

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.

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.

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 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.

Vary Sentence Structure

When using descriptive language, it is important to vary your sentence structure. Try to avoid using the same subject-verb pattern in all sentences. Embedding descriptive elements and combining sentences can help to avoid the routine subject-verb structure.

The hall was empty. She ran towards the classroom. She entered right after the bell rang.

Varying this sentence structure by embedding descriptive detail breaks the monotonous tone and the clipped, subject-verb style.

Racing down an empty hall, she skidded into the classroom, breathless, just as the bell clanged above her.

What to Avoid When Using Sensory Detail

- Too many adjectives—retain only the most powerful words in your writing, deleting any unnecessary words
- Too many adverbs—verbs are stronger than adverbs. *She **strolled** into the room* is more powerful than *She walked **casually** into the room*.
- Clichéd figures of speech—overused language, such as *green with envy*, signals a lack of imagination. Use fresh, descriptive words that go against rote thinking.