

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 cozy, 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.

Consider this a primer for writing good descriptions (here's your first lesson: "good" isn't a suitable or sufficient way to describe anything). To make things interesting — and very embarrassing for me — I've dug up several of my own stories from years past to illustrate some truly awful blunders in description, each of which poisoned workshops at varying times during the earlier half of the last decade. Be warned: some major toadstools lie ahead

Writing is an account of how people think. As a medium it's intrinsically empathic; it communicates patently human sensibilities. In order for a story to work, it needs to *feel* like real life, even when it's actually something quite different. The more detailed and rich your descriptions, the better your writing will approximate the human experience, thereby establishing a connection with fellow minds.

The best descriptions are the ones that are completely original, easily understood and often reminisced. They're digestible yet impressionable, they say something profound but they're palatable enough to be comprehended by anyone. It's a difficult technique to master, an art form in itself, really

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

In order to maximize that empathic response, try to appeal to all the senses as often as you can.

Don't just tell us what something looks like, tell us how it sounds, how it tastes, what it feel like, how it smells

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 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.

Be specific

Avoid summary in your descriptions. Offer concrete information, engage us with moment-to-moment details, tell us about each detail, and how they affect the senses.

One of the most practical — and indeed, easiest — ways of laying out a descriptive foundation is to envision each scene before you write it. Literally close your eyes, see the scene and then write it down. For the time being, just let the image do its work; look closely at the objects in the scene, and describe them in a manner that's as painfully specific as possible. Now — to establish storytelling authority — make sure the description is told from the proper subjective viewpoint: tell us how the character or narrator would see things from the POV you've established.

Here's an especially bad slice of description from a story I wrote eight years ago:

Example (bad): *It is hot.*

"It is hot" would be fine if I were filling out a police report, or even writing a piece of journalism. But this was intended to be a work of fiction. Clearly, I hadn't yet realized that by generalizing and not appealing to the readers' senses I missed an ideal opportunity to connect with empathizing human minds.

Example (better): *The heat is oppressive, sweltering and exhausting, it sticks to the skin and makes ovens out of parking lots.*

Some things to always consider when you're writing a scene: do your word choices paint images, do they place us in the moment? Do they make us participants in the story instead of mere observers? Not only is this new sentence more specific, it brings in a few common experiences associated with heat (sticky skin, broiling parking lots), thereby placing readers into the action and increasing the chances of an empathic response.

Limit modifiers

It's bad timing given my last example, but try to cut down on your adjectives and adverbs. Modifiers don't specify words as much as you might think. More often than not, they actually abstract a thought, so sentences that rely on modifiers for descriptive strength are building on faulty foundations. You'll be more successful if you instead find the verb that perfectly portrays the image you're envisioning. When you edit your work, spend considerable time scrutinizing your sentences to make sure the action maximizes full descriptive potential.

Example (bad): *They arrived at the house just behind the streaming line of fire trucks, their street alive in the opulent glow of lights and sirens, their house ablaze in a perennial bloom of orange and yellow.*

Unfortunately, this story was published before I possessed the wherewithal to edit such obtuse overwriting. Looking at it five years later,

the sentence would have been fine if I simply cut down on the modifiers and let the action breathe.

Example (better): *They arrived at the house just behind the fire trucks, the street alive in a glow of lights and sirens, their house ablaze.*

Notice how this version places an emphasis on the verbs. Moreover, there's another advantage gained here. In the first version, the sentence ends with a description of the colors of the blaze, hardly essential information. Now emphasis is placed on the most important information in the sentence (and in this case, the entire story): the burning house. If you want to draw extra emphasis to anything, put it at the end of the sentence. Placing it at the beginning is a close second. Never bury important information in the middle.

Use figurative language

Ever wonder why metaphor and analogy are such powerful — not to mention, popular — tools? Figurative language is an unmatched ally in descriptive pursuits. It gives the writer a chance to deconstruct a specific, subjective event and recast it into something familiar.

