

DESCRIPTIVE AND SENSORY DETAIL IN NARRATIVE WRITING

Overview

Descriptive details allow sensory recreations of experiences, objects, or imaginings. In other words, description encourages a more concrete or sensory experience of a subject, one that allows the reader to transport himself or herself into a scene. Writing that lacks description is in danger of being vague or overly general.

Usage

There are many different uses of descriptive detail. Although most commonly associated with creative writing, description enhances a wide variety of subjects. Writing that effectively uses descriptive detail will allow a reader to do more than merely see words on a page. Original description gives writing a sense of honesty and believability, while concise details can help enhance your focus. Descriptive details cause a reader to feel, to hear, to taste, to become intimately connected with the images and experiences being recreated. There are many different ways in which descriptive detail can be included in writing. Whether to describe, persuade, illustrate or demonstrate, the descriptive details you include in your writing should serve a purpose not just pad your writing with more words.

Sensory Detail

It is important to remember that human beings learn about the world through using the five senses. They are our primary source of knowledge about the world. Therefore, writing which incorporates vivid, sensory detail is more likely to engage and affect the reader. The following writing sample uses sensory detail to create concrete images. Because the most effective way to incorporate sensory detail is to use all five senses in harmony, this sample provides an effective example of how sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste work together to strengthen writing. Each of the views highlights exactly how each sense is involved in improving the paragraph's imagery.

Example Text: Paragraph Without Sensory Detail

Grandmother Workman reached over and grabbed her grandson's arm. He was nervous because the staircase was so steep, but she leaned against him and they began to climb.

Comment: These are the beginning sentences of a paragraph that describes a boy helping an elderly woman up a flight of stairs. The scene seems simple enough, but it leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Without the inclusion of sensory detail, the writing seems vague and non-specific. How might the author use descriptive detail to make the scene more vivid?

Example Text: Add Sight

Grandmother Workman *lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand*. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, *fidged with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip*. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmother's labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: Visual details are often successfully incorporated into writing. Details that appeal to our sense of sight ensure that the reader is able to give faces to characters, or add concrete details to a setting. For example, through adding visual detail, a room can become more than just a blank, vague receptacle. It becomes a small, oblong room with peeling maroon wallpaper and cracked ceiling tiles. A visual description allows readers to place themselves *within* a text. In the sample text, visual details help accomplish this through encouraging the reader to create a mental image of the characters, setting, and action.

Example Text: Add Sound

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidged with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, *the only sound was his grandmother's labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs*.

Comment: The human sense of hearing is an important means of communication. Next to visual details, auditory details are most commonly included in writing. This is because sounds give us a primary experience of the world. Sounds can remind us of personal memories, or can create images in our minds. For example, the sound of a ship's whistle might remind a person of a summer's night in New England, or of a tour of duty in the military. Sounds recreate personal, sensory experiences. The addition of auditory details gives the writer the opportunity to create a more detailed, layered, texture. In the sample text, the writer has incorporated references to sounds that allow the reader to infer the state of the old staircase, as well as the physical condition of the grandmother.

Example Text: Add Smell

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. *She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon.* As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmother's labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: The sense of smell is commonly overlooked in writing. However, it is the human sense of smell that is most closely linked to the brain. The receptors in the brain responsible for processing smells are very close to the area of the brain responsible for the storage of memory. Because of this link, scents are able to cause vivid sensory recreations of memories. Our sense of smell has an uncommonly strong power over our feelings, thoughts, and emotions. In the sample text, the addition of olfactory details helps set the mood of the paragraph by triggering our senses.

Example Text: Add Touch

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward him, *breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck.* She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmother's labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: The sense of touch encourages us to investigate the world around us by feeling it and learning the texture, shape, and size of things. Tactile images can be powerful sensory triggers. They allow a reader not only to visualize a scene, but to experience it. Inclusion of the sense of touch prevents the reader from remaining distanced or detached from the writing. In the sample text, the sense of touch has been engaged through allowing the reader to recreate a primary sensation: the feeling of a person's breath on the back of his or her neck. This is a sensory experience that most people have encountered. Therefore, through recalling familiar tactile sensations, the writer encourages the readers to put themselves in the place of the characters.

Example Text: Add Taste

Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of Randal's thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. Randal looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in his baseball jersey, and bit his lip. *His mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood* as she leaned in closely toward him, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of his neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As they slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was his grandmother's labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.

Comment: The human sense of taste allows a person to do much more than simply select and enjoy food. There are four familiar tastes:

SWEET

SALTY

BITTER

SOUR

By appealing directly to any of these tastes, a writer has the unique opportunity to affect a reader's senses. Memories, feelings, people, and places can all be suggested through the sense of taste.