

English6iz - DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Here are some very powerful lines of description from the poem, *The Tyger* (spelled with a “y” by the poet):

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forest of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

from The Tyger by William Blake



In many ways description is the *most* important kind of writing there is. This is despite the fact that description is *never* used as an end in itself. Description is used to *support* other reasons for writing such as story-telling, explanation, persuasion or argument.

Effective descriptive writing makes readers feel almost as if they are ‘there’, experiencing the thing being described. At its very best, descriptive writing can seem to ‘etch’ its images into its reader’s mind. Read these famous opening lines from a World War I poem and maybe you’ll get a feeling for this:



Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame all blind
Drunk with fatigue deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped gas bombs that dropped behind.

Effective descriptive writing works well **when it refers to things that relate to the senses** such as sounds and sights. This is called ‘sensory description’. Circle ‘sensory’ words in the two poem extracts above.

What does it *look* like?
“His ashen face looked like he had seen the horror of horrors.”

What does it *sound* like?
“A sound like a thousand crashing cymbals assaulted our ears”.

What does it *smell* like?
“The smell was indescribable; nothing this side of Hell’s gates could come close.”

What does it *taste* like?
“The taste was heavenly - like something you’d looked forward to all your life.”

What does it *feel* like?
“The soft gooey mass clung to my by now quivering flesh.”

In this next passage, prose not poetry this time, see how writer Bruce Chatwin achieves this in an extract from his travel-writing book, ‘In Patagonia’. Notice how he gives his reader the sense that he is **showing** us this woman rather than merely **telling** us about her – this is a key descriptive skill: **show, don’t tell!**

Notice, too, that he does three things to make this piece of writing more effective:

- he **focuses on specific details** – just those aspects that say something important about the character.
- he uses **precise vocabulary**, that is words that are, in themselves and without extra adjectives, highly descriptive.
- he uses *vivid* and *original figurative language*.

Underline the **precise language** as well as the **similes** and **metaphors** he uses.

She was waiting for me, a white face behind a dusty window. She smiled, her painted mouth unfurling as a red flag caught in a sudden breeze. Her hair was dyed dark-auburn. Her legs were a Mesopotamia of varicose veins. She still had the tatters of an extraordinary beauty.
She had been making pastry and the grey dough clung to her hands. Her blood-red nails were cracked and chipped.

[p.61]

Now, over to you!

Describe a car journey

What might you *see, touch, smell, taste and hear*?

Seen...

- Like a fiery red fist, the Ferrari Testarossa punched its way past our ageing Ford Fiesta...

Touched...

- the open window allowed a cool spring breeze to caress my cheeks...

Smelt...

- an ancient jalopy of a school bus spluttered along in front of us spewing out nauseous black clouds of exhaust...

Tasted...

- the bitter taste of the pre-trip travel sickness pill still clung to back of my throat...

Heard...

- the screeching siren of an ambulance forced us to pull in and wait till it passed...

It works, doesn't it?

And you can make it work for you. You'll gain a higher grade, too, so it must be worthwhile.

TIPS

Here's a typical exam question:

Qu. Describe the scene in a large department store or shop on the first day of the January sales. (2002)

How to go about it?

Imagine yourself to be a kind of 'human video camera'!

With your searching zoom lens you are going to 'record' what was in the particular scene or situation the exam question asks you to describe:

- a selection of the 'stills' from your video will provide the substance for what you describe.
- a good structure is crucial to a high grade. This can be achieved in several ways, for example, by describing each of the 'stills' from your 'video' location by location: 'In the corner...'; 'By the hot dog stall...'; 'In the sky...'; 'Over there...';
- other structures that work are: from inside to outside..., from then to now..., from the 'general' to the 'particular'... Structure provides 'shape' to your writing and can gain many marks.

Describe what you **saw, heard, tasted, smelt** and **felt**.

