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Descriptive writing

Reading

When you are writing something imaginative – such as a story or an account of an interesting personal experience – you can make your writing more effective by including detailed descriptions of people and places. To write effective descriptions, you need a clear picture in your mind of who or what it is that you are setting out to describe. Doing this allows you to focus on precise details which make the descriptions come alive in the reader's mind. Good writers incorporate descriptive passages into the overall piece of writing rather than write descriptively for the sake of it.

A good rule to follow in writing descriptions is to base what you describe on your own experiences. This doesn't mean that writers always describe exactly what they have seen or people they have met, but that they use their real life experiences as a *basis* for their descriptions and then develop them from there.

Here are five examples of descriptive writing (Extracts 1 to 5). Read the passages carefully and answer the questions that follow. All of these passages are taken from books written in the last 150 years or so (the earliest was published in 1854). Extracts 1 and 2 describe very hot days in the countryside. Extract 1 is set in the island of Jamaica in the Caribbean; Extract 2 is set in Botswana in Southern Africa.

Extract 1: A High Wind in Jamaica

The sun was still red and large: the sky above cloudless, and light blue glaze poured over baking clay: but close over the ground a dirty grey haze hovered. As they followed the lane towards the sea they came to a place where, yesterday, a fair-sized spring had bubbled up by the roadside. Now it was dry. But even as they passed some water splashed out, and then it was dry again, although gurgling inwardly to itself. But the group of children were hot, far too hot to speak to one another: they sat on their ponies as loosely as possible, longing for the sea.

The morning advanced. The heated air grew quite easily hotter, as if from some enormous furnace from which it could draw at will. Bullocks only shifted their stinging feet when they could bear the soil no longer: even the insects were too lethargic to pipe, the basking lizards hid themselves and panted. It was so still you could have heard the least buzz a mile off. Not a naked fish would willingly move his tail. The ponies advanced because they must. The children ceased even to think.

Richard Hughes

Exercise 1: A High Wind in Jamaica

- 1 From Extract 1 choose three details that convey the extreme heat of the day. Give reasons for your choice.
- 2 How did the heat affect the children?
- 3 Explain, using your own words, how the animal life responded to the heat.
- 4 Later in the day, a hurricane hits the area. How do the descriptions in the passage suggest that something serious is about to happen?

Extract 2: *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*



Suddenly she saw the house, tucked away behind the trees almost in the shadow of the hill. It was a bare earth house in the traditional style; brown mud walls, a few glassless windows, with a knee-height wall around the yard. A previous owner, a long time ago, had painted designs on the wall, but neglect and the years had scaled them off and only their ghosts remained ... She opened the door and eased herself out of the van. The sun was riding high; its light prickled at her skin. They were too far west here, too close to the Kalahari Desert, and her unease increased. This was not the comforting land she had grown up with; this was the merciless Africa, the waterless land.

Alexander McCall Smith

Exercise 2: The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

- 1 From Extract 2 choose three words or phrases that suggest that the house and its surroundings were unwelcoming and hostile. Give reasons for your choice.
- 2 Explain the effects of the sun on the woman in the passage.
- 3 What was it that she did not like about this part of the Kalahari Desert?
- 4 We learn in the book that the lady detective is visiting the house of a murderer. How does the description of the house and its surroundings emphasise this point?

Extracts 3 and 4 describe living beings. Gerald Durrell was a naturalist, conservationist and zoo keeper. In Extract 3 he describes a family of young hedgehogs that he looked after when he was a young boy. Charles Dickens, on the other hand, describes an unpleasant nineteenth century factory owner in his novel *Hard Times* in Extract 4.

Extract 3: Birds, Beasts and Relatives

They are covered with a thick coating of spikes but these are white and soft, as though made of rubber. They gradually harden and turn brown when the babies are a few weeks old. When they are old enough to leave the nursery the mother leads them out and shows them how to hunt for food; they walk in line, the tail of one held in the mouth of the baby behind. The baby at the head of the column holds tight to mother's tail with grim determination, and they move through the twilight hedgerows like a strange prickly centipede ...

Mine were always ready for food at any hour of the day or night. You had only to touch the box and a chorus of shrill screams arose from four little pointed faces poking out of the leaves, each head decorated with a crew-cut of white spikes; and the little black noses would wave desperately from side to side in an effort to locate the bottle.

