**Descriptive Essays- Hints and Tips etc.**

To write a **descriptive** essay, you’ll need to describe a person, object, or event so vividly that the reader feels like he/she could reach out and touch it.

**Tips for writing effective descriptive essays:**

* Tell a story about a moment or event that means a lot to you--it will make it easier for you to tell the story in an interesting way!
* **Get right to the action!** Avoid long introductions and lengthy descriptions--especially at the beginning of your narrative.
* **Make sure your story has a point! Describe what you learned from this experience.**
* **Use all five of your senses** to describe the setting, characters, and the plot of your story. Don't be afraid to tell the story in your own voice. Nobody wants to read a story that sounds like a textbook!

**How to Write Vivid *Descriptions***

Having trouble describing a person, object, or event for your narrative or descriptive essay? **Try filling out this chart:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **What do you smell?** | **What do you taste?** | **What do you see?** | **What do you hear?** | **What might you touch or feel?** |
|  |  |  |  |  |

**Remember: Avoid simply telling us what something looks like--tell us how it tastes, smells, sounds, or feels!**

Consider this…

* Virginia rain smells different from a California drizzle.
* A mountain breeze feels different from a sea breeze.
* We hear different things in one spot, depending on the time of day.
* You can “taste” things you’ve never eaten: how would sunscreen taste?
* Professional writers love the saying: **Remember Show Don’t Tell!!** It’s not interesting to read about the garage sale. But it is fascinating to see, feel and experience one. Don’t be greedy on details. Don’t say something is beautiful- describe what makes it beautiful. Don’t say something smelled awful- describe what it smelled like. Description is the key. Let the reader decide based on your description.
* Remember that the reader was not there when the story happened. He is trying to catch up with it while reading. Be polite and thoughtful and don’t get into useless details or get swept away by a story, leaving your reader wondering and wandering.
* Descriptive writing portrays people, places, things, moments and theories with enough vivid detail to help the reader create a mental picture of what is being written about.

## Things to Consider as You Write Your Descriptive Essay

* Think of an instance that you want to describe.
* Why is this particular instance important?
* What were you doing?
* What other things were happening around you? Is there anything specific that stands out in your mind?
* Where were objects located in relation to where you were?
* How did the surroundings remind you of other places you have been?
* What sights, smells, sounds, and tastes were in the air?
* Did the sights, smells, sounds, and tastes remind you of anything?
* What were you feeling at that time?
* Has there been an instance in which you have felt this way before?
* What do you want the reader to feel after reading the paper?
* What types of words and images can convey this feeling?
* Can you think of another situation that was similar to the one you are writing about? How can it help explain what you are writing about?
* Is there enough detail in your essay to create a mental image for the reader?

## Conventions of Descriptive Essays Illustrated by Sample Paragraphs

* **Appealing-to-the-Senses Description: Let the reader see, smell, hear, taste, and feel what you write in your essay.**

The thick, burnt scent of roasted coffee tickled the tip of my nose just seconds before the old, faithful alarm blared a distorted top-forty through its tiny top speaker. Wiping away the grit of last night's sleep, the starch white sunlight blinded me momentarily as I slung my arm like an elephant trunk along the top of the alarm, searching for the snooze button. While stretching hands and feet to the four posts of my bed, my eyes opened after several watery blinks. I crawled out of the comforter, edging awkwardly like a butterfly from a cocoon, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. The dusty pebbles on the chilled, wood floor sent ripples spiraling from my ankles to the nape of my neck when my feet hit the floor. Grabbing the apricot, terry-cloth robe, recently bathed in fabric softener and October wind, I knotted it tightly at my waist like a prestigious coat of armor and headed downstairs to battle the morning.

