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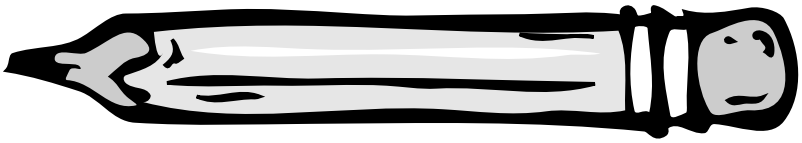
DESCRIPTIVE WRITING



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TO THE TEACHER

Descriptive writing is that domain of writing that develops images through the use of precise sensory words and phrases, and through devices such as metaphor and the sounds of words. The term *descriptive writing* rightly makes us think of wonderful poetry, of vivid story paragraphs that help us see settings of forests or seascapes or city streets, of passages that show us people acting, speaking, and feeling in ways that make them believable and real to us.

At the same time, descriptive writing is a "maverick" sort of domain that—ideally—appears in other domains as well. In expository writing, we use description to present facts clearly. In narrative writing, we use description to show clearly what is happening, event-by-event. In persuasive writing, we choose strong descriptive words to present and support our opinions.

To use descriptive writing on its own (that paragraph about the forest, that poem about the sea) or as part of another domain (that expository paragraph about the development of a butterfly, that persuasive paragraph about the need for a student after-school recreation program, that autobiographical narrative), students need the following:

- An ever-expanding **vocabulary** that helps students to precisely name events, feelings, and impressions;
- A facility with constructing **comparisons** (metaphor, simile, personification);
- Skills for **unifying** and **focusing** descriptions so that readers can track along with the writer, see in their mind's eye what the writer sees or otherwise senses;
- A wide variety of **activities** that encourage the use of descriptive techniques in writing in various curricular areas and in speaking, acting, listening, and presenting ideas visually.

This book provides strategies you can use and techniques your students can use to foster effective description as it applies to all the writing they'll need to do.

SOME OF THE BOOK'S FEATURES

A Gradual Build-Up

Parts One and Two encourage students to explore and use descriptive words and phrases to write short descriptive passages. Part Three helps students hunker down into fine-line pre-planning and editing of the descriptions they're writing. Part Four presents opportunities for using descriptive-writing techniques across the curriculum. Activities in all four parts lead up to writing a Personal Essay.

Reproducibles for Reference and Going-On

Some of the reproducibles in this book encourage students to compile their own reference lists of descriptive words and phrases, and to use the lists and accompanying activities to expand upon what they've learned through class discussion and practice.

Activities for Students with Various Interests or Modalities

The Additional Activities that conclude each part are designed to appeal to kids who work and think in different modalities. For example, students who are visually oriented can have fun describing a stage-setting. ESL students can learn word-meanings by drawing words to illustrate their meanings. Aural/oral students will enjoy listening for intonations in speech and learning from free-reads.

GENERAL TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Use Free-Writes and Free-Reads

Not every piece of writing needs to undergo a writing-process sequence. Recall that writers—young and old—learn more about writing from reading their own drafts aloud to an audience than they do from any other process. In a read-aloud setting where the audience refrains from commenting, writers discover on their own the phrases they wish to keep, change, or delete.

Have Students Use Writing Folders

While Portfolios represent what the student considers "best," Folders contain "everything." The purpose for keeping "everything" is that even the barest, most-scribbled description may eventually be the spur that generates an outstanding piece of writing. Supply students with gummed tags for sections in their folders. Example labels: *My Own Feelings*; *Places I Remember*; *Great Phrases From Books I've Read*; *People I Want to Describe*; *Words and Phrases to Describe Anger* (*Happiness*) (*Puzzlement*).

Present Activities in Your Own Way

You may want to move students step-by-step through the four parts of the book. Or, you may decide to use other sequences to adapt to individual students' interests and abilities. For example, super-star students might move immediately from **Metaphor and Simile** in Part One to **Descriptive Writing About Science and Technology** in Part Four. With students who need additional practice in constructing comparisons, you might move from **Metaphor and Simile** to **Describing People** in Part Three.

In general, work the activities in this book into your general plan for helping students become astute observers and reporters of the amazing things there are to sense in their world.

