The Descriptive Paragraph

A description is an account that creates a vivid mental image.

The ability to describe people, places, or objects accurately is a useful life skill. Whether you are talking with a stylist about the exact hairstyle you want, sharing a funny or startling scene from your day with a friend in an email, or reporting on the structure of a plant cell for a biology class, you will use description to make your point.

“Snow blows across the highway before me as I walk—little, wavering trails of it swept along like a people dispersed. The snow people—where are they going? Some great danger must pursue them. They hurry and fall, the wind gives them a push, they get up and go on again.”

JOHN HAINES, FROM “SNOW”
What’s the Point of Description?

In a descriptive paragraph, the writer uses sensory details such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and textures to create vivid images in the reader’s mind. An experienced writer relies on sense memories of a specific experience to call to mind these details. In addition, the writer often uses spatial order to create a clear visual image of a person, place, object, or scene: the location or arrangement in space from top to bottom, bottom to top, right to left, left to right, near to far, far to near, inside to outside, or outside to inside.

Every day, we experience rich sensory details from television, movies, music DVDs, and daily life. Think of a scene that grabbed your attention recently. What is your main impression of the scene? What are several details that make this impression so vivid or memorable?

Description also may include or suggest time order because a person, place, or object usually appears in a situation, or an incident usually occurs or suggests a scene.

Descriptive transition words signal that the details follow a logical order based on one or more of the following elements:

1. The arrangement in space of a person, place, object, or scene
2. The starting point from which the writer chooses to begin the description
3. The time frame as relevant to the description (see Chapter 5 for information about time order)

Getting a mental picture of the person, place, object, scene, or situation helps a writer discover his or her point about the subject being described. Study the following photograph of a popular destination for travelers: the Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas. Use your sense memory of this or similar scenes to call up sensory details. Fill in the graphic with captions that capture the particular details of specific locations on the Riverwalk. Then answer the question with a one sentence statement of the overall main idea: “What’s the point or impression you are trying to make?”

PHOTOGRAPHIC ORGANIZER: DESCRIPTION
A Where is this detail in the scene?
Upper left bank

What are the sensory details?
SIGHT: restaurants’ roofs lined with lights; lights in trees
SOUND: laughter, conversation, music
SMELL: damp, chilly
TASTE:
TOUCH: damp, chilly

B Where is this detail in the scene?
Far right bank

What are the sensory details?
SIGHT: lights on walkway and in trees along river
SOUND: laughter, conversation
SMELL:
TASTE:
TOUCH:

C Where is this detail in the scene?
Lower left bank

What are the sensory details?
SIGHT: brightly colored umbrellas; lights next to water
SOUND: laughter, music, conversation
SMELL: food cooking such as grilled meat, onions
TASTE: fajitas, margaritas
TOUCH: damp, chilly
My First Thoughts: A Prewriting Activity

Brainstorm about the images you just studied. Set a time limit, such as five minutes, and write in your notebook about the images you just studied and the details you generated. Write as quickly as you can without stopping.
Making a Point Using Description: One Student Writer’s Response

The following descriptive paragraph, written as an online review for tourists, offers one writer’s point about the Riverwalk at San Antonio. Read this description and the explanations; complete the activities. Then, read the writer’s journal entry about her experience writing the paragraph.

Main Idea:
The main idea is the point the author is making. The topic is “Paseo Del Rio, the San Antonio Riverwalk.” Underline the author’s point.

Spatial Order:
The phrase “left bank” establishes spatial order. Circle four more words or phrases that indicate spatial order.

Relevant Details:
Relevant details describe elements of the scene to support the point “shimmers with color and light.” Underline additional details that support this point.

Effective Expression:
Sensory details such as “cool, damp evenings,” “spicy fajitas,” “salty margaritas,” “lights” and “sunset glimmer” create a vivid mental picture. Underline 3 more sensory details.