The human mind is engineered to see patterns. Anytime you disguise a comparison as a statement (which is what happens with a metaphor) you're bringing the subject into a new relationship. You've established one pattern as being analogous to another pre-existing pattern, and we begin to see a small part of the world in a different way. It takes some creative know-how to make figurative language fly however, and metaphors that are confused, off-base or cliché can ruin an otherwise stellar piece of writing. The analogous relationships you establish have to be earned.

Example (bad): *The overcast September sky stared back under a blanket of ashen gray.*

First of all, I could happily live the remainder of my days without ever hearing clouds being referred to as a "blanket" again (ditto for "cotton"). Description this familiar tells me I wasn't particularly inspired when I wrote it, back in 2005. Then there's the semantic clumsiness of it all. "Blanket of ashen gray?" Why not just write "ashen gray blanket," or better yet, "gray blanket?" Finally, do skies really "stare back?" The figurative appeals here (clichéd metaphor, awkward personification) seem careless, even lazy. If I were to rewrite the phrase today I might say something like this:

Example (better): *There was an orange burn where the sun had been, and the mutilated animal shapes of cloud lay scattered in the tear of dusk.*

It's overkill, but you get the idea. Say something that both reconstructs the subject and enables the reader to see the world in a new, yet recognizable, light.

Also, avoid well-worn words and everyday figures of speech. Describing a farmhouse as "quaint," or using phrases like "before he knew it," are so familiar the reader treats them as boilerplate and usually skips over them entirely. Always try to describe something in a way that's never been described before.

If you want to draw extra emphasis to anything, put it at the end of the sentence. Placing it at the beginning is a close second. Never bury important information in the middle.

Get to the point

If there's a single take-away I want readers to get from a column that focuses on description, it's this: avoid obfuscating and pointless over-writing. It's not the job of the writer to besiege the reader, either with a litany of unimportant details or some long-winded, faux intellectual attempt at armchair discourse. Unfortunately, it seems nearly every writer (myself included) goes through this cringe-inducing phase where we pillage the dictionary or treat our keyboards like calculators. Works resulting from this mindset offer very little descriptive assistance for the reader, and a lot of later embarrassment for writers guilty of these storytelling snafus. When it comes to description, focus on the most telling details rather than caving in to your writerly proclivities to lean on the pen. You'll thank me later.

Example (bad): *He wondered if there was some deeper meaning to it, if the heat spoke of the true workings of this city, the only place*

he'd known really, and if he tried hard enough he could find an answer that satisfied him, an explanation beyond what those fortunate to have everything and those cursed with nothing have always been forced to accept, if nature's brutality revealed a final authority, and man's need to find reason with it was little more than a grotesque delusion that he could make sense out of nothing.

What a mess! Sentences like this reveal a practice that's very common today, where writers spin these syntactical Triple Lindies in the hopes they can somehow scare people into liking their work. There's a sort of bullying insecurity afoot here, because the delivery seems to operate off the idea that if readers don't like the work, clearly it means they "didn't understand it." In actuality, this hat trick works on very few people, and incidentally, what's on the page here says very, very little. This section's descriptive duties would've been much more effective if I had ditched the dime-store existentialism and described instead what the character was thinking, in terms more fitting of his POV. The fundamental disregard to work within the descriptive framework of the character I established — to choose authorial square jawed smugness instead of revealing things the way the character would have seen them, in other words — reveals a rudimentary mishandling of narrative. In the end, it's the writer who suffers the most from this kind of cloying pedantry, because he/she has deliberately girded the sentences' potential strengths with mindless clutter.

Example (better): *He wondered if the heat revealed nature's final authority, and that man's need to find reason with it was little more than a grotesque delusion that he could make sense out of nothing.*

The sentence's newfound pith reestablishes some aphoristic value that was completely submerged in the verbiage. It's still not a very good sentence, mind you, but it's far less annoying than what was on the page before. Maybe someday I'll go back and further try to clean up this mess-terpiece, but until then I'm more than happy to let my purple prose serve as a lesson in moderation and sensibility. Here's hoping you can also learn from your mistakes — as well as mine.