PART ONE

EXPLORING SENSORY IMAGERY

GETTING STARTED

During the days or weeks in which your students are exploring sensory images, make the classroom itself an exploration site. Tell students how you will do this: Each day before school starts, you'll change the room in some way that most students can detect—fairly easily at first and then with more study as the days go by. Students should look or listen (or even sniff!) for the change as they enter the room, then name it when the whole class is together. Examples:

- Change the position or angle of your desk.
- Position window shades in a new way to brighten or darken the room.
- "Scent" the room with a natural aroma likes cloves, apples, or roses.
- Play different kinds of tape-recorded music.
- Hang a familiar map or poster upside down.
- Put a small item such as an autumn leaf or a pinecone on each student's desk.
- Play one of the many available recordings of animal sounds: bird songs, wolf howls, the signals of whales.

Students may want to get involved in setting up these sensory trips. Set up a suggestion box. All suggestions should be signed.

REMEMBERING VISUAL DETAILS

This is an extension of "Seeing Details."

What You'll Need

A poster, or—for the overhead projector—a photo, that has several major features, such as people, actions, landscape details, colors, and shapes

Procedure

1. Explain the task: Students have 30 seconds to examine the visual. Each student then lists from memory as many details from the picture as possible. (Allow about four minutes for this step.)
2. Students work in groups to compare lists and to make a group master list. Groups share their master list with the class.
3. Show the picture again and encourage students to discuss the accuracy and completeness of their lists.
4. Point out some real-life occasions when we get just a quick look at something that we wish we had more time to study: when we travel in a car, bus, train; when something moves quickly past us as we stand still: a bird in flight, a firetruck, a parade. Discuss why "Look close, look fast!/It may not last!" is a good slogan for writers.

WRITE

Ask each student to write a paragraph describing the scene in the picture. For vivid results, encourage use of present-tense verbs.

IT'S IN THE BAG

This activity requires students to describe ordinary objects with great accuracy without actually seeing them.

What You'll Need

Drawing materials for each student; laundry bag containing four or five items that share some similar features such as shape, size, or texture—and sometimes similarities in *use* as well—for example:

- mallet, hammer, gavel, drumstick
- tweezers, pliers, kitchen tongs, hairpin
- lipstick, glue stick, crayon, pencil
- apple, pear, grape, orange, onion
- baseball, tennis ball, Ping-Pong ball, football

Procedure

1. Explain the activity: The "describer" will reach into the bag, and—without looking—select one of the items, determine through touch what it is, and then (here comes the describer's challenge!) describe the item to classmates *without* directly naming it (for example, "baseball") or the specific task in which it's involved (for example, "playing

baseball"). Audience members sketch the item as the describer tells about it.

2. Explain the skills involved: A really-super describer will give such thorough clues about shape, size, texture (and maybe even odor) that the audience will be able to draw the item correctly without ever hearing its name.

A really-super listener will be so attentive to the descriptive details that she or he will draw the item being described.

You may wish to provide a warm-up example:

> This object is about eight inches long. It has two hands or arms on it, which you squeeze together to pull out things. The object is made of metal, and this one has rubber tips at the end of the hands. (pliers)

3. After an item has been described and drawn, take it from the bag and have students check their drawings against it. Which of the describer's words helped artists form a picture of the item in their mind's eye? What details do they think the describer might have added? List students' responses on a chalkboard chart.

Continue the activity: Another describer tells about another of the items remaining in the bag; students check drawings, discuss and chart details.

WRITE

Ask students to refer to the class chart (below) as they independently write a paragraph that compares and contrasts two of the items.

Descriptive Words and Phrases	Item
Round; a fruit; a sort of dimple at one end; smooth; firm; about the size of a softball; smells sweet and fresh; probably red, green, or yellow. Grows on a tree. Often in lunchboxes.	an apple
Round; about the size of a marble; smooth and squishy; probably purple or green; smells sweet *and* bitter; a fruit. I think it grows on a vine. If you had a lot of them, you could make juice. Good lunch snack.	a grape

Apples and grapes are alike because they're both fruits and are round in shape. They also smell much alike, are smooth to the touch, and may both be green in color. However, grapes are much smaller than apples and grow on vines, not trees. Another difference is that apples are firm and grapes are soft.