Paseo Del Rio: A Festival of Color and Light

(1) The Texas spirit of fun and hospitality lights up Paseo Del Rio, the San Antonio Riverwalk. (2) This festive and popular travel destination shimmers with color and light. (3) Along the left bank, two lines of brightly colored café umbrellas—tropical red, Cancun blue, emerald green, lemon yellow—shelter outdoor diners and adorn the cobblestone walk. (4) Above the rainbow rows of umbrellas, white lights strung between oak trees along the walking path glimmer softly in the dusk. (5) Miniature white lights rim the eaves and roofs of the buildings behind the diners and illuminate the graceful drape of the oak branches bending over them. (6) Diners can stay warm on cool, damp evenings with spicy fajitas and salty margaritas as they watch the lights of the Riverwalk and the sunset glimmer upon the water. (7) As they watch, a steady flow of purple trimmed boats putter to midstream from under the bridge on the right side of the river. (8) On this side of the river, the rock walls and the footbridge showcase the rough beauty of the area’s natural elements and earth tones. (9) Colorful lights trace the arch under the footbridge. (10) Luminaries sit atop both sides of the bridge’s stone-grey railings. (11) At the far side of the bridge, more luminaries light the path along the water’s edge. (12) People fill the path with laughter and conversation as they stroll beneath trees shimmering with countless tiny lights. (13) All along the river, this canopy of lights buffers the Riverwalk from the buildings rising in the distance. (14) The lights, the good food, the water, the spectacle of color, the festive atmosphere provide a luscious retreat—Texas style!
The student writer of “Paseo Del Rio: A Festival of Color and Light” completed the following reflection to record her thinking through the writing process. Read her writer’s journal that describes a few key choices she made as she wrote.

MAIN IDEA: I spent a good deal of time studying this picture before I began writing, and I still needed several revisions to get the effect I wanted. My first thoughts were about the vivid colors and lights and how much fun the Riverwalk looks—like a festival. The place just seems like a carefully created retreat away from the hectic world that lies just a few blocks away. I found a graphic organizer very helpful during prewriting. Since I have visited Riverwalk, I used sense memory to recall details, and the graphic organizer helped me focus my point and map out the order of details without having to worry about wording, sentence structure, or punctuation.

RELEVANT DETAILS: During one revision, I discovered that my sentence about the boats wasn’t relevant to my point. I had included the boats because they were in the picture, not because they supported the point I wanted to make. So I revised that sentence to include the color of the boats, which does add to the festive atmosphere of the Riverwalk and directly supports my point.

LOGICAL ORDER: I devoted one revision to the words that signal spatial order; I wanted to guide the reader’s attention from the left bank to the right bank of the river. I had to really think about how to word these signals so the mind’s eye could create a picture and follow my point. So my mental eye went from the lower left bank of umbrellas, to above the umbrellas, and then behind them. Next, I directed the reader’s attention to the river in the middle of the picture by focusing on what the diners would be watching—the boat tours. To describe the right side of the river, I moved from “near” to “far” based on the location of the bridge.

EFFECTIVE EXPRESSION: During my last revision, I focused on my word choice. By referring to my thesaurus, I was able to use a variety of verbs and nouns for “light.” I wanted to emphasize the beautiful effect of the lights throughout the paragraph.
Developing Your Point Using Description

Writers use descriptive paragraphs to make a point through the vivid details they observe and share about a person, place, object, scene, or situation. To make a point by describing details, a writer often relies on spatial order transitions and sensory details. At times, a writer also uses time order to describe an experience.

The Point: The Main Idea

When you write a description, you limit your topic to concrete details based on sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Your opinion or attitude about the subject you are describing is your point or main idea. In a description, your main idea may also include logical order signal words; other times, the logical order is implied without including the signal words.

For example, the first of the following two topic sentences includes (1) the topic, (2) the writer’s opinion about the topic, and (3) spatial order signal words. The second topic sentence only includes (1) the topic and (2) the writer’s attitude about the topic.

From head to toe, Latoya dressed to appear professional and confident.

Miguel’s office reveals his careful attention to organization.

TOPIC SENTENCES

Practice creating topic sentences. The first two items below present a topic, an opinion, and logical order signal word(s). Combine the ideas in each group to create a topic sentence for a descriptive paragraph. Then complete the practice by composing your own topic sentences.

