CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Descriptive Essay

As you might expect, a descriptive essay “describes” ideas and examples focused on a particular subject. It attempts neither to argue nor persuade. Rather, it presents an impression—your impression—of something, through details that evoke one of the five senses.

When you are writing a text that’s entirely descriptive, you use vivid language to make whatever you are describing come alive. Indeed, readers typically “visualize” what they read, and so any manner in which you can help them along makes for a stronger essay.

Descriptive essays fall into two broad categories: objective and subjective. Objective essays describe the topic in a literal, impartial way. As much as is possible, the writer's feelings are not revealed. These types of essays tend to include words that don't convey a high degree of emotion.

Subjective essays, on the other hand, communicate the writer's opinion; their intention is to evoke from the reader an emotional response, among other things. These types of essays use words charged with some emotional tone and a clear-cut attitude.
There are several elements to a descriptive essay. Above all, it should use words that appeal to the five senses: smell, touch, hearing, taste, or feeling. Does your subject make noise? Does it have a specific feel when you touch it? Can you taste it? Of course, you won’t be able to—and it’s not necessary to—apply all five senses to every subject you write about, but strive to use as many as you can.

In a traditional descriptive essay, the topic sentence communicates the writer’s overall impression of the given subject. Often your thesis will be provided by a specific assignment, though you’ll still have to think about how to make the topic original. The supporting sentences that follow provide the sensory details that describe your overall impression.

**DON’T WRITE ONLY ABOUT WHAT YOU SEE OR HEAR**

Too often, we focus on describing things that we see or hear. Think about how words related to touch, smell, and taste create instant pictures: itch, rub, sting, and whiff.

**VIVID LANGUAGE**

Successful descriptive essays use words that come alive. Think of yourself as a painter whose canvas is the paper. Words can create pictures and impressions that appeal not only to the mind but also to the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Thus, your words should create visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile impressions. Note how the paragraph below conveys a clear impression of what’s taking place.
The assistant's hand trembles as he slices open the two twine-wrapped cardboard boxes. In the dusty silence of Cairo's Egyptian Museum he painstakingly unrolls the bubble wrap, then steps aside to let Zahi Hawass, 55, the mediagenic director of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, examine the contents. Each box holds a 2,000-year-old burial mask, made from powdered gypsum and adorned with dancing cobras. The pair was confiscated two years ago in a police raid on the home of a Florida arms trader. Now both masks have been returned to Egypt, cleaned and restored. Hawass emits an audible sigh of satisfaction. "Very nice," he says.

—Gretel C. Kovach, Newsweek, "Tomb Raiders, Beware!" September 2, 2002

Writing this wonderfully descriptive might seem effortless. But as any dedicated scribe can attest, such writing takes effort and thought. The result is a highly engaging text:

- The "trembling hand" captures the nervousness of the moment.
- The "dusty silence" allows one to hear, see, and smell the environment.
- The description of the masks—from their composition to their artwork—makes it clear why they are the center of attention.
- The "audible sigh of satisfaction" captures the moment of truth—at which point it's clear that a treasure has been returned to its rightful owner.

Aside from the specific language used, the author successfully builds suspense in the text. A less creative writer might have started with a description of the masks—which might make sense because, after all, they're the focus of the article. But by taking us through the steps involved in opening the box and unwrapping the mask, we experience the same sense of exhilaration that Hawass did upon viewing the contents.
PRECISE LANGUAGE

Use words and phrases that will turn the words on a flat page into a sensory experience for the reader. Bring out textures, colors, tastes, sights, sounds, and smells. Use striking adjectives, active verbs and other vivid details to present your scenario and create sharp mental pictures.

The way you do this is to select highly specific words. This isn't necessary in every sentence—in fact that would be distracting—but you want to do it where possible. “He thought about the problem” is far less specific than “He pondered the problem for five days but was still unable to come up with a resolution that would satisfy everyone.” And when including nouns, don't just write about “the dessert we had at the restaurant.” You're better off talking about the “ice cream that was so sweet and velvety soft I practically devoured it.”

Look at how the language used in the text below transports us to the story's setting:

It's 11 on Saturday inside the legendary New York punk club CBGB. That's A.M., not P.M. And there's no band in sight. The hulking man with the blue mohawk and tattoo isn't confused about the time of day—he's there for a workout. As in exercise. He takes one last gulp of his Bloody Mary, stubs out his cigarette on the bar floor and heads for an empty space in front of the stage. Joy Division's “Love Will Tear Us Apart” blasts through the PA system. The unlikely participant pulls off his sweatshirt, raises his arms and dips into a deep stretch a la Jane Fonda. Punk Rock Aerobics has begun.