Notice the **time frame**: *always* set your writing in the past: 'saw', 'heard', 'felt'... be safe and stick to writing about a past events using past tense verbs throughout!

Writing as if the event you describe were happening in the present (i.e. using present tense verbs like "walks/runs/drives") can be exciting to read. Sadly, and worryingly, it's far too easy to forget the time frame and flip back into using past tense verbs without realising. This will lose m-a-n-y marks!

- Avoid writing your answer in the form of a short story.
- Avoid being a part of the action – take the role of **observer** only ("The streets were... / the crowd was..." **not** "I saw..." / "I felt...")
- Follow the advice given above: 'zoom in' and 'focus' the lens of your 'video camera' on the kind of scene asked in the question and report what you capture on film.
- Help your reader to feel as if he or she were actually there, experiencing the thing being described.

A/A* TIP

Theme and Controlling Idea

What makes reading any piece of writing... *worthwhile*? You want to feel **interested, involved, engaged** with what the writing is telling about; most of all you need to **relate** to it in some way.

How can your descriptive writing be made to fit the bill?

Most of us seem to enjoy reading about the important things in life: fear, loneliness, friendship, growing up, getting old, facing problems... and most people enjoy reading when it creates a sense of excitement, tension, fear or wonder' also, and perhaps because we are rather 'nosy' or like to compare ourselves to others, we enjoy reading about interesting characters who succeed in overcoming the odds.

- *Writing that explores ideas like these **stands a good chance of being interesting to read**. Done well, it gains the highest grades.*

SIX STEPS TO SUCCESS

1. Read the question with thought and care

Seems obvious. As described above, decide if the topic of the question would allow you to develop an underlying message of some kind in your writing. This message then becomes your controlling idea. It can help to 'switch roles' for a moment and 'become' your own reader - putting on your 'reader's hat' is always a good thing to do when writing.

2. In an exam situation... *avoid telling a story.*

Even though all storytelling depends upon description to set a scene or mood, when writing purely 'to describe', it can be best to avoid writing a story. In an exam, for example, you won't have the time or space to write an effective story.

3. Write about a *past* time – avoid writing about the present!

However exciting 'present tense' writing might seem it is all too easy to fall into the trap of mixing tenses - moving from present tense to past tense without realising. It's best to start and continue in the past tense - maybe remembering a real scene from your own life?

4. Describe only what will help develop your underlying theme or message

Effective description is always **finely detailed** but **very carefully focused**. The secret is to choose a particular aspect of a scene – *one that will help reveal your underlying purpose*.

5. Put your reader into the right frame of mind to become involved in your writing

Interest and *involvement* are central to keeping your reader enjoying your writing. Without it your writing will not work well. Always set a suitable *mood* for your scene. This mood, which must be suitable to support the purpose of your writing, will help engage and absorb your reader.

6. Aim to describe 'how you felt at the time' - make the reader feel as if they are 'there'

Even though it is usually an imaginary or dramatised time in your writing, you will help your reader if you try to make them feel as you did. Using *sensory description* can achieve this.

7. Avoid excessive or boring (y-a-w-n!) 'flat' description

Thinking you must describe everything, and even worse giving every noun an adjective or two is one error to avoid at all costs.

8. Create a clear structure that is interesting to your reader

Aim to describe aspects of a scene in an interesting and logical order – one that seems 'natural' to your reader.

- *This might mean working from inside to outside, from the past to the future, from the general to the particular, from the small to the large, and so on. A planned structure will give 'shape' to your writing and add enormously to its effect. Writing that appears to the examiner or your teacher to be 'consciously shaped' work will gain a higher grade.*

9. Write like a master – Charles Dickens!

Dickens was a master storyteller; but he was also a master of using description to create a particular mood or idea. Underline all of the descriptive words and phrases in the extract below. Can you work out how each of these is contributing towards a particular 'controlling idea' or theme?

'IT WAS A TOWN OF RED BRICK, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, arid vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next...'

Charles Dickens 'Hard Times'