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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Using Descriptive Detail

This guide will explore the various uses and applications of description. Its purpose is to demonstrate the effectiveness of writing which includes descriptive details.

A Definition of Descriptive Detail

Descriptive details allow sensory recreations of experiences, objects, or imaginings. In other words, description encourages a more concrete or sensory experience of a subject, one which allows the reader to transport himself or herself into a scene. Writing that lacks description is in danger of being plain or overly general.

Uses of Descriptive Detail

There are many different uses of descriptive detail. Although most commonly associated with creative writing, description enhances a wide variety of subjects. Writing which effectively uses descriptive detail will allow a reader to do more than merely see words on a page. Original description gives writing a sense of honesty and believability, while concise details can help enhance your focus. Descriptive details cause a reader to feel, to hear, to taste, to become intimately connected with the images and experiences being recreated.

Fiction

Cara McDonald, GTA - Department of English

Look. Your reader is a bored, tired little person, maybe sitting at a bus stop. Take

care of them. Transport them. Let them smell your mom's coffee, let them see the ugly flowers on that dress you had to wear on the first day of Sunday School.

Mary Kate Perry, GTA - Department of English

One of my favorite ways of explaining the importance of vivid description in fiction writing is E.L. Doctorow's "Not that it's raining, but the *feel* of being rained upon." You don't tell your reader that it's rainy, because they won't care. They won't identify. You have to make them care through speaking to their senses. We perceive the world through our senses.

In fiction writing, it is important to make your scenes and characters as vivid as possible. One way this can be accomplished is through the inclusion of descriptive details. Fiction which incorporates original sensory description has the power to actively involve and affect the reader. Without such details, fiction is in danger of becoming listless or flat. Description is equally as important as dialogue and plot in moving forward the action of a story.

Poetry

Natalie Goldberg, *Wild Mind*

"William Carlos Williams wrote a poem about standing by the water tap in his kitchen and waiting for it to freshen. You know city water: sometimes it comes out rusty and you wait for it to run clean. I've done it, but I've never thought about it until I read Williams's poem."

Poetry often begins with an image. Therefore, poetry is in a unique position to explore and exploit the possibilities of language. By utilizing effective descriptive details, the language of a poem is able to achieve power over the thoughts and feelings of readers. Rhythm and meter are important to poetry, but without descriptive detail a poem cannot engage the imagination or the senses.

Narrative Essay

Gilbert Findlay, Departement of English

All writing is an act of definition. The writer uses some terms that are key to the subject. Take for example this passage from Itabari Njeri: 'Because of my family, I

learned to see and hear the complexity and grand drama that underlay the simplest of human actions.' The key terms here are 'family,' complexity,' and 'human actions.' Then, the writer is obliged to follow with descriptive detail. It must be concrete in order to 'define' these terms *in context*. Without descriptive, contextual detail, the reader may only understand 'family' with reference to his or her own family, while what Njeri may be promising about an understanding of culture through family may be 90 degrees off from what the reader assumes. "

Persuasive Writing

Karen Wuest, GTA - Departement of English

There is a significant difference between choosing details simply to describe something and selecting details that not only describe, but also *reveal*. This is particularly true in fiction—selective details which reveal character, or which might enlighten the reader about the narrator. It is also true in general, where details often reveal some deeper issue throbbing beneath the surface.

That details can be used to describe is essential and true, but they should also go beyond that. Sheer description bogged down with details lacks energy, verve. The details must carry weight, reveal something beyond just the surface they have been describing.

In the *Creative Writer's Handbook*, Philip K. Jason and Allan B. Lefcowitz explain that "sensory experience is primary experience: we see, feel, taste, smell, and hear before we think, analyze, choose, and argue" (130). Therefore, before an argument can effectively persuade an audience, the writer must carefully select and utilize descriptive details. If a writer can effectively engage the reader's primary senses, then the audience can be more easily enticed to *feel* the validity of the argument. For example, an argument which provides a plea to end deforestation is far more moving when it includes an emotional and sensory depiction of the desolate environment, the ravaged wilderness, the displaced animals. Descriptive details can cause emotional triggers which are key when attempting to persuade an audience.