Answers may vary.

1. TOPIC: (a favorite place) Grandmother’s kitchen

OPINION: offered a haven of old-fashioned country warmth

LOGICAL ORDER SIGNAL WORDS: A small room at the rear of the house

TOPIC SENTENCE: A small room at the rear of the house, Grandmother’s kitchen offered a

haven of old-fashioned country warmth.
2. TOPIC: (a treasured possession) The handmade well-pump lamp

OPINION: is an eye-catching and whimsical family treasure

LOGICAL ORDER SIGNAL WORDS: implied: such as in top to bottom

TOPIC SENTENCE: The handmade well-pump lamp is an eye-catching and whimsical family treasure.

3. TOPIC: (a useful product) An upright vacuum

OPINION: sleek, lightweight, flexible, easy to use

LOGICAL ORDER SIGNAL WORDS (as needed): implied: spatial order: handle, body (bag and attachment rack), and motor base; time order: demonstrates a design

TOPIC SENTENCE: An upright vacuum is sleek, lightweight, flexible, and easy to use.

4. TOPIC: (a person of character) My mother (or father, brother, sister, friend, etc.)

OPINION: kindness

LOGICAL ORDER SIGNAL WORDS (as needed): implied: eyes, hands: a description from top down

TOPIC SENTENCE: My mother is kind.

5. TOPIC: 

OPINION: 

LOGICAL ORDER SIGNAL WORDS (as needed): 

TOPIC SENTENCE:

More practice with creating topic sentences: <www.mywritinglab.com>
Once you have chosen a topic and focused on a main idea, you are ready to generate and organize details. To organize visual details, spatial order transition words are helpful during the prewriting phase as well as during the drafting part of the writing process. During prewriting, spatial signal words such as top, middle, or bottom can be used as headings to list details. During the drafting stage, explicitly stating spatial transition words creates a mental picture in your reader’s mind of how your subject is arranged in space. Strong transition words establish coherence—a clear and easy-to-follow flow of ideas.
**SPATIAL ORDER DETAILS**

Determine the logical order of the following details taken from Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Rewrite the paragraph, organizing the details by spatial order. *Hint:* Underline the words that signal spatial order. Complete the exercise by answering the question “What's the point?”

4. And when they put their hands on their hips in a show of jauntiness, the palms slipped the thighs as if the pants were waxed.

2. When they tried to smile to carry off their tiredness as if it was nothing, the body did nothing to help the mind's attempt at disguise.

1. In the store the men's faces were the most painful to watch, but I seemed to have no choice.

3. Their shoulders drooped even as they laughed.

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In the store the men's faces were the most painful to watch, but I seemed to have no choice.

When they tried to smile to carry off their tiredness as if it was nothing, the body did nothing to help the mind's attempt at disguise. Their shoulders drooped even as they laughed. And when they put their hands on their hips in a show of jauntiness, the palms slipped the thighs as if the pants were waxed.

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What's the point Maya Angelou makes with her use of spatial details?

*Student answers will vary; one possible answer: The men in the store can't hide how tired they are.*

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### Relevant Details

A writer narrows a topic into a focused main idea by generating descriptive details that answer questions such as who, what, and where. As a writer brainstorms, the thinking process brings to mind many sensory as well as spatial details. A writer evaluates the relevancy of each detail and uses only those that illustrate the main idea. Some relevant details describe the appearance of a person, object, place, or scene; other relevant details explain the author’s opinion about the topic. Many descriptive details appeal to sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. A **concept map**, or **graphic organizer**, helps in several ways. First, the graphic can prompt your thinking, memory, and creativity. In addition, the graphic helps to order ideas as they occur to you. A graphic organizer also allows you to visualize the details and see if you have enough details to make your point. Irrelevant details do not explain, support, or illustrate the focused point of the paragraph. In addition to the graphic organizer, writers use the revision process to double check details for relevancy and to eliminate irrelevant details.
During the prewriting phase of writing, a writer naturally generates irrelevant details. In fact, an effective writer evaluates the details and uses only the details that support the main idea. All descriptive details should work together to create a strong, unified impression, a mental image of the author's main point.

