

love her? Because all the lies of the Wahhabists cannot stifle the truth she embodies: The blessings of liberty were made for women, too.

—JEFF JACOBY, “Watching Oprah from Behind the Veil”

Liberty for all, of course, is a much greater issue than why a particular television show is popular with a particular audience. By linking his limited topic to this broader one, the author greatly enlarges its significance.

End with a recommendation

This strategy is especially appropriate when you’re concluding an argument. Before coming to the conclusion stated in the following paragraph, the author, a sportswriter, has made the claim that student athletes should be paid for their “work”:

The republic will survive. Fans will still watch the NCAA tournament. Double-reverses will still be thrilling. Alabama will still hate Auburn. Everybody will still hate Duke. Let’s do what’s right and re-examine what we think is wrong.

—MICHAEL ROSENBERG, “Let Stars Get Paid”

Not only is he recommending pay for college athletes, the author of this paragraph asks the reader to rethink, and totally revise, the conventional wisdom that says paying them is morally wrong. (For an essay that comes to precisely the opposite conclusion, see p. 521.)

5

DESCRIPTION

DESCRIPTION* is the pattern of writing that appeals most directly to the senses by showing us the physical characteristics of a subject—what it looks like, or how it sounds, smells, feels, or tastes. A good description *shows* us such characteristics; it doesn’t just tell us about them. Description is especially useful for making an **ABSTRACT** or vague subject—such as freedom or truth or death—more **CONCRETE** or definite.

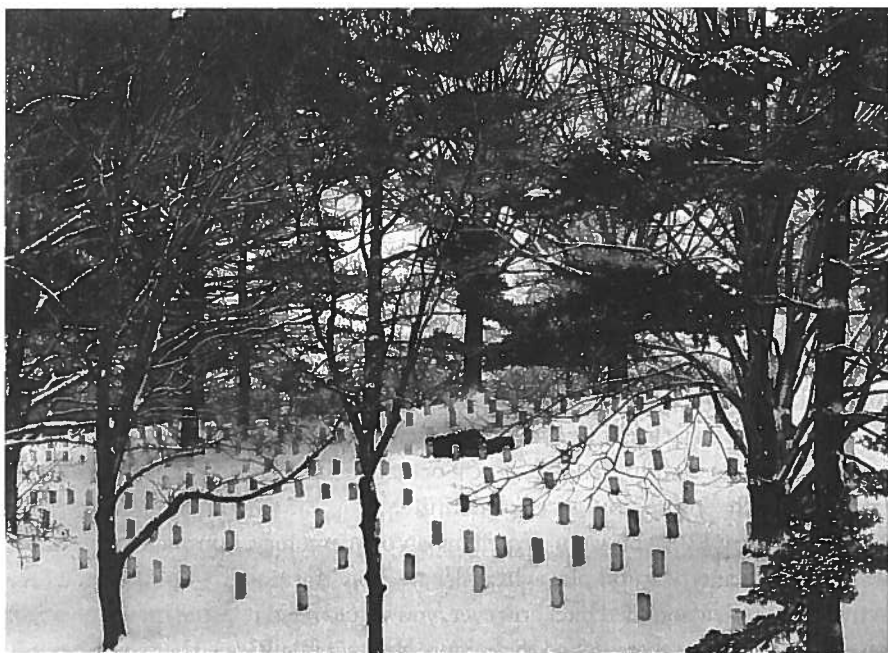
For example, if you were describing an old cemetery, you might say that it was a solemn and peaceful place. In order to show the reader what the cemetery actually looked or sounded like, however, you would need to focus on the physical aspects of the scene that evoked these more abstract qualities—the marble grave-stones, the earth and trees, and perhaps the mourners at the site of a new grave.

Such concrete, physical details are the heart of any description. Those details can be presented either objectively or subjectively. Consider the following caption for a photograph from the website of Arlington National Cemetery:

Six inches of snow blanket the rolling Virginia hillside as mourners gather at a fresh burial site in Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington, D.C. Rows of simple markers identify the more than 250,000 graves that make up the military portion of the cemetery. Visited annually by more than four million people, the cemetery conducts nearly 100 funerals each week.