Summary/Response

Gilbert Findlay, Department of English

The human mind cannot communicate in abstractions. If I write, 'communication is the most crucial element in contemporary society,' you, the reader think, 'gotta talk to my girlfriend.' But if I am more specific and write, 'Instant technological transfer of information from the World Wide Web to in-progress network reports of delicate diplomatic negotiations require that we reevaluate the way we respond to communications in contemporary society' then you, the reader, think, 'Oh! This writer is focusing on communication by the electronic media.' Bingo! Descriptive detail means clear communication.

Summary response writing is not exempt from the need to include descriptive detail. A descriptive summary/response essay will be effective if it includes both objective and subjective details. Objective details refer to concrete facts, while subjective details stress feelings about facts, places, people, and events. A balance between objective and subjective details will help the essay involve the emotions of the reader, while still relating the important facts.

Overall, a descriptive essay will focus upon one clear, dominant impression or idea. This dominant idea should be made clear in the thesis, and should guide the writer's selection of detail. Although the summary is not an appropriate place for a large amount of description, the main idea in the response can be effectively emphasized through the addition of clear creative and critical descriptive detail.

Types of Descriptive Detail

There are many different ways in which descriptive detail can be included in writing. Whether to describe, persuade, illustrate or demonstrate, the descriptive details you include in your writing should serve a purpose not just pad your writing with more words.

Sensory Detail

It is important to remember that human beings learn about the world through using the five senses. They are our primary source of knowledge about the world. Therefore, writing which incorporates vivid, sensory detail is more likely to engage and affect the reader.

The following writing sample uses sensory detail to create concrete images. Because the most effective way to incorporate sensory detail is to use all five senses in harmony, this sample provides an effective example of how sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste work together to strengthen writing. Each of the views highlights exactly how each sense is involved in improving the paragraph's imagery.

Example Text: Paragraph Without Sensory Detail

Grandmother Workman reached over and grabbed her grandson's arm. He was nervous because the staircase was so steep, but she leaned against him and they began to climb.

Comment: These are the beginning sentences of a paragraph which describes a boy helping an elderly woman up a flight of stairs. The scene seems simple enough, but it leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Without the inclusion of sensory detail, the writing seems vague and non-specific. How might the author use descriptive detail to make the scene more vivid?

Example: Add Sight

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: Visual details are often successfully incorporated into writing. Details which appeal to our sense of sight ensure that the reader is able to give faces to characters, or add concrete details to a setting. For example, through adding visual

detail, a room can become more than just a blank, vague receptacle. It becomes a small, oblong room with peeling maroon wallpaper and cracked ceiling tiles. A visual description allows readers to place themselves within a text.

In the sample text, visual details help accomplish this through encouraging the reader to create a mental image of the characters, setting, and action.

Example: Add Sound

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, **the only sound was his grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.**

Comment: The human sense of hearing is an important means of communication. Next to visual details, auditory details are most commonly included in writing. This is because sounds give us a primary experience of the world. Sounds can remind us of personal memories, or can create images in our minds. For example, the sound of a ship's whistle might remind a person of a summer's night in New England, or of a tour of duty in the military. Sounds recreate personal, sensory experiences.

The addition of auditory details gives the writer the opportunity to create a more detailed, layered, texture. In the sample text, the writer has incorporated references to sounds which allow the reader to infer the state of the old staircase, as well as the physical condition of the grandmother.

Example: Add Smell

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. **She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon.** As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: The sense of smell is commonly overlooked in writing. However, it is the human sense of smell that is most closely linked to the brain. The receptors in the brain which are responsible for processing smells are very close to the area of the brain responsible for the storage of memory. Because of this link, scents are able to cause vivid sensory re-creations of memories.

Our sense of smell has an uncommonly strong power over our feelings, thoughts, and emotions. In the sample text, the addition of olfactory details helps set the mood of the paragraph by triggering our senses.

Example: Add Touch

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, **breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck.** She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his

grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: The sense of touch encourages us to investigate the world around us by feeling it and learning the texture, shape, and size of things. Tactile images can be powerful sensory triggers. They allow a reader not only to visualize a scene, but to experience it. Inclusion of the sense of touch prevents the reader from remaining distanced or detached from the writing.