### RELEVANT CONCRETE DETAILS

The following paragraph develops the ideas recorded in the graphic organizer about Latoya and her professional attire. Circle the main idea. Underline the spatial signal words and the sensory details. Cross out the two details that are not relevant to the main idea.

#### Dressed to Impress

(1) Latoya Bond had been job hunting for months; finally, she landed an interview with a company that she was eager to join. (2) Latoya felt confident that she was well qualified for the position. (3) After all, she was one of the three final candidates chosen from over 100 applications, yet she also knew the importance of making a good impression. (4) From head to toe, Latoya dressed to appear professional and confident. (5) Latoya gathered her hard-to-manage curls into a neat and stylish twist. (6) To complement her no-nonsense hairstyle, Latoya used makeup sparingly but effectively. (7) A little black mascara on her lashes, a touch of blush across her cheeks, and bit of tinted lip balm brought attention to her interested eyes and her earnest smile. (8) She would also be sure to speak with a calm and assured voice. (9) The neatly pressed collar of a white cotton shirt contrasted nicely with her tailored blue pinstriped jacket. (10) Her dark blue A-line skirt reached to just below her knees. (11) Latoya finished her outfit with a flattering pair of blue low-heeled pumps that matched her briefcase and purse. (12) She would offer her prospective employer a firm handshake. (13) Latoya looked as professional and confident as she felt.
Effective Expression: Concrete Word Choice

Precise word choice communicates exact meaning. Words chosen for a specific emotional or visual impact create strong mental images in the reader’s mind and carry out the writer’s purpose. As you move through the writing process, think about the impact you want to have on your reader. For the greatest impact, choose concrete and precise words and phrases instead of general or vague expressions. Choose words that show instead of tell. Consider the following examples:

General or vague words that tell:
This property has curb appeal.

Concrete words that show:
This beachfront cottage charms potential buyers with its colorful garden, wrap-around porch, and ocean view.

CONCRETE WORD CHOICE

Each item below presents a general sentence using vague words. The phrase in parentheses before each sentence—“(A customer to a mechanic)” in item 1, for example—describes the speaker of the sentence and the person hearing it. Revise each sentence to eliminate vague wording. Consider the point of the writing situation; express ideas with words that have concrete and precise meanings for a specific impact. Discuss your revisions with your class or with a small group of peers.

1. (A customer to a mechanic): My car makes a funny sound sometimes.
   My car’s engine screeches and whirs during acceleration. My brakes squeal.

2. (A student commenting to his or her companion): The restaurant was disappointing.
   The dark and dirty restaurant smelled like an old mop.

3. (A weather reporter to a commuter): The weather is nice (or horrible).
   Today’s weather will be warm with highs in the 80s and breezy with no chance of rain.

4. (A staff assistant to Technology Support): The printer is broken.
   On the menu display, an exclamation point flashes orange and the word “error” scrolls across the screen as the printer spews out stacks of blank paper.
Using Description in Your Academic Courses

Many college courses such as literature, composition, history, psychology, ecology, and biology use description. As you study these courses, you will read descriptions of historical places, influential people, natural elements, and scientific experiments. In addition, you will write descriptions to learn or demonstrate what you have learned.

Using Description in a History Assignment

Student writer Jean Powell composed the following descriptive paragraph of an important historical site for a report in her American History course. Complete the following activities: (1) Insert appropriate transition words in the blanks. (2) Underline the words or phrases used to create sensory details. (3) Discuss the point of her report with a small group of peers or with your class.

Answers will vary.

