

How to Describe a Picture in English – Video

In this lesson, you can learn how to describe a picture in English.

Describing a picture is useful in many English exams; you need to describe a picture in English for exams like FCE (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/?s=fce>), TOEIC or PTE.

It's also a good way to practise your general English skills. Take an interesting picture, and try to describe it in English. You can practise your speaking and learn some new English vocabulary!

In this lesson, you can learn how to describe a picture in English in clear, detailed language. We'll show you how to build an answer step-by-step.

1. Summarize What You See

What's the best way to start your description?

Start with a summary, giving a general description of what's in the picture and what you can see.

It's useful to imagine that the person you're talking to can't see the picture. Think: what does the other person need to know? What do you need to say so that other people can understand what's in the picture?

Let's do an example.

You want to summarize what you see in one or two simple sentences. How could you do that?

You could say:

There are several small boats next to a beach.

The picture shows a beach, with many small boats in the water nearby.

Simple summaries like this make it easy to understand the general contents of the picture.

Let's do one more:

What could you say here?

Here are some possible answers:

There are three people cooking in a kitchen.

The picture shows three young friends cooking together.

Okay, now it's your turn. Here's another picture:

You need to make a summary of what you see.

You can use these phrases:

There is...

There are...

The picture shows...

Pause the video, and make one or two sentences. You can write down your answers if you want.

Okay, after your summary, you can start giving more detail about what you see in the picture.

2. Talking About Where Things Are

To start giving detail, you can talk about where things are (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/asking-directions>) in the picture.

Here's some useful language to help you do this:

Let's do an example.

You could say:

*On the left, there's a girl with dark, curly hair. She's holding half a cauliflower
(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/talk-about-food>).*

In the middle, there's a man who's chopping vegetables.

At the bottom, we can see a counter with many different vegetables on it.

When talking about photos, you might also need the phrases:

In the background...

In the foreground...

For example:

In the foreground, there's a sandy beach with three metal anchors on it.

In the middle, there are several small boats, which are close to the beach.

In the background, we can see the blue sea stretching to the horizon.

Let's put all of this language together in another example:

Think first: what could you say about this picture?

Okay, let's look at what you could say:

On the left, there's a cat sitting on a table.

On the right, there's a man standing, though we can't see his face.

In the background, we can see blue sky and snowy mountains.

Now it's your turn! Here's a picture:

Pause the video, and make at least three sentences. Use the useful language you saw in this section.

Again, you can write your sentences down if you want to!

Okay? What's next?

3. Adding More Detail to Your Description

Now, the person you're talking to should have a good general idea about what's in the picture you're describing, and where things are.

Next, you should start describing your picture in more detail.

Let's look at a picture you've seen before:

When adding detail, don't try to describe everything in the picture. It's not necessary or useful. You should add detail to the most important parts of the picture.

So, for this picture, what do you think the most important parts are?

Probably, the person who took this photo took it because of the people. So, you should focus your description on the two people.

Think: what do they look like, and what are they doing?

You could say:

The two people both look unhappy or irritated.

They're sitting at the kitchen table together, but they aren't talking to each other.

The man is staring down at the table, while the woman is stirring her tea with a spoon.

That's just three sentences, but they add a lot of detail to your description.

Let's try one more:

In this picture, what do you think you should focus on in your description? Fairly obviously, you should talk about the horses.

Let's try:

The horses are running through the grass.

Two of them are black, but the one in the middle is white and grey.

They don't have saddles or anything, so they could be wild horses.

Again, you can see that you can do a lot with just a few sentences.

Alright, now it's your turn!

Let's take a picture you've already seen:

Pause the video and make at least three sentences to describe the picture in detail. Try to include as much important information as you can.

How was that? If you want more practice, you can do the same exercise with other pictures from this lesson, or you could use your own pictures!

At this point, you've described the picture in detail. So, what else can you do?

4. Speculating About the Picture

Speculating (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/speculate>)... What does that mean?

Speculating means talking about possibilities.

For example, look at this picture:

Think about some questions:

Why are the umbrellas there?

Who put them there?

By trying to answer questions like this, you are speculating; you're talking about possibilities and giving your opinion about the picture.

Speculating can help you to make a longer, more detailed answer when talking about a picture.

Let's do an example:

I suppose it might be some kind of art project.

Maybe one person put an umbrella up there as a joke, and then other people started doing it, too.