In the sample text, the sense of touch has been engaged through allowing the reader to recreate a primary sensation: the feel of a person's breath on the back of his or her neck. This is a sensory experience that most people have encountered. Therefore, through recalling familiar tactile sensations the writer encourages the readers to put themselves in the place of the characters.

Example: Add Taste

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. **His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him**, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: The human sense of taste allows a person to do much more than simply select and enjoy food. There are four familiar tastes:

1. Sweet
2. Salty
3. Bitter

4. Sour

By appealing directly to any of these tastes, a writer has the unique opportunity to affect a reader's senses. Memories, feelings, people, and places can all be suggested through the sense of taste.

Characterization

Characterization refers to the process of describing the appearance, action, and thoughts of the persons discussed within a text. Characterization is an important part of description, because it causes readers to more fully understand the motivations of characters. Effective characterization works in harmony with setting and plot to make the reader connect on a more intimate level to a text. In order to create realistic characters, a writer should be certain to give each person within the text:

1. a unique way of behaving
2. a unique way of speaking
3. a unique appearance
4. a unique way of thinking

If this can be accomplished, the text will achieve a heightened sense of believability.

Techniques for Writing Characterization

No matter how insignificant a character might seem, it is important to provide insight into their thoughts and feelings. Fully-developed characters are the basis for effective writing.

In order to complete a more thorough characterization, a writer might ask himself the following questions:

1. When was the character born?
2. Where was the character born?
3. Who were the parents of this character?
4. What was this character's family life like?
5. How much education has the character experienced?

6. How does the character speak? Move? Relate to others?
7. What do others think about this character?
8. What does this character think about himself?
9. What does this character do for a living? For a hobby? In his free time?
10. What did the character dream last night?
11. What is the worst thing that ever happened to this character?
12. What is the best thing that ever happened to this character?
13. Who/what does this character love?
14. Who/what does this character hate?
15. What does the character want and why?

The more thoroughly the writer has researched the characters, the more realistically developed they will seem.

Observational Writing

The key to effective observing is to be able to show your reader people, places, events, or objects through the use of specific detail. In *The Prentice Hall Guide For College Writers*, Stephen Reid explains the process of observational writing:

If your reader is going to learn from your observations, you need to give the exact details that you learned from, not just your conclusions or generalizations. Even in writing, experience is the best teacher, so use specific details to communicate the feel, the data, the sights and sounds and smells.

Through the use of the following observational techniques, a writer will be able to more vividly describe a subject:

- Using Comparisons
- Describing Absences
- Describing Changes
- Point of View
- Focus

Using Comparisons

Comparisons most often come in the form of analogy or simile. An analogy demonstrates the similarity or similarities between two things or concepts, while a simile compares two distinctly different things using the word "like" or "as." Comparisons are created by writers in order to help readers create vivid visual images of the subject matter. Comparisons can also help readers connect something they have not experienced with something they are very familiar with. Not many people have jumped out of an airplane but many have ridden on a rollercoaster, so a writer can compare the experience of skydiving with that first drop on a world class rollercoaster.

Describing Absences

Effective observation does more than merely report data. While observation requires an explanation of the persons or things which are present, often a more thorough, layered text through can be created through also revealing the things which *are not present*. For example, if a writer wished to describe a young woman getting dressed for her wedding day, it would be necessary to explain what she was wearing: an antique dress with a satin train, plain white pumps with a faint black scuff on the toe, and her future mother-in-law's ugly, yellowed veil. All these details are important. But much could also be explained about the woman's emotional state by also observing what was missing: a smile.

Describing Changes

To make a subject less static, writers often choose to relate observations about changes in the subject's form or condition. Such details give people, places, and things a sense of history. Good writers will look for evidence of these changes in their subjects. From a speck of rust on the frame of a car to a potato in the pantry which has grown roots, the observation of changes is an effective way to breathe life into subject matter.

Choosing Point of View

The phrase "point of view" refers to position from which an object, person, or event is observed. Before beginning to write, an author must decide upon which point of

view would best complement the subject matter. Choosing to approach a subject from the most interesting or informative point of view is essential to effective observational writing. Perhaps a story might be better told from the point of view of the grandfather as opposed to the daughter? Or perhaps a critical essay would benefit from scientific, rather than conversational, point of view? Point of view holds the power to determine the audience's response to writing. As Stephen Reid explains in *The Prentice Hall Guide For College Writers*, "**what** is seen depends on **who** is doing the seeing."