The Vietnam Memorial is made up of two black granite walls joined in a wide-angled V shape. A study of just one of the walls reveals the significance of the memorial. A polished black granite slab stretches hundreds of feet long. At its highest tip, it stands 10 feet tall and then tapers to a height of 8 inches at its end point. Its low tip points toward the Lincoln Memorial. On its polished face are the carved names of service men and women who gave their lives during the Vietnam War. Starting at the highest point on the first panel, thousands of names are listed in chronological order. The high polish of the black granite reflects the image of the world upon the wall. The reflection of earth, sky, and visitors are seen along with the inscribed names. On the wall, the present and the past mingle. A path runs along the base of the wall so visitors can walk the path to read the names. Many create pencil rubbings or leave tokens such as flowers, flags, and personal notes. To the side of the path, a wide grassy park adds to the sense of serenity. The memorial is a quiet place where one can come to terms with loss and grief. Its tranquility is a fitting memorial to a controversial war that cost so many their lives.
Workshop: Writing a Description Paragraph Step by Step

Prewrite Your Paragraph

The various activities below will walk you through the steps of the prewriting stage of the writing process: choosing a topic; focusing your point; and generating and organizing relevant details.

Choose Your Topic

The following activities are designed to help you choose a topic.

1. Create a bank of topics. Use the following headings and brainstorm or list as many topics as you possibly can. Don’t analyze your thoughts; just jot down topics as quickly as they occur to you. Compare your bank of topics with those of your classmates.
   - The scene of an accident
   - A nature scene
   - A pop icon
   - An advertisement
   - Emotions (such as fear)

2. Reread the freewrite you composed based on the photograph of the San Antonio Riverwalk. Underline ideas that could be used for a descriptive paragraph. Map out the logical order of details.

3. Select a photograph of a special place. Write captions, brainstorm sensory details, and freewrite about the photograph. Remember to ask “What are the sensory details and how are the details arranged in space?” and “What’s the point?” as you generate ideas.

Focus Your Point

Think about a prewrite you have generated for a descriptive topic. Underline or generate words that suggest your values, opinions, or attitudes about what you described. Think about what strikes you as important about your subject. Consider your audience. Who would be interested in this information and why? Choose a purpose. Write a list of adjectives and sensory details that describe the essence of what you are describing. Use a thesaurus and choose several vivid words to express your thoughts. State in one sentence the point of your description:

AUDIENCE: ...........................................................................................................................

PURPOSE: ............................................................................................................................

WHAT’S THE POINT? ...........................................................................................................

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Generate and Organize Relevant Details

Using the ideas you have already recorded and the concept chart for a description, generate and organize sensory and spatial details that support your point. *(Hint: Fill in the “Where” column with spatial signal words such as left, right, near, far, above.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept Chart: Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOPIC:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT’S THE POINT?</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHERE</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Write a Draft of Your Paragraph

Using ideas you generated during the prewriting phase, compose a draft of your paragraph. Return to the prewriting process at any time to generate additional details as needed. Use your own paper.

Revise Your Draft

Once you have drafted a description, read the draft and answer the questions in the “Questions for Revising a Descriptive Paragraph” box that follows on the next page. Indicate your answers by annotating your paper. If you answer “yes” to a question, underline, check, or circle examples. If you answer “no” to a question, write needed information in the margins and draw lines to indicate placement of additional details. Revise your paragraph as necessary based on your reflection. *(Hint: Experienced writers create several drafts as they focus on one or two questions per draft.)*
Questions for Revising a Descriptive Paragraph

☐ Have I stated or implied a focused main idea? Have I created a strong impression? Can I state my point in one sentence?

☐ Is the logical order of the details clear? Have I used strong transitions to indicate spatial order? Time order?

☐ Have I created a vivid mental image through the use of sensory details?

☐ Have I made my point with adequate details?

☐ Do all the details support my point?

☐ Have I chosen concrete words to make my point?

Proofread Your Draft

Once you have made any revisions to your paragraph that may be needed, proofread your paper to eliminate unnecessary errors, such as dangling or misplaced modifiers.

Grammar in Action: Eliminate Dangling or Misplaced Modifiers

Modifiers are words and phrases that describe other words. A dangling modifier occurs when a writer uses a modifier without including the word that the modifier describes.

