

Descriptive Writing

“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass”. Anton Chekhov

Descriptive prose in academic writing could be found as a secondary developmental scheme in different essays. In comparison and contrast essays, you may describe, for instance, a story in its text and video version; besides, you might describe the embalming procedure in a professional process essay. Descriptions might also be used as a primary method of development; for example, you might be asked to describe a character in some detail, starting from a holistic image then a specific one (Langan & Winstanley, 2014; Wyrick, 2011).

What is a descriptive essay?

In the descriptive prose, the writer creates a word-picture of persons, settings, objects and emotions (Wyrick, 2011), “using sharp, colourful, and specific details” (Langan & Winstanley, 2014, p. 135) to make an impression on the reader (Wyrick, 2011) or talk to his/her senses (Langan & Winstanley, 2014).

How to write a descriptive essay?

The descriptive essay is an academic writing prose that follows the standard form of the essay: introduction, development & conclusion. To write an effective essay, you have to consider certain norms (Wyrick, 2011):

TEACHER’S NOTE

A descriptive essay:

- Describes
- gives impressions, not definitions
- shows the reader
- creates a sensory image in the reader’s mind

Recognise your purpose. When you develop the thesis of your descriptive essay, you have to show the “dominant impression” which refers to: your “general feeling” about your subject in a personal, impressive or expressive description, or to an “overview” of your subject in an objective description (Langan & Winstanley, 2014). In other words, in the personal descriptive essay you show your emotional reaction to what you will describe, but in the objective descriptive essay, you present an overview of the scope of your subject.

Purpose	Thesis statement example
Impressive descriptive essay	The trip that was such a thrilling idea was, in reality, gruelling days of bone-chilling wind and stinging rain.
Objective descriptive essay	Eight main areas represent important communities on Pelee and Middle Islands; the community types range from forests and savannas to alvars and wetlands.

Adapted from Langan and Winstanley, 2014, p. 140

Use a spatial organization. You have to organize your sentences using a space order: from top to bottom, from right to left, from nearest to farthest and from inside to outside or vice versa (Hogue, 1996).

Choose third person voice. Your presence as a writer in a descriptive prose, whether personal or objective, should be secondary, if not invisible. You should show readers impressions and details, and the “I” distracts them from the dominant impression. Consequently, third person voice or pronoun point of view is the one chosen in descriptive essays (Langan & Winstanley, 2014).

Describe clearly, using specific details. To make the descriptive prose vivid to your reader, you have to develop your essay with specific details (Wyrick, 2011). To describe something clearly, you should paint your picture with words; the more precise you are, the more picturesque your description will be (Hogue, 1996). For example, a simple act, like finding a worn sweater, could evoke a great impression in your readers; “As the lavender-scented tissue paper fell away from the neatly folded layers of soft, pale-yellow wool, Nonna seemed to float silently into the room” (Langan & Winstanley, 2014, p. 141). Furthermore, you can’t talk to your readers’ senses if your description is structured with vague generalities. Following is an example (Hogue, 1996, p. 74):

Vague

a pretty face

Specific

warm brown eyes, shining black hair, and sparkling white teeth.

Select only appropriate details. The details selected to develop descriptive essays—especially the more subjective ones—should present a dominant impression; an emotional reaction that you felt with the described subject, and you want to transmit it to the reader. You have to omit any distracting or unimportant details (Wyrick, 2011). Consider the following example which has dominant mood of joy and innocence:

“A dozen kites filled the spring air, and around the bright picnic tables spread with hot dogs, hamburgers, and slices of watermelon, Tom and Annie played away the warm April day”.

Notice how the mood would be spoiled if the writer ended his/her detail like:

“Tom and Annie played away the warm April day until Tom got so sunburned; he became ill and had to go home” (Wyrick, 2011, p. 323).

Make your description vivid. To make your reader feel and see what you have described, you have to always use sensory details and figurative language when appropriate. (Langan & Winstanley, 2014; Wyrick, 2011).

a. *Use sensory details.* Describe your subject with the five senses to reach your reader by making use of clear and precise words. In the following example, notice how the writer uses the five senses to describe his/her broken leg and a stay in hospital.

Sight *The clean white corridors of the hospital resembled the set of a sci-fi movie, with everyone scurrying around in identical starched uniforms.*

Hearing *At night, the only sounds I heard were the quiet squeakings of sensible white shoes as the nurses made their rounds.*

Smell *The green beans on the hospital cafeteria tray smelled stale and waxy, like crayons.*

Touch *The hospital bed sheet felt as rough and heavy as a feed sack.*

Taste *Every four hours they gave me an enormous gray pill whose aftertaste reminded me of the stale licorice my grandmother kept in candy dishes around her house.*

Adapted from Wyrick, 2011, p. 324

b. *Use figurative language when appropriate.* Figurative language corresponds to devices that draw a picture or an image in readers' mind by comparing something unfamiliar to something familiar to enable them to understand abstract subjects. Following are some devices that you may use of to make your description clear, vivid and unforgettable (Wyrick, 2011):

1. Simile / 'sɪmɪli /: a comparison between two things not usually considered together, using the words "like" or "as".

Example Seeing exactly the shirt he wanted, he moved as quickly as a starving teenager spotting pie in a refrigerator full of leftover vegetables.

2. Metaphor / 'metəfɔː /: a direct comparison between two elements not considered together that does not use "like" or "as".

Example Waves of questionnaires about petty matters flooded the department when the ex-headmaster was in charge of the office.

3. Personification [pəˌsɒnɪˈfɪkeɪʃn]: human characteristics and emotions attributed to inanimate objects, animals, or abstract ideas.

Example The old teddy bear sat in a corner, dozing serenely before the fireplace.

4. Hyperbole / haɪˈpɜːbəli /: intentional exaggeration or overstatement

Example He was so lazy; he worked nights as a futon.

5. Understatement: intentional representation of a subject as less important than the facts would warrant

Example "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."—Mark Twain

6. Synecdoche / sɪˈnekdəki /: a part of something used to represent the whole.

Example A hundred tired feet hit the dance floor for one last jitterbug. [Here "feet" stand for the dancing couples themselves.]

TEACHER'S NOTE

In similes & metaphors, you have to grab your readers' attention with fresh pictures, don't bore them with clichés; for example: snake in the grass, hot as fire, quiet as a mouse, ... are not welcome!

References

- Hogue, A. (1996) *First steps in academic writing*. Longman
- Langan, J., & Winstanley, S. (2014). *Essay writing skills with readings* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
- Wyrick, J. (2011). *Steps to writing well with additional readings* (8th ed.). Wardsworth, Cengage Learning.