In an **OBJECTIVE** description like this, the author stays out of the picture. The description shows what a detached observer would see and hear—snow, rolling hills, graves, and mourners—but it does not say what the observer thinks or feels *about* those things.

*Words printed in **SMALL CAPITALS** are defined in the Glossary/Index.



A **SUBJECTIVE** description, on the other hand, presents the author's thoughts and feelings along with the physical details of the scene or subject, as in this description by novelist John Updike of a cemetery in the town where he lived:

The stones are marble, modernly glossy and simple, though I suppose that time will eventually reveal them as another fashion, dated and quaint. Now, the sod is still raw, the sutures of turf are unhealed, the earth still humped, the wreaths scarcely withered . . . I remember my grandfather's funeral, the hurried cross of sand the minister drew on the coffin lid, the whine of the lowering straps, the lengthening, cleanly cut sides of clay, the thought of air, the lack of air forever in the close dark space lined with pink satin. . . .

—JOHN UPDIKE, "Cemeteries"

This intimate description is far from detached. Not only does it give us a close-up view of the cemetery itself, it also reports the sensations that the newly dug graves evoke in the author's mind.

Whether the concrete details of a description are presented from a subjective or an objective **POINT OF VIEW**, every detail should contribute to some **DOMINANT IMPRESSION** that the writer wants the description to make upon the reader. The dominant impression we get from Updike's description, for example, is of the "foreverness" of the place. Consequently, every detail in Updike's description—from the enduring marble of the headstones to the dark, satin-lined interior of his grandfather's coffin—contributes to the sense of airless eternity that Updike recalls from his grandfather's funeral.

Updike's references to the "raw" sod and to unhealed "sutures" in the turf show how such figures of speech as **METAPHOR**, **SIMILE**, and **PERSONIFICATION** can be used to make a description more vivid and concrete. This is because we often describe something by telling what it is like. A thump in your closet at night sounds like a fist hitting a table. A friend's sharp words cut like a knife. The seams of turf on new graves are like the stitches closing a wound.

As Updike's description narrows in on his grandfather's grave, we get a feeling of suffocation that directly supports the main point that the author is making about the nature of death. Death, as Updike conceives it, is no abstraction; it is the slow extinction of personal life and breath.

Updike's painful reverie is suddenly interrupted by his young son, who is learning to ride a bicycle in the peaceful cemetery. As Updike tells the story of their joyful afternoon together, the gloom of the cemetery fades into the background—as descriptive writing often does. Description frequently plays a supporting role within other **PATTERNS OF WRITING**; it may serve, for example, to set the scene for a **NARRATIVE** (as in Updike's essay) or it may provide the background for an **ARGUMENT** about the significance of a national cemetery.

Almost as important as the physical details in a description is the order in which those details are presented. Beginning with the glossy stones of the cemetery and the earth around them, Updike's description comes to focus on the interior of a particular grave. It moves from outside to inside and from the general to the specific. A good description can proceed from outside in, or inside out, top to bottom, front to back, or in any other direction—so long as it moves systematically in a way that is in keeping with the dominant impression it is supposed to give, and that supports the main point the description is intended to make.

Joseph Krivda's description of the Vietnam War memorial on p. 79 is both subjective and objective.

The dominant impression of a description of a swimming pool, p. 86, is one of nostalgia.

In the following description of a boy's room, the writer is setting the stage for the larger narrative—in this case, a fairy tale:

The room was so spare one could see everything at a glance: a closet door with a lock on it, a long table with five perfect constructions—three ships, two dragons—nothing else on the table but a neat stack of stainless-steel razor-blades. What defined all the rest, of course, was that immense desk and chair. They made it seem that the room itself was from a picture book, or better yet, a stage-set, for across one end hung a dark green curtain. Beyond that, presumably, the professor's son crouched, hiding. My gaze stopped and froze on an enormous bare foot that protruded, unbeknownst to its owner, no doubt, from behind the curtain. It was the largest human foot I'd ever seen or imagined . . .