In just a few short sentences, a number of questions are answered:

- What day and time is it?
- Where are we?
- What is unusual about the scene?
- Precisely where inside the club are we?
- What does this “hulking man” look like?
- What is he wearing?
- What is he drinking? smoking?
- What is he doing here?
- What song is playing? Is it loud?
- What music is normally played in the club?

These questions probably don’t seem highly complex to you. They’re not. But they are highly specific, and there are many of them. By answering all of the questions—with great attention to detail such as the kind of drink being consumed and the name of the song playing over the PA—the author transports us to a smoky, time-worn nightclub where one would be shocked to find anything related to aerobics. An alternative approach—to state simply that a burly guy was taking an aerobics class at a club better known for its punk rock music—would still intrigue us, to be sure, but it would be far less engaging.

**USE WORDS THAT CONJURE UP IMAGES**

Judgmental words such as *angered, offensive, or unsympathetic* tend to defeat the purpose of a descriptive essay. Use them sparingly. Instead, create images through your words.
IMAGERY

Similes and metaphors make comparisons to enhance the reader’s understanding of an experience or event. They create instant visual images in the reader’s mind. Similes are comparisons using like or as, whereas metaphors are direct comparative statements, usually using is.

Original sentence: “He was angry.”
Modified: “He felt like a hornet was buzzing in his head.”
Simile: Anger is compared to a hornet.

Original sentence: “It snowed heavily.”
Modified: “The white blanket covered the city in silence.”
Metaphor: Snow is compared to a white blanket.

Original sentence: “Her eyes were greenish.”
Modified: “Her eyes flashed like emeralds.”
Simile: Green eyes are compared to emeralds.

Original sentence: “She walked down the street unsteadily.”
Modified: “She wobbled like a wounded duck.”
Simile: Her gait is compared to a duck’s.

Comparison can be a helpful tool.

Comparison makes for a clear visual image when you compare your subject to something else. When you write "he cackled like a hyena," you create an immediate impression.

The following two paragraphs show the value of imagery in writing. Take note of how the imagery allows you to understand precisely what’s happening.
The sun is just poking over the hills of central Pennsylvania. The cars in the parking lot are thick with dew. For hours now, Elliot Abrams, the chief meteorologist at AccuWeather, has been sitting in his cramped, windowless office, working the phones like a stockbroker during a crash.


They are invisible—no bandages or scars—but the mental and physical pain of mood disorders can be unbearable. Anxiety overwhelms the mind with worry, fear and dread. Depression hijacks a person’s sense of well-being, manifesting itself not just in the brain but in an array of physical symptoms—weight loss, stomachaches, headaches. The joy of life is seized and “everything is pretty much flat,” says Robin Goad, 46, who suffers from depression. “It’s real easy to give up.”


In the first example, the author uses crisp descriptions before homing in on the subject—we go from the hills of Pennsylvania to the parking lot, and finally, to the office. The simile, “like a stockbroker during a crash,” depicts vividly the scene of a man scrambling to communicate.

In example two, the writer uses several metaphors to anthropomorphize (ascribe human characteristics to) the mental and physical pain of mood disorders. We are told that the disorder “overwhelms,” “hijacks,” and “seizes.” *Hijacks* is an especially good example of imagery because it jolts us with an awful connotation. The first sentence effectively prepares us for this description by pointing out the invisibility of the pain. It should be pointed out that this paragraph is effective not only because the author chose the right words and structure, but because she clearly understood and researched the topic beforehand. In writing, half the battle is the research.
"SHOW DON'T TELL"

The emphasis on both precise language and imagery can be summarized in this simple rule for description: The most important part of a descriptive essay is the picture you create in the mind of the reader. Your goal is to infuse your experience into the mind of your audience.

In order to effect a permanent image on the part of the reader, your description must be specific to the situation at hand. You must draw readers into your world. Remember, the key principle of description is to "show don't tell." As you write, use vivid sensory details, which change the flat "telling" of a story into "showing."

SPECIFIC IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN VAGUE:

Students often feel that it's safer to use vague language. In fact, that just weakens your writing. Choose concrete and specific words over general and vague words.

Consider these two pairs of sentences. Each pair refers to the same event.