- Dangling modifier:
  \[ \text{INCORRECT: Entering the museum of shrunken heads, my stomach lurched with queasiness.} \]
  \[ \text{(The missing word is "I"; it was I, not my stomach, that entered the museum.)} \]
  \[ \text{Revised sentence:} \]
  \[ \text{CORRECT: As I entered the museum of shrunken heads, my stomach lurched with queasiness.} \]

A misplaced modifier occurs when a writer separates the modifier from the word it is describing.

- Misplaced modifier:
  \[ \text{INCORRECT: Scattering in a million directions, Tyrone hustled to scoop up the spilled ball bearings.} \]
  \[ \text{(The ball bearings scattered, not Tyrone)} \]
  \[ \text{Revised sentence:} \]
  \[ \text{CORRECT: Tyrone hustled to scoop up the spilled ball bearings scattering in a million directions.} \]
The Amazing Ruby Falls

(1) The caves at Ruby Falls are one of the wonders of the world, eerie yet intriguing. (2) Our tour group was a small one of about ten people. (3) We all piled onto an elevator, stuffy from all the bodies and stinking like a dirty sock, to sink 250 feet underground. (4) We exited the elevator, gasping for air because of the lack of oxygen and the dampness of the cave. (5) The cave was dark with barely any light. (6) We wore helmets mounted with lights. (7) I looked like a real spelunker. (8) We saw stalactites hanging from the ceiling and stalagmites growing up from the ground. (9) The columns, drapes, and flow stone were phenomenal. (10) We walked through an onyx jungle flowing with layers of limestone. (11) The massive monuments were smooth and damp. (12) Some were slimy like a snail. (13) Water trickled from the ceiling in my hair and down my face, a kiss from the cave. (14) Squeezing through stone pathways littered with rock shapes resembling everything from bacon, to a dragon foot, to a form that looked like New York City, all natural. (15) We came across a huge formation; that appeared to be lifelike; the icicle stalactites looked like they could break free and assault us. (16) A breathtaking formation that appeared to be lifelike. (17) The caves are amazing.
Use the following form to record your thinking about writing a descriptive paragraph. Select and focus a topic for your writing situation, audience, and purpose.

Choose a person, place, object, or scene and identify its significance.

What is your point?

**TOPIC, PERSON, PLACE, OBJECT, OR SCENE:**

**AUDIENCE:**

**PURPOSE:**

State your main idea in a topic sentence.

**TOPIC:**

**OPINION:**

Generate relevant details:

**REPORTER’S QUESTIONS: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN?**
Generate sensory details:

LOCATION (TOP, MIDDLE, BOTTOM, LEFT, RIGHT):

.................................................................

.................................................................

SIGHT: .................................................................

.................................................................

SMELL: .................................................................

.................................................................

SOUND: .................................................................

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TASTE: .................................................................

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TOUCH: .................................................................

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Use logical order. Use transitions words to signal organization of details and relationships between ideas.

SPACE ORDER: .................................................................

TIME ORDER: .................................................................

Use effective expression. Choose words for clear, precise meaning.

CONCRETE WORDS THAT SHOW INSTEAD OF TELL: .................................................................

.................................................................

CORRECTED DANGLING OR MISPLACED MODIFIERS: .................................................................
## Writing Assignments

### Considering Audience and Purpose

Study the photographs at the beginning of the chapter. Assume you are a member of the Riverwalk business community, and the community leaders have asked you and other interested parties for needed safety improvements along Riverwalk. Suggest and describe one or more specific safety improvements.

### Writing for Everyday Life

Assume you are separated from your family or loved ones during a holiday or a special occasion. Write a letter in which you describe a significant element of the event. For example, describe the decorations of the season or event, a bride’s dress, a favorite birthday gift, or the spread of food at a party or dinner. Choose words that reflect one of the following: (1) approval and enjoyment or (2) disapproval and disappointment.

### Writing for College Life

Assume you are writing a report in your psychology class about how a person’s mood is reflected in the clothes he or she chooses on any given day. Describe an outfit that reflects an individual’s mood.

### Writing for Working Life

Assume you have invented a product that will make life much easier; also assume that the Small Business Association finances the production and marketing of useful new inventions. Write a paragraph describing your product to submit your idea to the Small Business Association.