Focusing

Effective observational writing employs many different techniques, yet must always do so with purpose. It is not useful to describe everything about a subject. If this occurs, a reader will become bogged down with inconsequential information. Rather, a writer should be careful to **focus** his or her attentions upon a clear dominant idea. Ultimately, successful writers are able to focus primarily upon details and images which enhance or expand upon the reader's understanding the dominant idea. Knowing what to **exclude** from a piece of writing is as important as knowing what to **include**.

Showing Versus Telling

Showing vs. telling is an important aspect of creating effective description. The distinction between these two types of writing can be defined in very basic terms. "Telling" refers to the process of creating text which does not speak to the imagination of the reader. Writing which "tells" is plain and straightforward, yet often has difficulty involving the reader. An example of a "telling" sentence would be, "Kathy was sad." This sentence tells the reader what judgment needs to be made about Kathy, yet does not provide the evidence to support that judgment. For example, how do we know that Kathy is sad? How is she behaving? What does she look like? Writing which "shows" generally incorporates vivid descriptive detail in order to help the reader evaluate evidence in order to make the appropriate judgments.

Example: Telling in Creative Writing

Mrs. Jones loved gardening.

Comment: This sentence tells the reader exactly what judgment need to be made about Mrs. Jones. However, because this analysis of Mrs. ones' feelings has been "forced" by the writer, the reader is unlikely to feel any real emotion or understanding towards the character. We know that this woman loves to garden, but "love" is an ambiguous word. For example, how much does she love to garden? How does she express this love? There is no room for interpretive analysis, because none of the pieces of the puzzle have been provided.

Example: Showing in Creative Writing

From the moment she woke up in the morning, Mrs. Jones smiled at the thought of her garden. Most mornings, she'd scald her mouth trying to gulp down her coffee so that she could get outside while the ground was still damp from the morning dew. Once she knelt down in the soil, she lost track of all time and all concerns of her body. She would work well into the evening, barely noticing when the nails of her left hand would break to the point of bleeding. Mrs. Jones' Jones jeans were always stained on the knees with thick mud, and her arms were always bruised and scraped. But she didn't mind a bit.

Comment: The "showing" version of Mrs. Jones' story does a more effective job of involving the reader. Although the word "love" is never mentioned in relationship to her garden, the reader can clearly infer Mrs. Jones' feelings through the descriptive depiction of her actions. Readers have not merely been "told" that Mrs. Jones loves her garden. Instead, readers are able to see and feel this love for themselves.

Example: Telling in Critical Writing

Dennis Rodman is a poor role model.

Comment: In this sentence, the author makes a clear statement of opinion. However, an unsupported opinion does not have the power to affect or influence a reader. Instead of merely claiming that Dennis Rodman is a poor role model, the author must describe the situation in order to fully explain why he has come to that

conclusion. The reader must be given all of the necessary evidence to "show" that Rodman is poor role model. Otherwise, the argument is neither moving, nor convincing.

Example: Showing in Critical Writing

Dennis Rodman continues to break the rules of the NBA. He is rude to officials, excessively violent on and off the court, and has publicly claimed he holds no remorse for his actions.

Comment: In this "showing" example, the author has reserved judgment for the audience. With the evidence provided, it is likely that a reader would come to the conclusion that Dennis Rodman is a poor role model. However, because this is a conclusion that the reader has come to of his or her free will, the argument is far more effective.

Simile

A simile is a comparison of two seemingly dissimilar objects. Its purpose is to make a unique connection between things which appear essentially unlike, usually through using the words "like" or "as." Simile is an important component of effective writing, as it provides the writer with a creative means of description.

The following paragraph, written by a student writer, makes fairly effective use of sensory detail. However, visual imagery could be greatly improved through the addition of simile.

Example: Paragraph Without Simile

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet

cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Example: Paragraph With Simile

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmothers' labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: With the addition of simile, the descriptive details in the text are much more concrete. The unusual comparisons of a woman's arm to electrical wiring and to a relief map make the writing stand out. Simile allows the reader is able to create a visual image of a much more unique character.

Additional Resources

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