

OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 9 AND 10 WRITING/HANDOUT 2

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

(Adapted from http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/descriptive_writing)

The primary purpose of descriptive writing is to describe a person, place or thing in such a way that a picture is formed in the reader's mind. Capturing an event through descriptive writing involves paying close attention to the details by using all of your five senses. By writing more descriptively, you improve writing because it is more interesting and engaging to read.

Descriptive writing shares the following characteristics:

1. Good descriptive writing includes many vivid sensory details that paint a picture and appeals to all of the reader's senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste when appropriate. Descriptive writing may also paint pictures of the feelings the person, place or thing invokes in the writer.
2. Good descriptive writing often makes use of figurative language such as analogies, similes and metaphors to help paint the picture in the reader's mind.
3. Good descriptive writing uses precise language. General adjectives, nouns, and passive verbs do not have a place in good descriptive writing. Use specific adjectives and nouns and strong action verbs to give life to the picture you are painting in the reader's mind.
4. Good descriptive writing is organized. Some ways to organize descriptive writing include: chronological (time), spatial (location), and order of importance. When describing a person, you might begin with a physical description, followed by how that person thinks, feels and acts.

Activity 1

Read the selections on the next few pages and look for characteristics of good descriptive writing. In addition, can you guess which novels the selections are from? If you are not familiar with the novels, can you make intelligent guess about the genres?

SELECTION 1

The helping hands didn't stop swarming around him until Thomas stood up straight and had the dust brushed from his shirt and pants. Still dazzled by the light, he staggered a bit. He was consumed with curiosity but still felt too ill to look closely at his surroundings. His new companions said nothing as he swiveled his head around, trying to take it all in.

As he rotated in a slow circle, the other kids snickered and stared; some reached out and poked him with a finger. There had to be at least fifty of them, their clothes smudged and sweaty as if they'd been hard at work, all shapes and sizes and races, their hair of varying lengths. Thomas suddenly felt dizzy, his eyes flickering between the boys and the bizarre place in which he'd found himself.

They stood in a vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of gray stone and covered in spots with thick ivy. The walls had to be hundreds of feet high and formed a perfect square around them, each side split in the exact middle by an opening as tall as the walls themselves that, from what Thomas could see, led to passages and long corridors beyond.

"Look at the Greenbean," a scratchy voice said; Thomas couldn't see who it came from. "Gonna break his shuck neck checkin' out the new digs." Several boys laughed.

"Shut your hole, Gally," a deeper voice responded.

Thomas focused back in on the dozens of strangers around him. He knew he must look out of it—he felt like he'd been drugged. A tall kid with blond

SELECTION 2

We came over the ridge and I paused. I always have to pause. Before A6, this had been a public beach. Tourists, picnickers, runny-nosed kids and fat baggy grandmothers with sunburned elbows. Candy wrappers and popsicle sticks in the sand, all the beautiful people necking on their beach blankets, intermingled stench of exhaust from the parking lot, seaweed, and Coppertone oil.

But now all the dirt and all the crap was gone. The ocean had eaten it, all of it, as casually as you might eat a handful of Cracker Jacks. There were no people to come back and dirty it again. Just us, and we weren't enough to make much mess. We loved the beach too, I guess—hadn't we just offered it a kind of sacrifice? Even Susie, little bitch Susie with her fat ass and her cranberry bellbotoms.

The sand was white and duned, marked only by the high-tide line—twisted skein of seaweed, kelp, hunks of driftwood. The moonlight stitched inky crescent-shaped shadows and folds across everything. The deserted lifeguard tower stood white and skeletal some fifty yards from the bathhouse, pointing toward the sky like a finger bone.

And the surf, the night surf, throwing up great bursts of foam, breaking against the headlands for as far as we could see in endless attacks. Maybe that water had been halfway to England the night before.

SELECTION 3

The captain was in the right of it. We had run down a boat in the fog, and she had parted in the midst and gone to the bottom with all her crew but one. This man (as I heard afterwards) had been sitting in the stern as a passenger, while the rest were on the benches rowing. At the moment of the blow, the stern had been thrown into the air, and the man (having his hands free, and for all he was encumbered with a frieze overcoat that came below his knees) had leaped up and caught hold of the brig's bowsprit. It showed he had luck and much agility and unusual strength, that he should have thus saved himself from such a pass. And yet, when the captain brought him into the round-house, and I set eyes on him for the first time, he looked as cool as I did.

He was smallish in stature, but well set and as nimble as a goat; his face was of a good open expression, but sunburnt very dark, and heavily freckled and pitted with the small-pox; his eyes were unusually light and had a kind of dancing madness in them, that was both engaging and alarming; and when he took off his great-coat, he laid a pair of fine silver-mounted pistols on the table, and I saw that he was belted with a great sword. His manners, besides, were elegant, and he pledged the captain handsomely. Altogether I thought of him, at the first sight, that here was a man I would rather call my friend than my enemy.

The captain, too, was taking his observations, but rather of the man's clothes than his person. And to be sure, as soon as he had taken off the great-coat, he showed forth mighty fine for the round-house of a merchant brig: having a hat with feathers, a red waistcoat, breeches of black plush, and a blue coat with silver buttons and handsome silver lace; costly clothes, though somewhat spoiled with the fog and being slept in.

ACTIVITY 2

<http://www.projectgradhouston.org/fineArts/descriptiveWritingFromPhotographs.php>



INVENTORY:

- List all the objects in the picture.
- Identify the subject.
- List the details of the background and surroundings.
- Identify the type of photograph you think it is: portrait, still life, landscape.

INTERROGATION:

- What is the most important thing, or center of interest in the picture?
- What does the background tell you about the subject?
- From what vantage point or angle do you think the photographer took the picture?
- What do the expressions of the people tell you about them?
- What emotions are the people in the picture showing?
- Does the pose or posture of the person give you more information to interpret the photo?
- Does the clothing help you interpret the photo?
- What questions do you have for the photographer?

WILD IDEAS:

- What do you think might be going on outside the frame of the picture?
- What do you imagine happened just after or before the picture was taken?
- Does the picture have an attitude?
- What feeling do you get from the photograph?
- Does the photo seem to be a part of a story?
- What title or name would you give to this photograph?

INTERPRETATION:

- Use all the evidence gathered in the previous steps to decide what the photographer wanted you to think about the photograph.
- What details or clues in the photo led you to this explanation?