



THE POWER OF DESCRIPTION

Good writing depends to a great extent on good description. Description is the essence of **showing and not telling**. Here are some techniques of description.

General Goal: DETAILING/MAKING THINGS SPECIFIC

Change vague, indefinite writing into lively, image-filled writing that helps capture your reader's interest and makes your meaning clear. Compare the following sentences:

GENERAL to SPECIFIC

She gave him the paper.

Linda quietly slipped Herb the crumbled receipt.

The sound came from outside.

The high-pitched grind of the sander whistled incessantly from the old house across the street.

The boy was on the floor.

The two year old boy played energetically with his trucks on the living room carpet.

NAMING/ USE EXACT NAMES

He bought a *car*.

Tom bought a new *Camero*.

USE LIVELY VERBS

The sunlight *shone* on the pond.

The sunlight *glistened* on the pond.

USE DESCRIPTIVE MODIFIERS/ ADJECTIVES & ADVERBS

The *book* lay on the *shelf*.

The *dusty, old* book lay *forlornly* on the *high, wooden* shelf.

USE THE SENSES-- sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch

(sight) That man works for the post office.

That *tall, dark-haired* man works for the post office.

(hearing) The train arrived at the station.

The "toot toot" of the train's whistle announced the train's arrival at the station.



(taste) The enchiladas needed to be washed down with tea.

The *hot jalapeno* enchiladas needed to be washed down with *sweet* tea.

(touch) His hands grasped the bat.

His *rough, calloused* hands grasped the *smooth, hard* bat.

(smell) Tim could tell breakfast was almost ready.

The *smell of coffee and bacon* cooking told Tim breakfast was almost ready.

Here is an example of sounds being incorporated into a description:

Sure signs of the new day are the sounds in the kitchen as breakfast is prepared. The high sigh of the gas just before it whooshes into flame and settles into a whispering hum blends with the gurgling of the water for the morning coffee. Soon the gloop, gloop, gloop of the coffee sets up a perky beat. Then it mingles the crackle of creamy butter on a hot skillet and the shush of an egg as it meets this fiery foe. Ribbons of bacon start to sizzle in the spitting grease. The soft rustle of plastic as bread is removed from its wrapper floats on the air and seems to form part of the atmosphere. The can opener whirs, and the orange juice concentrate drops with a splat into the blender, which whizzes together the orange cylinder and splashed-in water. For minutes after the blender stops, tiny effervescing bubbles fizz.

USE COMPARISONS

Whereas naming and detailing call on the power of observation, comparing brings the imagination into play. Comparison makes language even more precise and description more evocative. There are two types of comparisons: similes and metaphors. A **simile** is a comparison using either **like** or **as** to directly express a similarity. A **metaphor**, on the other hand, is an implicit comparison by which one thing is described as though it were the other. Look at this passage:

He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert. His face was fierce, small and pointed as a lizard's; he would have made a good arrowhead. There was just a dot of chin, maybe two brown hairs' worth, and then the pure white fur began that spread down his underside. He had two black eyes I didn't see, any more than you see a window.

simile: "thin as a curve" metaphor: "a muscled ribbon"

SHOWING and NOT TELLING the essence of description

Another way to think of describing is to seek "to show and not tell." By showing with our descriptions we as writers are allowing our readers to make up their minds about what they "see" in our description. Showing is much more detailed and specific and depends on close



observation. Like sketching the negative space in a drawing, as you "show" the thing you are describing comes into greater focus. For instance, I could "tell" you "it is a beautiful day"; however, I could express that the day was beautiful in a far more pleasing way by "showing" you the details of this beautiful day--the sun glistening on the pond, the light breeze, the cool temperature, the clear blue sky, the sounds of kids playing.

ACTIVITY: Use the techniques of description to liven up these sentences. Use a separate sheet of paper.

Examples: Single sentence opening

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|-----------------------|---|
| Vague, general | The person got off the bus. |
| More detailed | The teenage boy bounded like a panther down the steps of the shiny yellow school bus. |
| | |
| Vague, general | She worked hard all summer. |
| More detailed | All summer, Eva sorted peaches and blueberries in the hot, noisy canning factory. |

Example: Larger, "showing" opening (multi-sentence)

She was happy.

Crystal whistled a cheerful tune as she skipped along the sidewalk, waving at anyone she passed along the way. A grin as big as the Grand Canyon spread across her face as she exclaimed to her mother, "Mommy, isn't it a beautiful day!"

Try practicing with some of these single sentence and larger "showing" openings from these "telling" sentences.

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|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. The car was old. | 6. He or she is gorgeous. |
| 2. He was angry. | 7. The weather was awful. |
| 3. The boy was tired. | 8. I was happy to see them. |
| 4. My room needs cleaning. | 9. It is a beautiful day. |
| 5. He was an unfeeling boss. | 10. The salesperson was obnoxious. |

Try to look for "doors" inside your own text (nouns, verbs, telling sentences) which you can open up with description using the techniques covered here.