colors
 - Throw pillows
 - Lamps
 - Posters
 - Pictures of family and friends
 - Stuffed animals
 - Bookshelves filled with books and games
- ⇒ Organize your paper according to one or a combination of the following:
 - ⇒ Physical order - move from left to right, or far to near, or in some other consistent order
 - ⇒ Size - begin with large features or objects and work down to smaller ones
 - ⇒ A special order - use another order that is appropriate to the subject
 - ⇒ Appeal to as many senses as possible when describing a scene
 - * Chiefly, you will use sight, but try to include touch, hearing, smell, and taste as well.
 - ** Remember that it is the richness of your sense impressions that will help the reader form a picture of the scene.

Personal Checklist

Use this checklist to determine if you have fully developed your paper. Make any revisions necessary until each question can be answered “yes.”

1 - Unity

- Do you have a clearly stated thesis in the introductory paragraph?
- Does the thesis convey a dominant impression?
- Does each supporting paragraph back up your thesis?
- Is each paragraph necessary for the reader to understand the essay?

2 - Support

- Are there at least two separate supporting points for your thesis?
- Do you have *specific* evidence for each of your supporting points?
- Do you have enough specific evidence for each of your supporting points?

3 - Coherence

- Do you have a clear method of organization?
- Did you use transitions and connecting words?
- Do you have an effective introduction, conclusion, and title?

4 - Audience and Purpose

- Do you have an appropriate audience in mind? Can you describe them?
- Do you have a purpose for the paper? What is it supposed to do or accomplish?
- Does the purpose match your assignment?

5 - Sentence Skills - Consult a grammar guide, such as *Harbrace* to check for errors in grammar or sentence structure. These typically include:

- Sentence fragments
- Fused sentences
- Incorrect verb forms
- Problems with subject and verb agreement
- Problems with pronoun and antecedent agreement
- Punctuation problems, including: apostrophes, quotation marks, semicolons, colons, commas, dash, hyphen, and parentheses

Adapted from *College Writing Skills with Readings, Fourth Edition* by John Langan



Descriptive writing portrays people, places, things, moments and theories with enough vivid detail to help the reader create a mental picture of what is being written about.

Things to Consider as You Write Your Descriptive Essay

- Think of an instance that you want to describe.
- Why is this particular instance important?
- What were you doing?
- What other things were happening around you? Is there anything specific that stands out in your mind?
- Where were objects located in relation to where you were?
- How did the surroundings remind you of other places you have been?
- What sights, smells, sounds, and tastes were in the air?
- Did the sights, smells, sounds, and tastes remind you of anything?
- What were you feeling at that time?
- Has there been an instance in which you have felt this way before?
- What do you want the reader to feel after reading the paper?
- What types of words and images can convey this feeling?
- Can you think of another situation that was similar to the one you are writing about? How can it help explain what you are writing about?
- Is there enough detail in your essay to create a mental image for the reader?

Conventions of Descriptive Essays Illustrated by Sample Paragraphs

- **Appealing-to-the-Senses Description: Let the reader see, smell, hear, taste, and feel what you write in your essay.**

The thick, burnt scent of roasted coffee tickled the tip of my nose just seconds before the old, faithful alarm blared a distorted top-forty through its tiny top speaker. Wiping away the grit of last night's sleep, the starch white sunlight

blinded me momentarily as I slung my arm like an elephant trunk along the top of the alarm, searching for the snooze button. While stretching hands and feet to the four posts of my bed, my eyes opened after several watery blinks. I crawled out of the comforter, edging awkwardly like a butterfly from a cocoon, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. The dusty pebbles on the chilled, wood floor sent ripples spiraling from my ankles to the nape of my neck when my feet hit the floor. Grabbing the apricot, terri-cloth robe, recently bathed in fabric softener and October wind, I knotted it tightly at my waist like a prestigious coat of armor and headed downstairs to battle the morning.

- **Spatial-Order Description: Show the reader where things are located from your perspective.**

Billy Ray's Pawn Shop and Lawn Mower Repair looked like a burial ground for country auction rejects. The blazing, red, diesel fuel tanks beamed in front of the station, looking like cheap lipstick against the pallid, wrinkled texture of the parking lot sand. The yard, not much larger than the end zone at General G. Patton High School on the north end of town, was framed with a rusted metallic hedge of lawn mowers, banana seat bicycles, and corroded oil drums. It wasn't a calico frame of rusted parts, but rather an orchestra of unwanted machinery that Billy Ray had arranged into sections. The yellow-tanked mowers rested silently at the right of the diesel fuel. Once red, now faded orange, mowers stood at attention to the left. The oil barrels, jaded and pierced with holes, bellared like chimes when the wind was right. The bikes rested sporadically throughout the lot. In the middle of it all was the office, a faded, steel roof supported by cheap two-by-fours and zebra paneling. Billy Ray was at home, usually, five blocks east of town on Kennel Road.

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For questions and suggestions, please e-mail us at leolink@stcloudstate.edu.

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Writing Descriptions

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Because description is a mode of expository writing which is relied upon in other expository modes, we sometimes find difficulty in imagining a purely descriptive essay. In a narrative, for example, description can make the setting of characters more vivid; in a process paper it can insure that the audience understands the finished product. Regardless of how we use description, it is easy to see that it strengthens an essay considerably.

Principles

Students often ask, "But how do I write a purely descriptive essay? What's the point of description? What's so different about it?" There are three characteristics of a purely descriptive essay which are worthy of remembering.

- a descriptive essay has one, clear dominant impression. If, for example you are describing a snowfall, it is important for you to decide and to let your reader know if it is threatening or lovely; in order to have one dominant impression it cannot be both. The dominant impression guides the author's selection of detail and is thereby made clear to the reader in the thesis sentence.
- a descriptive essay can be objective or subjective, giving the author a wide choice of tone, diction and attitude. For instance, an objective description of one's dog would mention such facts as height, weight, coloring and so forth. A subjective description would include the above details, but would also stress the author's feeling toward the dog, as well as its personality and habits.
- the purpose of a purely descriptive essay is to involve the reader enough so he or she can actually visualize the things being described. Therefore, it is important to use specific and concrete details.

Conventions

- The descriptive essay relies on concrete, sensory detail to communicate its point. Remember, we have five senses, not one or two.

- The author of a descriptive essay must carefully select details to support the dominant impression. In other words, the author has the license to omit details which are incongruent with the dominant impression unless the dominant impression is one which points out the discrepancies.
- Description very often relies on emotion to convey its point. Because of this, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives convey more to the reader than do nouns.
- Unless the description is objective, you must be sure that the dominant impression conveys an attitude.

Strategies

- Try giving all the details first; the dominant impression then is built from these details.
- Check your details to be sure that they are consistent with the dominant impression. You might even want to write down the five senses on a scratch piece of paper and check to see that you have covered them all.
- Try moving your reader through space and time chronologically. For instance, you might want to describe a train ride from start to destination, or a stream from its source to the point at which it joins the river.
- Use a then-and-now approach to show decay, change, or improvement. The house where you grew up might now be a rambling shack. The variations on this strategy are endless.
- Select an emotion and try to describe it. It might be more difficult to get started, but it can be worthwhile.

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