

Example of descriptive writing

The following scenario may help clarify description as a mode of writing. Imagine you had witnessed a robbery. You saw the criminal fleeing from a convenience store on the evening of August 29, 2002. Police arrived on the scene and asked you to describe in writing what the robber looked like. Your description might read like the paragraph below.

"The suspect was a white male, approximately six feet tall with a medium build. His complexion was fair and he wore a moustache. He looked young, perhaps between 20 and 25 years of age. He was wearing dirty blue jeans, a white, short-sleeve tee shirt with a logo on the back, and athletic shoes. He wore a tattered, black baseball cap, and his hair, blonde in color, hung out the back of the cap to about shoulder length. He ran out of the store with a brown bag in his left hand. As he ran, he carried his right arm across his chest as if it were in a sling. A driver was waiting for him at the far edge of the store's parking lot in a dilapidated pickup, a dark blue Dodge (maybe 1990). The suspect climbed in the passenger door of the pickup and it sped off onto 4th Street."

Now, imagine that another person who was also at the store saw the criminal as well as you had. The police asked this person, like yourself, to describe what the robber looked like. That description might read like the paragraph below.

"It all happened pretty quickly, but I got a good look at him. I was a little shocked at first, and then I was a little frightened. I was only there to buy some milk and then it happened. The robber was dressed like a kid except older. He had a moustache or maybe a beard. He had long hair and wore a hat. He wasn't too tall, but he looked big. He ran from the store. The guy got in a pickup and drove away. He wasn't too old because he dressed like a kid in jeans and a shirt. He was a bum, probably a junkie. It's just like them. They got away in an old truck."

Who is the audience for these descriptions? Which one has a clearer focus? What differences are there in word choices between the two descriptions? Which attempts to be more objective? What levels of general or specific language are used? Does the level of detail and specificity lead one paragraph to have a clearer focus? Why is one more organized than the other? Your answers to these questions will form a basis for the qualities and characteristics of descriptive writing.

To play out this scenario even further, imagine that the officer asked you to come down to the police station to write a full statement of your involvement at the scene of the crime. Perhaps in your statement you also mentioned that the robber had the distinctive smell of alcohol about him, a clue that might be helpful to police trying to capture a criminal. Or, perhaps you also heard peculiar and unusual noises from the engine of the getaway pickup.

Also, you may have been asked to describe the robber's face to a police artist who could produce a composite sketch, an image or picture, of what the robber looked like. In describing the criminal's face for the artist, the level of detail you would supply would need to be of a high or dense nature in order for the artist to produce an accurate composite. In a sense, in

your description at the police station you would be giving in words a close-up shot of the criminal. In the paragraph above, written at the scene of the crime, you had given a more general description or, by comparison, a generalized view of the robber.

Yet another example of description connected to this robbery scenario would be the technical specifications of the manufacturer for the model of gun used by the robber. Reporting technical information requires a precision in description even beyond that required of the close-up sketch of what the robber's face looked like, but technical writing is the content of a separate course and not to be covered here.

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