Let's look at one more picture:

Think, if you wanted to speculate about this picture, what could you say?

Another way to think about it: what questions could you ask yourself about this picture?

Possible ideas are: who made the footprints, and why? Where were they going? Where is the person who made the footprints now?

There are other possibilities, of course, so feel free to use your own ideas, too!

Okay, so what could you say to speculate about this picture?

Here are some examples:

The footprints must have been made by a climber or a mountaineer

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mountaineering>).

The person who made the footprints might be standing on top of the mountain now.

In our examples, you've seen some useful language which you can use to speculate about a picture. Do you remember?

You can use language like:

I suppose...

Maybe...

[It] must...

[He] might...

Let's practise using these once more with another picture:

Could you make four sentences, using the useful language we just saw?

Let's do an example together:

I suppose the guy is a climber, or he's on an adventure holiday.

Maybe he climbed something, and now he's on the way down.

He must have a lot of experience, because his body language is quite relaxed.

He might be focusing on what he's doing, but he might just be enjoying the view!

Okay, now it's your turn. Let's take another of our pictures:

Can you make four sentences to speculate about this picture, using the language you've learned in this section? Pause the video and think about your answers!

Now, you have one more thing to do.

5. Speculating About the Context of the Picture

When you speculate, you can speculate about what you can see in the picture. However, you can—and should—speculate about what you can't see, too.

How's this possible? Well, think about this picture:

You can think about questions like: where and when was the picture taken? Who took the picture? What was the photographer doing there?

For example:

I think this could be in the USA, or maybe Russia.

It's a good photo, so perhaps it was taken by a professional nature photographer.

You see? Talking about what you can't see in the picture can be very useful, and can help to add details to your answer.

Let's do one more example:

What could you say about this picture?

Let's do this one together. You could say:

This must be somewhere tropical, like the Caribbean or the Maldives.

Perhaps it was taken by a tourist who came to the beach on one of those boats.

Okay, one more. This time, you have to do it yourself!

Here's your picture:

Make at least two sentences to speculate about the context of the picture. Think about where and when it was taken, who took it, and what the photographer was doing there.

How was that? Hopefully you feel more confident describing pictures in English now.

Let's put everything you've learned together and practise making longer, fluent descriptions.

6. Making a Longer Answer

When you describe a picture, you should:

1. Give a summary of what you see.
2. Talk about where things are in the picture.
3. Add details.
4. Speculate about what's in the picture.
5. Speculate about the context of the picture.

Let's make a longer answer together. We'll start with a picture we've used already:

Here's a possible longer answer:

In the picture, there are two people sitting at a table, looking unhappy. There's a woman on the left and a man on the right. In the middle of the picture, we can see some things on the table, like cups of tea, biscuits, milk and so on. The two people look sad or irritated (<http://languagelearningbase.com/86663/list-of-adjectives-to-describe-feelings-and-emotions>), and they aren't speaking to each other. They're both looking down at the table. I suppose they had a fight and now they aren't talking to each other, or they might just be bored and not have anything to talk about. I guess it's a stock photo because otherwise, why would the photographer be in the kitchen with them?

Do you think you could make an answer like this? Remember, all the language you need is in this lesson. You just need to take the things you practised in each part, and then put them together.

Let's do one more example together:

The picture shows umbrellas hanging in the air. In the foreground, we can see a streetlight, and the umbrellas fill the picture from left to right. The umbrellas are of many different colours, mostly bright colours like pink, yellow or green. They're hanging from wires. I can see at least four lines of umbrellas hanging down in this way, but there could be even more. Maybe this is some sort of art project. It might also be a festival or tradition, that people decorate the street with colourful umbrellas like this. I suppose the picture was taken in a city or town, though I can't tell where exactly. Perhaps the photographer was a tourist, and was just walking around the city when he saw this amazing and strange scene.

Alright, now it's your turn. We'll give you a new picture:

Pause the video and try to make a longer answer, like we just did. Follow the same structure.

Finished? I don't think so! You should practise as much as you can. Take the other pictures from the lesson, and make longer answers about them, too.

Practise your answers several times, until you can do it fluently and comfortably. Post your responses on the Oxford Online English YouTube channel and we'll give you feedback!

Do you want more practice with vocabulary? Watch our lesson to get advice on keeping a vocabulary notebook (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/vocabulary-notebook>).

Thanks for watching!