* **Spatial-Order Description: Show the reader where things are located from your perspective.**

Billy Ray's Pawn Shop and Lawn Mower Repair looked like a burial ground for country auction rejects. The blazing, red, diesel fuel tanks beamed in front of the station, looking like cheap lipstick against the pallid, wrinkled texture of the parking lot sand. The yard, not much larger than the end zone at General G. Patton High School on the north end of town, was framed with a rusted metallic hedge of lawn mowers, banana seat bicycles, and corroded oil drums. It wasn't a calico frame of rusted parts, but rather an orchestra of unwanted machinery that Billy Ray had arranged into sections. The yellow-tanked mowers rested silently at the right of the diesel fuel. Once red, now faded orange, mowers stood at attention to the left. The oil barrels, jaded and pierced with holes, blared like chimes when the wind was right. The bikes rested sporadically throughout the lot. In the middle of it all was the office, a faded, steel roof supported by cheap two-by-fours and zebra paneling. Billy Ray was at home, usually, five blocks east of town on Kennel Road.

More than many other types of essays, descriptive essays strive to create a deeply involved and vivid experience for the reader. Great descriptive essays achieve this affect not through facts and statistics but by using detailed observations and descriptions.

***What do you want to describe?***

As you get started on your descriptive essay, it's important for you to identify exactly what you want to describe. Often, a descriptive essay will focus on portraying one of the following:

* a person, a place, a memory, an experience, an object etc.

Ultimately, whatever you can perceive or experience can be the focus of your descriptive writing.

***Why are you writing your descriptive essay?***

It's a great creative exercise to sit down and simply describe what you observe. However, when writing a descriptive essay, you often have a particular reason for writing your description. Getting in touch with this reason can help you focus your description and imbue your language with a particular perspective or emotion.

Example: Imagine that you want to write a descriptive essay about your grandfather. You've chosen to write about your grandfather's physical appearance and the way that he interacts with people. However, rather than providing a general description of these aspects, you want to convey your admiration for his strength and kindness. This is your reason for writing the descriptive essay. To achieve this, you might focus one of your paragraphs on describing the roughness of his hands, roughness resulting from the labor of his work throughout his life, but you might also describe how he would hold your hands so gently with his rough hands when having a conversation with you or when taking a walk.

***How should you write your description?***

If there's one thing you should remember as you write your descriptive essay, it's the famous saying: show don't tell. But what's the difference between showing and telling?

Consider these two simple examples:

* I grew tired after dinner.
* As I leaned back and rested my head against the top of the chair, my eyelids began to feel heavy, and the edges of the empty plate in front of me blurred with the white tablecloth.

The first sentence tells readers that you grew tired after dinner. The second sentence shows readers that you grew tired. The most effective descriptive essays are loaded with such showing because they enable readers to imagine or experience something for themselves.

As you write your descriptive essay, the best way to create a vivid experience for your readers is to focus on the five senses.

* Sight, sound, smell, touch, taste

When you focus your descriptions on the senses, you provide vivid and specific details that show your readers rather than tell your readers what you are describing.

***Quick Tips for Writing Your Descriptive Essay***

Writing a descriptive essay can be a rich and rewarding experience, but it can also feel a bit complicated. It's helpful, therefore, to keep a quick checklist of the essential questions to keep in mind as you plan, draft, and revise your essay.

## *Planning your descriptive essay:*

* What or who do you want to describe?
* What is your reason for writing your description?
* What are the particular qualities that you want to focus on?

## *Drafting your descriptive essay:*

* What sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures are important for developing your description?
* Which details can you include to ensure that your readers gain a vivid impression imbued with your emotion or perspective?

## *Revising your descriptive essay:*

* Have you provided enough details and descriptions to enable your readers to gain a complete and vivid perception?
* Have you left out any minor but important details?
* Have you used words that convey your emotion or perspective?
* Are there any unnecessary details in your description?
* Does each paragraph of your essay focus on one aspect of your description?
* Are you paragraphs ordered in the most effective way?

Example descriptive paragraphs

**The Blond Guitar by Jeremy Burden**

My most valuable possession is an old, slightly warped blond guitar--the first instrument I taught myself how to play. It's nothing fancy, just a Madeira folk guitar, all scuffed and scratched and finger-printed. At the top is a bramble of copper-wound strings, each one hooked through the eye of a silver tuning key. The strings are stretched down a long, slim neck, its frets tarnished, the wood worn by years of fingers pressing chords and picking notes. The body of the Madeira is shaped like an enormous yellow pear, one that was slightly damaged in shipping. The blond wood has been chipped and gouged to gray, particularly where the pick guard fell off years ago. No, it's not a beautiful instrument, but it still lets me make music, and for that I will always treasure it.