A. He was in a lot of trouble and it looked like it would be difficult to escape.

B. He was hanging over the rocky face of a cliff, scrambling for a handhold.

C. Her car crashed suddenly and it was totally destroyed.

D. The convertible careened sideways on two screeching tires, and then, smashing through the metal guardrail and into the cement abutment, it broke into two twisted pieces.
Clearly, the second sentence in each pair is more descriptive: The sensory details evoke our sense of sight, noise, and touch—thus creating a more realistic scenario.

**A MODEL OF DESCRIPTIVE WRITING**

The essay below, excerpted from its original form, commemorates the first anniversary of the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The language and imagery make it highly engrossing. As you read, underline the examples that, in your opinion, stand out.

**FIVE WHO SURVIVED**

Up, or down?
Kelly Reyher stood in the crowded 78th-floor elevator lobby of World Trade Center 2 and pondered whether to retrieve his Palm handheld from his office, 22 stories above. It was just after 9 A.M. on September 11, 2001, and Reyher, a lawyer with Aon Risk Services, had been interrupted in mid-evacuation. Fifteen minutes earlier a Boeing 767 had flown into the North Tower, touching off a fireball that, across the 140 feet separating the buildings and through the windows on the 103rd floor, still felt to one of Reyher’s colleagues, Judy Wein, “like putting your head in an oven.” Reyher and about 20 co-workers had set off down the stairs, then turned around after hearing an announcement that the South Tower was “secure” and workers could return to their offices.

They had emerged on 78, one of two “sky lobbies” where workers transferred between express elevators to the street and local cars serving the floors above. At that moment a second 767 was banking over New York Harbor on a course that would lead it to within 100 feet of where Reyher was standing. To anyone who could have seen the disaster in the making, the right decision was self-evident: go down. Reyher, 41, watched as his colleagues piled into a car headed for the street. Then he punched the button to go up.
Up or down, life or death. The two great fires in the sky touched off by the 9-11 terrorists swept everything before them—paper and plastic, concrete and steel, flesh and blood. At least 1,100 people were trapped on or above the floors where the planes struck—roughly from 78 and above in the South Tower, and 94 and up in the North. Some jumped to their death; others tried to reach the roof (which was locked) in hope of a rescue by helicopter (which authorities had ruled out anyway), or waited for emergency workers, who never reached them. But a tiny handful—fewer than 20, according to definitive surveys by USA Today and The New York Times—made their way down a smoke-filled and treacherous stairway in the South Tower to safety. Of the 17 still alive, 10 agreed to tell their stories to Newsweek, some for the first time. ... They brought with them indelible memories of wrecked hallways lined with corpses, and a humbling awareness of how narrowly they slipped through the door to survival. Because those who lived weren't the smartest, or fittest, or best prepared, and as a group they were no more deserving of life than the firefighters who passed them on the stairs going up. The key to survival wasn't even as simple as knowing in which direction the street lay. Just ask Kelly Reyher.

What many of them recall is how dark it was afterward, and how still. There were, by various estimates, as many as 200 people crowding the sky lobby when the 767 smashed into the south face of Tower 2, flying in a steep bank that spanned seven stories. Wein, 45, was there with three colleagues from Aon and, in a separate group, Ling Young, 49, and Mary Jos, 53, college friends who worked together in the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance. The blast wave from the plane's impact, channeled between the elevator banks, swept north up the central lobby where people were waiting, and leveled them. "I flew from one side of the floor to the other side," Young recalls. "When I got up I had to push things off me. I can't see because my glasses were filled with blood. I took them off, cleaned them very carefully, and I looked around and saw everybody lying there, not moving. It was like a flat land. Everybody was lying down."

With the initial impact, Wein went flying, too, and was airborne long enough to reflect on what a crummy, meaningless way to die this was. She landed on her right forearm, shattering the ulna almost
beyond repair. Then, as the tower shuddered and snapped back to
the vertical, she slid back across the floor in a jumble of debris,
coming to a stop just short of an open elevator shaft through which
she could see flames licking up from below. "I got up and walked to
the people in my group, walking over bodies. They were all over. I
sat down, and Howard [Kestenbaum], my boss, was flat on his back
and motionless, and I believe he was not alive. I've known him for
23 years." She remembered that there was a communications desk in
the middle of the floor and she went to find it, but it was gone, and
the farther south she walked the more bodies she encountered. Men
in suits sat amid the wreckage of marble walls and ceiling tile, crying
softly. She walked back toward the north windows, where she could
see papers fluttering from the burning North Tower, and she sat
down on the floor to wait. ...

