

Writing Handout E-7:

Descriptive Essay

Structuring a Descriptive Essay

A descriptive essay simply describes something or someone by appealing to the reader's senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Here are the basic steps to writing an effective descriptive essay:

1. Select a subject

Observation is the key to writing a good description. For example, if you are writing about a place, go there and take notes on the sights, sounds, and smells. A descriptive essay paints a picture for the reader, using descriptive devices and the senses. Create a thesis statement that informs the reader who or what you are describing. Examples: "The wooden roller coaster in Coney Island is a work of art." "My bedroom is an ocean sanctuary."

2. Select dominant details

Select only the details that support the dominant impression (your thesis statement).

3. Organize details

The paragraphs in a descriptive essay can be structured spatially (from top to bottom or from near to far) or chronologically (time order) or from general to specific. Descriptive essays can also use other patterns of organization such as narrative or exemplification.

4. Use descriptive words

Do not use vague words or generalities (such as good, nice, bad, or beautiful). Be specific and use sensory, descriptive words (adjectives). For example:

I ate a good dinner. OR I devoured a steaming hot, cheese-filled pepperoni pizza for dinner.

Provide sensory details:

- Smells that are in the air (the aroma of freshly brewed coffee)
- Sounds (traffic, honking horns)
- Sights ("The sun scattered tiny diamonds across dew-covered grass as it peeked out from beyond the horizon.")
- Touch ("The texture of the adobe hut's walls resembled coarse sandpaper.")
- Taste: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, tart ("Giant goose bumps formed on my tongue when I accidentally bit into a sliver of lemon.")

5. Draw a logical conclusion

The conclusion may also use descriptive words; however, make certain the conclusion is logical and relevant.

Description Sample

Summer Escape

Title:

Note how creative title relates to essay.

Introductory paragraph:

First paragraph sets the stage: where the action happened, when it happened, and to whom it happened. Note descriptive words.

First body paragraph:

Note how writer provides details, translating an experience into written words that permit the reader to visualize the situation. Note descriptive details.

Tense:

This essay is written in the present tense; most narratives, however, will be written in the past tense. Either tense can be effective.

Second body paragraph:

Note use of details, especially adjectives. Writer makes use of figurative language (personification - flowers "waving hello").

Third body paragraph:

Writer continues to appeal to readers' senses with visually descriptive words. Figurative language is again used with the simile "like a carriage created by nature."

Imagery:

Note how the writer creates images for the reader (bold type) by appealing to the senses.

Conclusion:

Writer alludes to another sense (smell) and uses words to indicate closing ("final crest"). Essay ends with strong concluding sentence.

My family has always looked forward to leaving Florida during the **torrid** summer months. It is a tremendous relief to get out of the **heated hustle and bustle** of summer living in Florida. Each summer, we follow the yellow brick road to our hometown in upstate New York.

As we drive through state after state, it becomes apparent that the world around us is changing. In South Carolina, we already begin to notice changes. The trees appear to be touchable, offering **soft, plush** leaves which **sway in the breeze**, and the grass actually invites us to share its place rather than scaring us away with **mounds of intruding fire ants**. As each state brings new surroundings, our anticipation builds, and home seems closer all the time.

Leaving the **flatlands** and entering an area where we are suddenly **surrounded by hills of purple and blue** are by far the most awakening moments. Virginia and Pennsylvania offer brilliant scenery with **majestic hills and checkerboard farmlands**. As we descend through the **curves and winds** of the northern region of the United States, home is now very close: we are almost there. Suddenly, we have driven from **wide-open flatlands** to a **narrow, winding road surrounded by hillsides of stone and trees**. **Around every curve, orange and black tiger lilies claim their place in the world as they push themselves out toward the car, waving hello and flashing their mysterious black spots toward us as we drive by.**

The journey home is almost complete. **As we begin our final descent** through the state of Pennsylvania into upstate New York, the surroundings become comfortably familiar. Before long, we are welcomed by a **sign that reads "Waverly, 18 miles"** and the familiar fields of **grazing cattle**. Through the last stretch of Pennsylvania, the **bursting foliage** seems to **envelop us and carry us over the hills like a carriage created by nature.**

It is at this point that our family, even the youngest member, knows that our vacation in New York is about to begin. Our eldest son has joked for years that he can **"smell" Grandma's apple pie** already. Approximately fifteen minutes pass and as our vehicle takes us over the final crest, we see **the smoke stack from the local factory** as we cross the border of Pennsylvania and New York and are aware of our surroundings. A couple of turns later, we are there. We have reached our destination; we are home.

- Arin B. Terwilliger