**A Friendly Clown**

On one corner of my dresser sits a smiling toy clown on a tiny unicycle--a gift I received last Christmas from a close friend. The clown's short yellow hair, made of yarn, covers its ears but is parted above the eyes. The blue eyes are outlined in black with thin, dark lashes flowing from the brows. It has cherry-red cheeks, nose, and lips, and its broad grin disappears into the wide, white ruffle around its neck. The clown wears a fluffy, two-tone nylon costume. The left side of the outfit is light blue, and the right side is red. The two colors merge in a dark line that runs down the center of the small outfit. Surrounding its ankles and disguising its long black shoes are big pink bows. The white spokes on the wheels of the unicycle gather in the center and expand to the black tire so that the wheel somewhat resembles the inner half of a grapefruit. The clown and unicycle together stand about a foot high. As a cherished gift from my good friend Tran, this colorful figure greets me with a smile every time I enter my room.

## Example Descriptive Essay

## Young Lions, Young Ladies

**by Shea Stutler**

Adolescents like to have a place they can call their own. In the fifties, teenagers hung out at the malt shop, sipping cherry cokes and rockin' with Elvis. Today, in a small town in Tennessee, they're jam skating to Montell Jordan. I was amazed to find a microcosm of life blooming on a 70 x 160-foot cement slab known as a roller skating rink.

As I entered the building which housed the rink, the warm, nostalgic scent of popcorn hit that part of my brain where dusty, cobwebbed memories live, memories of my own adolescence. I made my way past a group of exuberant teenagers at the snack bar until I reached the skating rink. Skinny, hard benches, made for small butts, lined one wall. I took a seat and scanned the rink. My eyes paused to read a sign; white, block letters on a black background warned, "Skate at Your Own Risk."

Two young men swaggered past me: confident, heads held high, eyes focused on their destination. I leaned over, looking down the long row of benches, curious to find out where they were going. Their confidence lagged a bit as they approached a large group of their peers, including several young ladies. All of them exhibited signs of discomfort as the girls crossed their arms over their nubile bodies and the boys tried hard not to stare.

Abruptly, a silent signal sent the entire assembly to the benches. Pairs of dexterous hands laced up skates as quickly as possible, while other hands aided in conversation that only the listener was allowed to hear. I was struck by the intimacy of this scene. They all knew each other well. They had come together in the freedom of this one place to share and explore without the encumbrance of parents, teachers, or any other meddlesome adult. I sat bolt upright, feeling very much like someone who had accidentally stumbled into a room full of naked people.

Attempting to recover from my embarrassment, I was suddenly startled by a cacophony . . . music, perhaps? It must have been music, because I glanced down to find my foot tapping away to a beat long forgotten. As if on cue, young people from every corner of the room flocked to the rink. The awkwardness their bodies had expressed off the rink had been replaced by a grace not unlike the albatross. They were clumsy in their approach to flight, but, once airborne, they were a soaring sight to behold.

I was mesmerized by the effortlessness of their movements, weaving in and out, endlessly circling. Skates became a blur of color: green, purple, blue, pink, red--speeding by fast and furious. I felt the rush of wind on my face as I caught the musky scent of cologne mixed with sweat. A swirl of communication was taking place, none of it involving speech. The tactile sense had kicked in: punching and shoving of young lions trying to impress their ladies of choice, bodies brushing by each other, and the gentle touch of hand on arm. A statuesque blonde, six inches taller than her partner, slipped. "Catch me, I'm falling on purpose," her body language seemed to say. Eye contact was prevalent. Most skaters continually scanned the rink, found the one they were looking for, and BAM!! eyes quickly darted away. This testing of emotional waters went on for several hours; boys and girls trying on relationships of men and women like kids playing dress up in their parents' clothes.

I remembered the sign, "Skate at Your Own Risk." At the time, I had worried about broken arms and legs, but as I watched the dance unfold on that skating rink, I realized that these young people risk so much more. The pain of rejection, the fear of making fools of themselves, and the devastation they feel when they believe that they have, makes life for these adolescents a risky business. Perhaps that sign should have read, "LIVE at Your Own Risk."