

How Can I Write More Descriptively*

Overview

Descriptive language allows you to share experiences with your audience and can help give context for your writing in a more nuanced manner.

General Considerations

Read your writing prompt to help determine how much descriptive language you need. If the prompt primarily focuses on developing an argument that stems from traditional academic research, then use descriptive writing sparingly. If the prompt primarily focuses on developing a narrative, then use more descriptive language.

Write the most significant aspects with the most detail. Successful descriptive writing depends on the author's understanding of when and why they are setting up an experience for their reader. Not every minute detail needs to be described with lavish imagery—in fact, writing descriptively when the experience isn't important to the overall piece you are writing leads to purple prose and confusion.

Emphasize *what* is happening versus *how* it is happening. The most heavily descriptive writing usually takes place in scenes, and readers want to understand *what* is happening so they have agency over their own complex experience of the scene.

In Practice

Use the five senses.

Sight: This is arguably the greatest sense that many people rely on when it comes to detailed writing. As a result, consider all the elements that are present when it comes to vision; the shape of an object, its color scheme, how light refracts off it, texture, and so on.

- You do not have to go into excruciating descriptions for commonly recognizable objects, but the color, building material, texture, and shape can wildly vary. These are the details that you would want to mention in greater depth. Conversely, if these features are not present in the object being described, then this should be pointed out as well.
- In terms of people, physical traits (e.g., height, width, clothing, hair styles) are not the only aspects that could be discussed. Body position and facial expressions are two important aspects that could be described in great detail, and they speak volumes in terms of said person's personality.

Sound: While sound is often seen as an intangible quality, there is much that can be revealed through detailing how things are heard, most notably atmosphere and personality.

- For describing an atmosphere, contemplate the ambient surroundings. Are there chirping birds whistling a song of serenity? Did the door ominously creak as the boy entered the house, with its moan echoing the halls? Was the rain falling on the window in a rhythmic pitter-patter that lulled the couple to sleep? Mentioning these details helps set the tone for the rest of the piece.
- As for personality, describing sound often refers to patterns of speech, which can be divided into tone and the strength of the voice.
- For tone, consider how exactly someone communicated their message. Was it in a cheery and gleeful manner? Did it drip with venomous intent and disdain? Could it have been a snarky quip, a witty response? Providing this information helps the reader glimpse into the personality of the speaker, thus allowing a better image of said character.

Taste: This sense is not used very often when it comes to everyday interactions (save for ingesting food and drink). So if this sense is going to be incorporated, make sure that you highlight the various properties of what is being tasted, most notably flavor and texture. Biting into a warm and chewy steak with spicy seasoning is different than slurping a sweet and goopy Slurpee from 7-11 that made your mouth tingle.

- Not only is it important to mention those properties in your writing, but consider how you reacted when experiencing this sense. Does your face scrunch up in discomfort due to how sour that candy is? Are your teeth chattering after biting into some freezing ice cream? Mentioning reactions in response to taste help establish just how much flavor something has.

Smell: Aromas often reveal a lot of information about character, whether it's a person's or an environment's. Some things to reflect on with this sense include its overall scent and strength. A sweet and flowery whiff of perfume that shortly flirts with the nostrils is a stark contrast when compared to the heavily thick and burning scent of smoke that lingers in the nasal cavity throughout the day.

- Pay attention to the way a specific smells contrasts with its environment. The spray of a skunk is more noticeable than many other scents because it is such an odd sensation that disrupts the its surrounding aroma.

Touch: This tactile sensation can serve to establish tone and context in any written piece. For instance, shaking your boss' hand for the first time to find your appendage in a firm and icy grip can give off a feeling of serious formality, as opposed to the warm and tender lips of a significant other that draws you into tranquility and happiness.

- Temperature (a burning hot stove versus a frozen ice cube), texture (a smooth pebble versus the sticky sap), and weight (a light feather that floats on your hand versus the boulder that requires all of your strength to lift) are all great ways evoke the sense of touch. This not only serves to help establish the physical traits of an objects/people, but

can also say something more about them. Is there any significance that the rock you picked up was scorching hot as opposed to the thousands of others that lay at your feet? Should the reader pay any special attention to how heavy the duffel bag was for you to lift?

Exercises

1. Ask a reader to draw out the concrete features of your scene. Compare their drawing to what is most important for you to convey and revise accordingly so that the image the reader perceives matches the image you are trying to convey.
2. Describe the environment around you, as well as your position/where you are in said location in two different ways:
 - Method 1: Brainstorm for as many details as possible. Abundance of description is good for earlier drafts when you are exploring what is the most important thing you want your readers to experience and why.
 - Method 2: Choose one or two things in your description that stand out to you in greater detail. In general, something that surprises, intrigues, or disturbs you stands out most. Writing descriptively help you explore these reactions. It also helps readers enter your point of view.

Compare the two methods to see which would interest readers the most, and mix and match these two methods as you wish. Remember, the aspects of the scene that are most significant to you should receive the most detail.

Resources

You Hauck, Marian K. "The Case for Descriptive Writing." (n.d.): n. pag. Web.
<<http://files.eric.ed.gov.proxy.lib.umich.edu/fulltext/ED062352.pdf>>.

Hook, J. N. *Writing Creatively*. Boston: Heath, 1963. Print.

* Adapted from "How to Practice Descriptive Language" by Robert Molnar, University of Michigan History Major and Writing Minor