—JOHN GARDNER, *Freddy's Book*

This description of the lair of a boy giant is pure fantasy, of course. What makes it appear so realistic is the systematic way in which Gardner presents the objects in the room. First we see the closet door, a feature we might find in any boy's bedroom. Next comes the lock. Even an ordinary boy might keep the contents of his closet under lock and key. The long table with the models and razor-blades is the first hint that something unusual may be at play. And when we see the oversized desk and chair, we truly begin to suspect that this is no ordinary room and no ordinary boy. But it is not until our gaze falls upon the enormous foot protruding from beneath the curtain that we know for sure we have entered the realm of make-believe.

Fanciful as the details of Gardner's description may be, his systematic method of presenting them is instructive for composing more down-to-earth descriptions. Also, by watching how Gardner presents the details of Freddy's room from a consistent **VANTAGE POINT**, we can see how he builds up to a dominant impression of awe and wonder.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING A DESCRIPTION

As you write a description, you need to identify who or what you're describing, say what your subject looks or feels like, and indicate the traits you plan to focus on. Cherokee Paul McDonald makes these basic moves of description in the beginning of his essay in this chapter:

He was a lumpy little guy with baggy shorts, a faded T-shirt and heavy sweat socks falling down over old sneakers. . . . Covering his eyes and part of his face was a pair of those stupid-looking '50s-style wrap-around sunglasses.

—CHEROKEE PAUL McDONALD, "A View from the Bridge"

McDonald identifies what he's describing (a "lumpy guy"); says what his subject looks like ("lumpy," "with baggy shorts, a faded T-shirt and heavy sweat socks"); and hints at characteristics (his "stupid-looking" sunglasses) that he might focus on. Here is one more example from this chapter:

But the center of it all was that gleaming, glorious swimming pool. Memories of Dreamland, drenched in the smell of chlorine, Coppertone, and french fries, were what almost everyone who grew up in Portsmouth took with them as the town declined.

—SAM QUINONES, "Dreamland"

The following guidelines will help you to make these basic moves as you draft a description—and to come up with your subject; consider your purpose and audience; generate ideas; state your point; create a dominant impression of your subject; use figurative language; and arrange the details of your description effectively.

Coming Up with a Subject

A primary resource for finding a subject is your own experience. You will often want to describe something familiar from your past—the lake in which you learned to swim, the neighborhood where you grew up, a person from your hometown. Also consider more recent experiences or less familiar subjects that you might investigate further, such as crowd behavior at a hockey game, an unusual T-shirt, or a popular bookstore. Whatever subject you choose, be sure that you will be able to describe it vividly for your readers by appealing to their senses.

For a taste of the unusual, Ann Hodgman describes pet food on p. 107.

Considering Your Purpose and Audience

Your **PURPOSE** in describing something—whether to view your subject objectively, express your feelings about it, convince the reader to visit it (or not), or simply to amuse your reader—will determine the details you include. Before

you start composing, decide whether your purpose will be primarily objective (as in a lab report) or subjective (as in a personal essay about your grandmother's cooking). Although both approaches provide information, an **OBJECTIVE** description presents its subject impartially, whereas a **SUBJECTIVE** description conveys the writer's personal response to the subject.

Whatever your purpose, you need to take into account how much your **AUDIENCE** already knows (or does not know) about your subject. For example, if you want to describe to someone who has never been on your campus the mad rush that takes place when classes change, you're going to have to provide some background: the main quadrangle with its sun worshipers, the brick-and-stone classroom buildings on either side, the library looming at one end. On the other hand, if you were to describe this same locale to fellow students, you could skip the background description and go directly to the mob scene.

Generating Ideas: Asking What Something Looks, Sounds, Feels, Smells, and Tastes Like

Good descriptive writing is built on **CONCRETE** particulars rather than **ABSTRACT** qualities. So don't just write, "It was a dark and stormy night"; make your reader see, hear, and feel the wind and the rain, as E. B. White does at the end of "Once More to the Lake," pp. 7–13. To come up with specific details, observe your subject, ask questions, and take notes. Experience your subject as though you were a reporter on assignment or a traveler in a strange land.

