



THE WRITING PROCESS

Description

A descriptive essay uses physical details of a person, place, or thing in order to give readers a sensory impression of whatever you are describing. Descriptive detail also, generally, conveys a writer's impression of or attitude about the subject.

A descriptive essay tells the reader:

- what something looks like
- what it feels like
- what it smells like
- what it sounds like
- what it tastes like

However, description can also do more than convey sense impressions. For example, an essay about a city might describe any of the following:

- the kinds of people living there
- their lifestyles
- their backgrounds
- their attitudes

APPROACHES TO DESCRIPTION

When you write description, you use your observations to create a vivid impression for your readers. There are two basic approaches to description: **objective description** and **subjective/impressionistic description**. Objective description focuses on the object you are portraying rather than on your personal reactions to it. Many writing situations require precise descriptions, and in these cases your goal is to supply information—to construct as accurate a picture as you can for your audience. Subjective/impressionistic description discloses your responses to what you see and tries to get your readers to share them. These responses are not expressed directly, through a straightforward statement of your opinion or perspective. Rather, they are revealed indirectly, through your choice of words and phrasing.

Neither of the two approaches to description exists independently. Objective description is always the product of a subjective selection of details; subjective/impressionistic description attempts to capture reactions to an objective reality. The skillful writer, however, adjusts the balance between objectivity and subjectivity to suit the topic, thesis, audience, purpose, and occasion of an essay.

SELECTION OF DETAIL

All good writing, whether objective or subjective, relies heavily on specific details which enable readers to visualize what you are describing. **Your aim is not simply to tell your readers what something looks like but to show them.** Every person, place, or thing has its special characteristics, and you must use your powers of observation to detect them. Then, you must select the concrete words that will enable your readers to see, hear, taste, touch, or smell what you are describing.

Of additional importance in writing description is to realize that not all details relating to your topic are equally useful or desirable. **Only those details that add to the dominant impression you wish to create should be included.** For example, in describing a man's face to show how angry he was, you would probably not describe the shape of his nose or the color of his hair. (After all, the color of somebody's hair doesn't change when he or she gets angry.)

The number of details you use is less important than their quality. In order to avoid an indiscriminate list, you must select and use only those specific details that are relevant to your purpose.

STRUCTURING A DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY

To organize a descriptive essay, begin by brainstorming a list of details. Then arrange those details into paragraphs or sections in a way that advances your thesis or unifying idea.

For example:

- Move from a specific description of an object to a general description of other things around it.
- Begin with the general and proceed to the specific.
- Progress from the least important feature, until you finally focus on the most important one.
- Move from the smallest to the largest item or from the least unusual to the most unusual detail.
- Move from left to right or right to left, from top to bottom or bottom to top.

The particular organizing scheme you choose will depend on the following:

- the dominant impression you want to convey to your readers
- your thesis or unifying idea
- your purpose and audience