Six floors above the sky lobby, Richard Fern, 39, a technical-
support manager for Euro Brokers, remembers watching people
jump from the windows of the North Tower and thinking, it's about
time I got out of here. He had just stepped into an elevator that
would take him down to 78 when the second plane hit, tossing him
against the wall of the car and knocking him to his knees. He got up
and scrambled for the nearest exit, which turned out to be Stairway
A. It was dark inside and he could smell smoke, but he could just
make out a luminescent stripe on the steps, and there was never any
doubt in his mind about which way to go: down. "I'm running and
running, and all of a sudden there's a man and a woman looking up
at me saying, 'You can't pass.' There was a wall down, and it was
covering the staircase. I didn't even acknowledge them or say
anything; I just lifted the wall a foot or so, and it popped onto the
handrail and stayed there, and I went underneath. I hope they
followed me." A little farther along he came to another section of
collapsed wall, and this time he went over it, skidding and rolling
down and landing on his feet. Farther down, the stairs were clear but
still seemed to stretch endlessly. "When I got down to the 30s my
legs just felt like lead. But I didn't take a break, not once. All I could
think was 'Get out, get out.'"

Just behind Fern another group left the 84th floor, composed of
six or seven men led by Brian Clark, a 54-year-old executive vice
president of Euro Brokers. Three floors down they encountered a
man and a woman, probably the same pair who had accosted Fern. The woman—Clark remembers her as “very heavy” and her companion as “frail”—urged them to turn around and head back up. “You can’t go down!” she warned. “There’s flames and smoke. We’ve got to climb higher, to get above it.” While the group debated what to do, Clark heard a banging from the other side of the stairway wall, and a voice calling for help. He squeezed through the partially blocked doorway leading to the 81st floor. The last thing Clark saw on the stairway was his companions Bobby Coll and Kevin York and David Vera, calming the woman, taking her by the elbows and helping her up the steps, away from the fire. They all died.

The man calling for help was Stanley Praimnath, 45, an executive at Fuji Bank who had improbably survived an almost head-on collision with the jetliner. … He was answering a phone call when he saw the nose of United Airlines Flight 175 filling his window. He dropped the phone and dived to the floor just before the plane hit—Praimnath calculates barely 20 feet away.

The floor was a shoulder-high heap of rubble, and Praimnath could smell the jet fuel boiling out of the ruptured tanks. He hauled himself to the top of the wreckage and began to crawl away from the gaping hole made by the fuselage. He heard voices, saw Clark’s flashlight and let out a yell.

Now smoke was beginning to envelop them. Praimnath was having trouble breathing. But Clark found himself—“miraculously,” he says—in a “bubble” of fresh air.

Praimnath was still separated from his rescuer by an eight-foot-high slab of wallboard.

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” he yelled to Clark.

That’s not what Clark expected to be asked, but he said he did.

Praimnath asked Clark to pray with him, and they shared what Praimnath describes as a moment of reverent silence, although what Clark remembers thinking was “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

“I pointed a finger at him and I said, ‘You must jump over this! It’s the only way out!’ He jumped, got a handhold, and I tried to grab him, but I missed. He went up again and somehow I got an arm around his neck and pulled him up and over.”
The two men, remarkably uninjured save for bloodied palms, walked down 81 flights and out to the street, where they headed for Trinity Church.

"You saved my life," Praimnath exclaimed fervently.

"Well, Stanley," Clark replied, "maybe so. But you may have saved my life too." He didn't realize, at that moment, how true that was. As they watched, the tower plummeted to the ground. ...

And that leaves Kelly Reyher in his elevator on the 78th floor, the man who chose to go up when the smart people were heading down. But the colleagues who boarded an express elevator for the 45-second trip to safety never arrived downstairs. As for Reyher, he was knocked unconscious by the jolt and came to in a wrecked car in a burning shaft. He squeezed through a narrow gap between the doors, using his briefcase as a shield against the flames, and then, with his colleagues Keating Crown and Donna Spera, made his way down Staircase A to safety. And the very next day he drove far out on Long Island with his fiancée, Liz, and her 18-month-old daughter, Caitlin. It was as he watched Caitlin splashing in the pool that he cried for the first time, over the randomness of his survival, the preciousness of what he had nearly lost and the magnitude of the grief settling over the nation. And it is that which has stayed with him and sustained him through this terrible year, the laughing girl in the pool, a reminder of the moment when, on a sunny, terrible morning in New York, he somehow chose life.

—Jerry Adler, Newsweek, September 11, 2002

This essay is an example of the power of vivid description: It provides extensive detail on a harrowing experience. The sections below will discuss a handful of significant examples.