Most baby animals know when they have had enough, but in my experience this does not apply to baby hedgehogs. Like four survivors from a raft, they flung themselves on to the bottle and sucked and sucked and sucked as though they had not had a decent meal in weeks. If I had allowed it they would have drunk twice as much as was good for them. As it was, I think I tended to overfeed them, for their tiny legs could not support the weight of their fat bodies, and they would advance across the carpet with a curious swimming motion, their tummies dragging on the ground. However, they progressed very well: their legs grew stronger, their eyes opened, and they would even make daring excursions as much as 15 centimetres away from their box.



Gerald Durrell

Exercise 3: Birds, Beasts and Relatives

- 1 From Extract 3 write down six facts that you learn about hedgehogs.
- 2 Choose four words or phrases from the passage that refer to the hedgehogs as if they were human children. How does each of these expressions help you to imagine the appearance and behaviour of the animals?
- 3 Explain, using your own words, the way in which the hedgehogs drank from the bottle of milk.
- 4 Explain, using your own words, the effect of having drunk too much milk on the hedgehogs.

Extract 4: *Hard Times*

He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility.

A year or two younger than his eminently practical friend, Mr Bounderby looked older; his seven or eight and forty might have had the seven or eight added to it again, without surprising anybody. He had not much hair. One might have fancied he had talked it off; and that what was left, all standing up in disorder, was in that condition from being constantly blown about by his windy boastfulness.

In the formal drawing-room of Stone Lodge, standing on the hearthrug, warming himself before the fire, Mr Bounderby delivered some observations to Mrs Gradgrind on the circumstance of its being his birthday. He stood before the fire, partly because it was a cool spring afternoon, though the sun shone; partly because the shade of Stone Lodge was always haunted by the ghost of damp mortar; partly because he thus took up a commanding position, from which to subdue Mrs Gradgrind.

'I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch.'



Mr Bounderby

Charles Dickens

Exercise 4: Hard Times

- 1 How old is Mr Bounderby from Extract 4?
- 2 What do you think the phrase ‘metallic laugh’ suggests about Mr Bounderby and his interests?
- 3 Choose four words or phrases from the passage which suggest that Mr Bounderby is a thoroughly unpleasant man. Explain as fully as you can how the expressions you have chosen suggest his unpleasantness.
- 4 Explain what is meant by ‘the Bully of humility’.
- 5 Give one piece of evidence from the passage to show that Mr Bounderby is a bully.
- 6 Choose two descriptions that suggest that the writer is making fun of Mr Bounderby. Explain the reasons for your choice.

The final passage – Extract 5 – is by the Irish writer, Flann O’Brien, and describes a rather creepy old house.

Extract 5: The Third Policeman

I opened the iron gate and walked as softly as I could up the weed-tufted gravel drive. My mind was strangely empty. I felt no glow of pleasure and was unexcited at the prospect of becoming rich. I was occupied only with the mechanical task of finding a black box.

The front door was closed and set far back in a very deep porch. The wind and rain had whipped a coating of gritty dust against the panels and deep into the crack where the door opened, showing that it had been shut for years. Standing on a derelict flower-bed, I tried to push open the first window on the left. It yielded to my strength, raspily and stubbornly. I clambered through the opening and found myself, not at once in a room, but crawling along the deepest window-ledge I had ever seen. After I had jumped noisily down upon the floor, I looked up and the open window seemed very far away and much too small to have admitted me.

The room where I found myself was thick with dust, musty and empty of all furniture. Spiders had erected great stretchings of their web about the fireplace. I made my way quickly to the hall, threw open the door of the room where the box was and paused on the threshold. It was a dark morning and the weather had stained the windows with blears of grey wash which kept the brightest part of the weak light from coming in. The far corner of the room was a blur of shadow. I had a sudden urge to have done with my task and be out of this house forever.

Flann O’Brien

Exercise 5: The Third Policeman

- 1 Where does the narrator of the story first land once he has climbed through the window?
- 2 What evidence can you find in the second paragraph that the house has 'been shut for years'?
- 3 Why is it difficult for the narrator to see into the far corner of the room in the final paragraph?
- 4 What evidence is there in the final paragraph that the inside of the house is deserted?
- 5 Choose five words or phrases that suggest to you that there is something mysterious about the house. Give reasons for your choices.

Reading for pleasure

Here are two more descriptions of places. The first one is another extract from *Hard Times* in which Dickens describes a fictional industrial town and makes it appear like a vision of hell. The second passage is an entirely different picture. It is an extract from another book by Gerald Durrell called *My Family and Other Animals*. In the passage he describes the appearance of a villa in which he and his family lived when he was a child growing up on the Greek island of Corfu. Read the two passages and think about how the writers achieve their effects – you may find this of help when you do the writing tasks on page 51–52.

Hard Times

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. [...] All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction.



Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

Charles Dickens

My Family and Other Animals

Halfway up the slope, guarded by a group of tall, slim, cypress-trees, nestled a small strawberry-pink villa, like some exotic fruit lying in the greenery. The cypress-trees undulated gently in the breeze, as if they were busily painting the sky a still brighter blue for our arrival.



The villa was small and square, standing in its tiny garden with an air of pink-faced determination. Its shutters had been faded by the sun to a delicate creamy-green, cracked and bubbled in places. The garden, surrounded by tall fuschia hedges, had the flower beds worked in complicated geometrical patterns, marked with smooth white stones. The white cobbled paths, scarcely as wide as a rake's head, wound laboriously round beds hardly larger than a big straw hat, beds in the shape of stars, half-moons, triangles, and circles all overgrown with a shaggy tangle of flowers run wild. Roses dropped petals that seemed as big and smooth as saucers, flame-red, moon-white, glossy, and unwrinkled; marigolds like broods of shaggy suns stood watching their parent's progress through the sky. In the low growth the pansies pushed their velvety, innocent faces through the leaves, and the violets drooped sorrowfully under their heart-shaped leaves. The bougainvillea that sprawled luxuriously over the tiny iron balcony was hung, as though for a carnival, with its lantern-shaped magenta flowers. In the darkness of the fuschia-hedge a thousand ballerina-like blooms quivered expectantly. The warm air was thick with the scent of a hundred dying flowers, and full of the gentle, soothing whisper and murmur of insects.

Gerald Durrell

Writing

Similes

A **simile** is a figure of speech in which two things that are not obviously like each other are compared to make a description more vivid. A simile will often begin with a phrase introduced by *like* or *as*.

Here are some examples of similes taken from the passages on pages 47–48:

- 1 the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, **like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness**
- 2 a small strawberry-pink villa, **like some exotic fruit lying in the greenery**
- 3 the cypress-trees undulated gently in the breeze, **as if they were busily painting the sky**
- 4 roses dropped petals that seemed **as big and smooth as saucers**
- 5 marigolds **like broods of shaggy suns**
- 6 a thousand **ballerina-like blooms** quivered expectantly.

You'll notice that each of these similes (identified in **bold**) makes you think of the object it describes in an original way, bringing the object more clearly into your mind.

For example, the bright orange colour of the marigolds in number 5 and the shape of their petals are emphasised by the comparison with a 'shaggy sun'; and the comparison with large saucers in number 4 focuses on the size and perfection of the rose petals. In number 1 Dickens achieves many effects with his comparison of the movement of the steam-engine's piston with the movement of 'an elephant in a state of melancholy madness': he emphasises the unnatural and overwhelming size of the machines; he hints at the depressing effects they have on the lives of the workers; and he suggests the dangerous and potentially uncontrollable power and strength contained within them.

Metaphors

Metaphors are like concentrated similes. In a metaphor two dissimilar things are compared but rather than saying one is like the other, a metaphor goes a stage further and makes one thing become another.

For example, in the *Hard Times* passage on page 47, Dickens writes about 'tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled'. Here he is comparing the way smoke from factory chimneys appears in the sky to huge snakes floating in the air and coiling above the ground. However, rather than say 'the smoke was like



snakes' he gives the scene even more impact by making the smoke and the snakes the same thing. He succeeds in adding to the hellish portrait of the town. Metaphors are often used by poets who want to pack as much meaning as they can into as few words as possible.

A word of warning

Similes can be very effective aids in your imaginative writing; however, if a simile is used too often it tends to lose its effect. For example, the statement 'The young child was as good as gold' contains a simile ('as good as gold') but the comparison is so common that very few people when reading it think of the precious nature of gold and how this emphasises the value of the child's behaviour. Overused similes such as this are known as **clichés** and relying on them too much is a sign of lazy writing. Try to avoid doing this at all costs.

Another point to bear in mind when using similes is to make sure that there is always at least one point of comparison between the two objects in the clause and that the simile used is drawing attention to that quality in the first object.

Finally, remember that too many similes in the same paragraph can slow down your writing so it's usually better to use similes sparingly unless, as in Gerald Durrell's description of the strawberry-pink villa, you are trying deliberately to create a sense of peace and calm.

Exercise: Similes

Some overused similes are listed below. Think of some more original comparisons and then make up sentences in which they are used:

- 1 clean as a whistle
- 2 quiet as a mouse
- 3 cool as a cucumber
- 4 straight as an arrow
- 5 as easy as pie
- 6 like a bull in a china shop
- 7 run like the wind
- 8 hungry as a horse
- 9 flat as a pancake
- 10 as cold as ice.