One of your richest sources of ideas for a description—especially if you are describing something from the past—is memory. Ask friends or parents to help you remember details accurately and truthfully. Jog your own memory by asking, "What *did* the place (or object) look like exactly? What did it sound like? What did it smell or taste like?" Recovering the treasures of your memory is a little like fishing: think back to the spots you knew well; bait the hook by asking these key sensory questions; weigh and measure everything you pull up. Later on, you can throw back the ideas you can't use.

Templates for Describing

The following templates can help you to generate ideas for a description and then to start drafting. Don't take these as formulas where you just have to fill

In "The Miss Dennis School of Writing," p. 98, Alice Steinbach draws upon her memories of a favorite teacher.

in the blanks. There are no easy formulas for good writing. But these templates can help you plot out some of the key moves of description and thus may serve as good starting points.

- ▶ The main physical characteristics of X are _____, _____, and _____.
- ▶ From the perspective of _____, however, X could be described as _____.
- ▶ In some ways, namely _____, X resembles _____; but in other ways, X is more like _____.
- ▶ X is not at all like _____ because _____.
- ▶ Mainly because of _____ and _____, X gives the impression of being _____.
- ▶ From this description of X, you can see that _____.

For more techniques to help you generate ideas and start writing a descriptive essay, see Chapter 3.

Stating Your Point

We usually describe something to someone for a reason. Why are you describing bloody footprints in the snow? You need to let the reader know, either formally or informally. One formal way is to include an explicit **THESIS STATEMENT**: "This description of Washington's ragged army at Yorktown shows that the American general faced many of the same challenges as Napoleon in the winter battle for Moscow, but Washington turned them to his advantage."

E. B. White makes his point about time and mortality with a single chilling phrase (p. 13, par. 13).

Or your reasons can be stated more informally. If you are writing a descriptive travel essay, for example, you might state your point as a personal observation: "Chicago is an architectural delight in any season, but I prefer to visit from April through October because of the city's brutal winters."

Creating a Dominant Impression

Some descriptions appeal to several senses: the sight of fireflies, the sound of crickets, the touch of a hand—all on a summer evening. Whether you appeal to a single sense or several, make sure they all contribute to the

DOMINANT IMPRESSION you want your description to make upon the reader. For example, if you want an evening scene on the porch to convey an impression of danger, you probably won't include details about fireflies and crickets. Instead, you might call the reader's attention to dark clouds in the distance, the rising wind, crashing thunder, and the sound of footsteps drawing closer. In short, you will choose details that play an effective part in creating your dominant impression: a sense of danger and foreboding.

Even though you want to create a dominant impression, don't begin your description with a general statement of what that impression is supposed to be. Instead, start with descriptive details, and let your readers form the

impression for themselves. A good description doesn't *tell* readers what to think or feel; it *shows* them point by point. The dominant impression that John Gardner creates in his systematic description of Freddy's room, for instance, is a growing sense of awe and wonder. But he does so by taking us step by step into unfamiliar territory.

If you were describing an actual room or other place—and you wanted to create a similar dominant impression in your reader's mind—you would likewise direct the reader's gaze to more familiar objects first (table, chairs, fireplace) and then to increasingly unfamiliar ones (a shotgun, polar bear skins on the floor, an elderly lady mending a reindeer harness).

Using Figurative Language

Figures of speech can help to make almost any description more vivid or colorful. The three figures of speech you are most likely to use in composing a description are similes, metaphors, and personification.

SIMILES tell the reader what something looks, sounds, or feels like, using *like* or *as*: "Suspicion climbed all over her face, like a kitten, but not so playfully" (Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*).

METAPHORS make implicit comparisons, without *like* or *as*: "All the world's a stage" (William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*). Like similes, metaphors have two parts: the subject of the description (*world*) and the thing (*stage*) to which that subject is being implicitly compared.

PERSONIFICATION assigns human qualities to inanimate objects, as Sylvia Plath does in her poem "Mirror," in which she has the mirror speak as a person would: "I have no preconceptions. / Whatever I see I swallow immediately."

Judith Ortiz Cofer's description of her grandmother's house, in "More Room," p. 114, conveys enchantment.