**Paragraph 3**

All of the words combine to describe the picture of the horrific power of the fire. The details give life to the paragraph and prepare us for what is to come.
We're led to a picture of a holocaust that killed all but a very few. Those few survived the trek "down a smoke-filled and treacherous stairway" (a phrase much more gripping than *down the stairs*).

Descriptive details are included, balancing the phrasing with a point-counterpoint "paper and plastic, concrete and steel, flesh and blood."

The final sentence creates a sense of suspense, leading us to wonder Reyher's fate, which we do not learn until the end of the article. (A photograph accompanying the opening of the article made it clear that he survived.)

**Paragraph 5**

*Shattering the ulna almost beyond repair.* The author could have simply stated, "severely breaking her arm." But the word *shattering* is more evocative than *breaking*; the word *ulna* identifies a specific bone in the arm.

*The tower shuddered.* Note here the power of anthropomorphism: By making the building shudder, the building is given humanlike qualities, expressing fear as well as the actual "shaking."

*Jumble of debris* gives a clearer picture than *mess.*

*Flames licking* compares the fire to an animal and creates an image of "tongues" of fire. It is more precise than to say *flames rose up.* It is an example of *showing,* not *telling.*

**Paragraph 6**

*Scrambled for the nearest exit* elicits an image of a person running through a chaotic scene. To say *he searched or ran* for the nearest exit would not capture the essence of *scrambled.*

*Luminescent stripe* tells the reader not only that the line was bright, but that it was glowing in the dark.
Skidding and rolling down the wall makes the reader visualize exactly how Fern managed to get over the wall, in a way that jumping over or rumbling through would have failed to convey.

**Paragraph 9**

Praimnath could smell the jet fuel boiling out of the ruptured tanks. It's possible that all Praimnath may have said was that he smelled gas. But by clarifying the source of the actual smell, the author makes a connection that readers might not have made. It also further advances the urgency of the situation.

**Gaping hole made by the fuselage.** This phrase might have otherwise been The opening made by the airplane. But the search for the right words yields a much more precise, clear sentence. The author knew that that this wasn't just any opening—it was indeed a gaping hole. And from the information in paragraph 9, the author could be more precise in stating the hole was created by the fuselage—the tube-shaped "body" of the airplane.

Look back at the first three words of the essay: You'll see a simple question. This question "Up, or down?" serves as a metaphor for the entire article. Indeed, it reflects the arbitrary nature of the decisions that led some people to safety and others to death. In paragraph three, we read more about this metaphor, with some clarification: The nature of the choice was, "Up or down, life or death."

And again, in the final paragraph, the author returns to the metaphor of an up-or-down choice, framing the article and providing a cohesive conclusion. Not a summary of the first few paragraphs, the conclusion returns in the final line to the article's central idea: the survival issue. The final image of the "laughing girl in the pool" completes the picture—it is a powerful symbol of what the victims had lost and of what the survivor is now able to treasure. The final sentence emphatically closes the story.
DEVELOPING YOUR DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY

Following are some basic rules to keep in mind as you write a descriptive essay.

**Topic:** If you are not specifically given a topic, you must decide on one. Brainstorm three or four experiences that have made an impression on you. Of these, which has the best potential for creating vivid images and striking sensory impressions? You may wish to seek feedback from a peer or teacher. Quite often, the act of discussion clarifies the task of which topic to select.

**Put words on paper:** Begin writing about your chosen experience. But keep in mind that you don’t have to start at the beginning! Pick any place in the course of the experience that stands out to you. Put that down on paper. Later on, you’ll add to that sequence of events, rounding out what happened beforehand and after. For now, you just need something written to work with. One technique is to write without stopping as much as you can in 10 or 15 minutes. Write without editing; get a flow of ideas going on paper!

**Review and organize your draft:** Outline or in some way plan the organization of this experience, event, character, or picture. Think about how to present the details, where to begin, and how to end. Then, rewrite.

**Apply descriptive craftsmanship:** This is the step where you apply what you have learned about *showing* not telling. Review your work and then try replacing some of the more nondescriptive words with more vivid imagery. Use a thesaurus if you’d like (but don’t simply insert words that are unfamiliar to you). Make sure your language is precise and evocative: Use similes and/or metaphors to enhance the pictures you’ve created.
Though it isn't necessary to write about all five senses, use as many as are appropriate. Check back to see how many of your paragraphs contain sensory examples. Work through them line by line and decide how you can make the impressions more striking and intense.

**Do a final review:** Review your opening paragraph: Do you begin with an important attention-getter? After reading your first line, will the reader want to continue? Check your conclusion. Do you leave the reader with a lasting impression?