



DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

The Descriptive Essay

Description presents information in a way that appeals to one or more of the five senses, usually with the purpose of creating a specific impression or feeling. Descriptive writing makes ideas vivid, so the audience can almost see, hear, smell, taste, or touch what is being written about. For instance, the writer might describe the odor and appearance of a substance made by combining two chemicals in a chemistry lab report for college.

DEFINING TERMS

- Active verbs:** Instead of bland verbs, such as “said” or “heard,” actually describe what the person/place/thing is doing to communicate that act. Instead of simply saying “someone accepted an award,” the writer could say “he/she marched to the podium, grasped the trophy, and gestured toward his/her teammates.”
- Connotative language:** Language that communicates the feelings or emotions associated with a word (ie. Connotative language for flag is patriotism).
- Comparisons:** A descriptive essay uses similes (direct comparison of two or more items using “like” or “as,” ie. *the mats were spread like islands*), metaphors (indirect comparison without using “like” or “as,” ie. *the mats were islands*), or personifications (giving inanimate objects human characteristics, ie. *the waves chased me to the shore*).
- Dominant impression:** An overall attitude, mood, or feeling about the subject; this is the implied thesis of a descriptive essay, suggesting the author’s main point about the subject. This sentence could communicate awe, inspiration, anger, or distaste.
- Sensory details:** These are words that appeal to a person’s senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. For example, a moldy block of cheese may smell putrid, or an Asian dish might taste salty, spicy, and sweet.
- Vantage point:** This is the point or position from which one writes a description. A fixed vantage point is explained from a particular position, whereas a moving vantage point is recounted from many different perspectives. For example, a fixed vantage point may relate something only from the author’s perspective, while a moving vantage point would employ multiple people’s perspectives. One might explain how the human eye is similar to a movie camera: a fixed vantage point is like a stationary camera on a tripod, trained on a subject from one direction, whereas a moving vantage point is like a handheld camera that moves around the subject, capturing it from different directions.

Varied sentences:

Avoid overusing adverbs (pretty, very, really, etc.), and instead vary the sentence structure to emphasize the desired point. Instead of “Mary opened the fridge. She saw many things,” the writer could say, “Mary slowly opened the old fridge, and a rainbow of colors and smells were revealed.”

WHERE TO START

Step 1: Select the topic.

Be familiar with the topic or select one that can be easily learned. Narrow this topic to emphasize a particular slant or angle. Instead of describing a guitar’s physical appearance in general, focus on its usefulness, beauty, or value.

Step 2: Collect details to describe the subject.

Brainstorm: describe the object to a friend, writing down the words used, draw a sketch of the subject and label the parts, or list sensory details.

Step 3: Find comparisons.

Look over the list of details, and think of appropriate comparisons for each one: similes, metaphors, and personifications should be utilized. Jot these down next to the appropriate detail on the list. Do not expect to come up with a comparison for each detail; instead, try to find one or two strong comparisons.

Step 4: Choose a vantage point.

To use a moving or fixed vantage point, think about the aspect of the subject being emphasized and how it can be best communicated. Ask which vantage point will give the reader the most useful information and which vantage point can reveal the most striking details.

Step 5: Create the dominant impression.

This sentence is the thesis of the paper; in other words, it is the most important sentence of the entire paper, as it defines the direction the rest of the paper will go. This sentence creates the mood or feeling about the subject, which all other details in the essay will support. Select the attitude about which you feel the most confident. It should appeal to the audience, offer an unusual perspective, and provide new insights on the subject. Additional prewriting may be needed to gather support of a dominant impression, collecting “evidence” composed of sensory details.

Step 6: Write, rewrite, and edit

WRITING PROCESS

Introduction: This paragraph will provide the background and setting. The last sentence of this paragraph will be the thesis or dominant impression. The introduction should include the context of the description, background information, setting, and dominant impression. Here is an example of a dominant impression:

Opening the box was like lifting the lid of a time machine, revealing toys and games from another era.

Body paragraphs: these 2 or more paragraphs will provide supporting details for the description. Be sure to only include relevant details, keep the description focused, and ensure the details fit the essay's tone and point of view. These paragraphs can be portrayed in many different ways:

Spatial order: This method of writing systematically describes an object or term starting at a focal point and moving to objects that surround it. For example, the item could be described from top to bottom, left to right, far from the author toward the author, outside to inside, etc.

Chronological order: This order is best for describing events or changes that occur over a given period of time, such as a child growing older or a play from beginning to end.

Most-to-least or least-to-most order: This is used to place things in order of size, severity, etc. For example, the smells in a garden or the sound of an orchestra tuning up would be good topics for which to use this order. The brightest flower in the garden would catch the observer's attention first, so it would be described first in a most-to-least order, then comment on flowers that are progressively less prominent. But, in least-to-most order, the smallest, least significant part of the garden would be described first, gradually leading to the most prominent flower.

Conclusion: This paragraph references the dominant impression (thesis) and draws the essay to a close.

Information taken from *Reflections: Patterns for Reading and Writing*, pgs. 231-241 & 272-281, by Kathleen T. McWhorter, 2013 edition.

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