Arranging the Details from a Consistent Vantage Point

The physical configuration of whatever you're describing will usually suggest a pattern of organization. Descriptions of places are often organized by direction—north to south, front to back, left to right, inside to outside, near to far, top to bottom. If you were describing a room, for example, you might use an outside-to-inside order, starting with the door or the door knob.

An object or person can also suggest an order of arrangement. If you were describing a large fish, for instance, you might let the anatomy of the fish guide your description, moving from its glistening scales to the mouth, eyes, belly, and tail. When constructing a description, you can go from whole to parts, or parts to whole; from most important to least important features (or vice versa); from largest to smallest, specific to general, or concrete to abstract—or vice versa.

Whatever organization you choose, be careful to maintain a consistent **VANTAGE POINT**. In other words, be sure to describe your subject from one position or perspective—across the room, from the bridge, face-to-face, under the bed, and so on. Do not include details that you are unable to see, hear, feel, smell, or taste from your particular vantage point. Before you fully reveal any objects or people that lie outside the reader's line of sight—such as a boy giant behind a curtain—you will need to cross the room and fling open the door or curtain that conceals them. If your vantage point (or that of your **NARRATOR**) changes while you are describing a subject, be sure to let your reader know that you have moved from one location to another, as in the following description of a robbery: "After I was pushed behind the counter of the Quik-Mart, I could no longer see the three men in ski masks, but I could hear them yelling at the owner to open up the register."

EDITING FOR COMMON ERRORS IN DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Like other kinds of writing, description uses distinctive patterns of language and punctuation—and thus invites typical kinds of errors. The following tips will help you to check for and correct these common errors in your own descriptive writing.

Check descriptive details to make sure they are concrete

- ▶ When I visited Great Pond, the lake in E. B. White's essay, it was so ~~amazing~~ and ~~incredible~~ clear and deep that floating on it in a boat seemed like floating on air.

Amazing and *incredible* are **ABSTRACT** terms; *clear* and *deep* describe the water in more **CONCRETE** terms.

- ▶ The Belgrade region is famous for its ~~charming views~~ panoramic views of fields, hills, and woodlands.

The revised sentence says more precisely what makes the views charming.

Check for filler words like *very*, *quite*, *really*, and *truly*

- ▶ The lake was ~~very much secluded~~ fifteen miles from the nearest village.

Check that adjectives appear in the right order

Subjective adjectives (those that reflect the writer's own opinion) go before objective adjectives (those that are strictly factual): write "fabulous four-door Chevrolet" rather than "four-door fabulous Chevrolet." Beyond that, adjectives usually go in the following order: number, size, shape, age, color, nationality.

- ▶ The streets of Havana were lined with many ~~old, big~~ big, old American cars.

Check for common usage errors

UNIQUE, PERFECT

Don't use *more* or *most*, *less* or *least*, or *very* before words like *unique*, *equal*, *perfect*, or *infinite*. Either something is unique or it isn't.

- ▶ Their house at the lake was a ~~very~~ unique place.

AWESOME, COOL, INCREDIBLE

Not only are these modifiers too abstract, they're overused. You probably should delete them or replace them with fresher words no matter how grand the scene you're describing.

- ▶ The Ohio River is an ~~awesome river~~ approximately 981 miles long.

EVERYDAY DESCRIPTION

A Cheesy Label



When you describe something, you tell what its main attributes and characteristics are. A cheese, for instance, can be strong or mild in taste, hard or soft in texture, white or yellow in color—and anywhere in between. Made in Wisconsin, the Italian-style cheese described on this label is moderately strong, hard, and white. It also costs \$6.39. An effective description emphasizes the most distinctive qualities of its subject, however. The folks in the marketing department at the Sartori Company ("Established 1939") recognize this. Inspired by the name of their product *MontAmoré*, which means "*Mount Love*" in French, they skip over the cheese's more common features and go to the seductive specifics. This cheese is "sweet, creamy, and fruity." It also has a spicy aftertaste ("finishes with a playful bite"). As the label warns, "prepare to fall in love."