Techniques for descriptive writing

Describing things effectively is an important way to directly involve your readers – the more convincing your descriptions, the more likely you are to draw your readers into your writing. It's important that you make your descriptions as clear as possible and you can do this by focusing on specific details of the person or place that you are describing.

An effective and straightforward way of including such detail is by concentrating on how what you are describing appeals to the different senses. Ask yourself the following questions before you start to write to help you focus on these details.

- What does the person or place look like?
- What sounds do I hear? (This could refer to a person's voice and/or movements or to the sounds that are most apparent in the place you are writing about.)
- What does it feel like? (For example, you could describe a character's handshake or the feeling of damp and cold in a winter scene.)
- What does it taste like?
- What does it smell like?

Obviously, you may not want to include references to all the senses in every description – if you're describing your favourite pet it's unlikely that you will want to describe its taste!

Most importantly, good descriptive writing depends on choosing exactly the right word to communicate what is in your mind. It's usually better to present your description in a dynamic way through an effective choice of verbs and adverbs, rather than slowing down your description with too many adjectives and similes. Consider the following sentences.

- The teacher came into the classroom and sat on his chair behind the desk.
- The teacher drifted into the classroom and slumped into his chair behind the desk.
- The teacher stormed into the classroom and positioned himself on the chair behind his desk.

Each of these sentences conveys the same basic information (a teacher entered a classroom and sat at his desk). However, the different choice of verbs (underlined) in each sentence suggests a completely different account of events. The first one is neutral in what it tells us; the other two sentences are much more vivid and give a much clearer indication of the mood and character of the teacher.

Exercise: Developing a description

Here are some brief notes made by a writer as to what is to be included in a description of a scene.

Night time; house; trees; countryside; people entering house; cars; moonlight; noises in background; people talking; food being cooked; man in shadow of tree.

- Write two short paragraphs in which you develop these notes to produce a detailed and vivid description.
- Through choosing your words carefully, try to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere in one of the paragraphs and then a sinister and threatening atmosphere in your other paragraph.

Exercise: Character and place description

Write two longer paragraphs in which you:

- 1 describe an unusual and eccentric character. (It may help to base this character on someone you know, but you can, of course, add or make up details. It doesn't have to be a human being – it could be a pet or another animal)
- 2 describe the place in which this character lives. You should concentrate on creating a description of a place which matches the eccentric nature of the character you have described in the previous paragraph.

Speaking and listening

Activity

Imagine that you have been witness to a minor crime and that you are helping the police with their enquiries by giving them a description of the person or persons involved. Give your description to your group – you should base it on someone you all know (although not necessarily a member of the group) – and ask them to see if they can guess who you are describing. Remember: you wouldn't know the criminal's name!

Key skills

Punctuation

Commas

Commas are one of the most commonly used pieces of punctuation and are key in allowing you to express yourself precisely. It's important that you understand when and where you should use them, and not just put them into your writing at random. Commas have four main uses which should become second nature to a confident writer.

- 1 To separate words or phrases in a list or series (except for the last two items which are usually joined by 'and'). For example: 'Polly's bag contained all her favourite things; in it there were coloured pencils, felt tipped pens, a small paintbox with brushes, drawing paper and a notebook for writing down ideas.'
- 2 To separate the name or title of a person being spoken to from the rest of the sentence. For example: 'Mummy, I'm feeling very tired and my back hurts,' said Polly.
- 3 To mark off words or phrases that follow a noun and which are parallel in meaning to it. This is known as being in apposition. For example: 'Barbara, Polly's mother, met some of her friends in the park.' The phrase 'Polly's mother' is in apposition to 'Barbara' as the two are the same person.
- 4 To separate words and phrases such as 'however', 'therefore', 'by the way', 'nevertheless', 'moreover', etc. that have been added into a sentence. For example: 'Polly was feeling tired; however, she knew that she had to finish the long walk.'

Exercise: Commas

Copy out the following passage and then insert commas where necessary.

Mrs Lee the Headteacher of Springfield Primary School was proud of her school. The students were hard-working punctual well-behaved and interested in their lessons. The classrooms were well-equipped with modern furniture new textbooks computers and interactive whiteboards. Moreover when she walked round on her daily inspection she knew that she would be welcomed into the classrooms by every teacher in the school. Only that morning she had entered the classroom of Mr Miah the Deputy Head. Straightaway all the children stood up and said 'Good morning Mrs Lee we are very pleased to see you.' Mr Miah however appeared to be a little confused by their greeting and Mrs Lee realised that it must have been something they had done without any prompting from him.