

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

DESCRIPTION

The purpose of descriptive writing is to give the reader a word picture of something by developing its sensory aspects. It appeals to the reader's senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste by providing detail about the subject. These details describe the specific colors, dimensions, and composition of the object or person. In sum, the writer describes the subject by appealing as often as possible to the reader's sensory perceptions. The writer therefore chooses a point at which to begin the word picture and then moves logically and smoothly through space to complete the description.

The following paragraphs are examples of descriptive writing. Both "The Old, Vacant Cabin" and "The Little Red Schoolhouse" are descriptions of buildings and their surroundings; however, a comparison of these paragraphs reveals that the first is an objective description and the second is a subjective one. In the first, the writer includes no personal judgments. She includes descriptive information that all close observers of the same site would be able to see. The second writer includes not only the information that any close observer would see but also personal judgments. Whether the paragraph is objective or subjective depends upon the individual writer's purpose; however, every writer should be aware of the kind of information (either subjective or objective) that the topic contains and tailor the approach used to fit the topic.

SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS

The Hollerith Card

The Hollerith card is the standard "punch card" used in computers. The Hollerith card is made of a heavy paper material, frequently called "card stock." It is of a natural, off-white color and is cut into a rectangular shape having three square corners and, at the top left, one diagonal corner. The card is 7 1/2 inches wide, 3 1/4 inches high, and perhaps the thickness of a matchbook cover. On the card's face are fourteen symmetrically spaced rows of black printed numbers which extend laterally the width of the card. In four of the rows, the numbers are in sequence and ascend from 1 through 60 or 80. In the remaining rows, a single digit is repeated eighty times across the card. Each digit, 0 through 9, is exclusively represented in one of the rows which begins with zero at the top and progresses toward nine in downward, succeeding rows. Here and there a number is missing. In its place is a tiny, precise rectangular opening. These openings are sometimes parallel with each other and sometimes not. On the reverse side, the card is blank and only the tiny openings are visible.

Paul Hewitt

A Summer Storm

The quiet, peaceful quality of the day was shattered by the sudden onslaught of the summer storm. The group that had been gathered around the swimming pool rushed inside to watch from behind the plate-glass window of the summer cottage. Just on the other side of the swimming pool, the waters of Tampa Bay raged against the embankment that was straining to hold them in. A forgotten beach ball was tossed aimlessly by the merciless wind. The white light generated by the storm made the scant trees look naked and defenseless. Rain lashed against the plate-glass window and threatened to seep inside the house itself. The glass shook with the fury of the wind. A single ray of sunlight illuminated a break in the dense, purplish clouds and created the feeling that this storm was a connection to God Himself. Blades of grass trembled in the turbulence of the storm causing the ground to look like one large sea of motion.

Breathlessly we watched the havoc being created when suddenly the sunlight grew stronger and the clouds broke apart. As sharply as it had started, the storm exited the little cove. Its only sign of passing was the forgotten beach ball floating out to sea.

Stern's Diner at 1:30 A.M.

The starkly lit diner, though a bright spot in the night, offers little comfort to late-night patrons. Tarnished steel swivel stools run the length of the smooth, white counter, their faded red-vinyl tops torn and scarred. Patches of gray workman's tape are evidence of feeble attempts at repair work. The counter is paralleled by a row of cushionless, gray-formica booths, pushed up against a wall of grimy windows. The painful brightness of the lights succeeds in isolating the diner's occupants from the outside, for in the windows one can only see a bleak reflection of the diner's contents. The faint electric hum of fluorescent bulbs is regularly interrupted by the shuddering, metallic stops and starts of the overhead heater, which accomplishes its function by blowing small gusts of hot air into the faces of customers. Huddled in the last booth against the wall, an old man sits bent over a cup of coffee. A tattered brown fedora rests wearily on his head and his ancient, black overcoat is soiled and torn. Both of his chapped, red hands clutch the cup of coffee close to his body, as if to draw every possible bit of warmth from it. A steady squeak of worn leather work shoes heralds the approach of his waitress. She drops a greasy, plastic menu in front of him and the squeaking retreats. The old man remains unmoving, seemingly unaware of her arrival and departure, while, a few feet away, a gaudy, red neon sign hangs flashing its incessant message into the night. Stern's...A11 night cafe...Stern's ...

The Old Woman

The stooped creature hobbled along the path in front of my cabin every day at four o'clock. She always wore the same dull-brown, knee-length shawl that could have been knitted fifty or more years ago by a beginner who dropped stitches. A faded black skirt, frayed at her ankles, would swing gently in the summer breeze and cling tenaciously in the freezing winter wind. Her wrinkled face, always partially hidden by an unstarched, off white bonnet, dropped into her clavicle. Her shawl-covered arms never contained bundles, parcel, or other objects. Despite the number of years that I spent watching her, I never knew why she haltingly placed one black-laced old brogan in front of the other as she bobbed along through the seasons of my childhood.

Dell Duncan

The Barnyard

The barn and its surroundings were typical of West Texas. It had been painted that slightly sickening barn-red many years ago, but lack of care, and probably lack of money, had caused the color to blend with the oak planks to a not-quite pastel and not-quite pink. The front of the yard faced what could euphemistically be called "the ranch yard." This area consisted of a large water tank for the house, a larger water tank for the surrounding stock troughs, a five-hundred gallon gasoline tank, two pickups, assorted piles of lumber and metal, and every variety of weed (no grass) known to the Big Bend area. To the left of the barn was a large corral and a small milking pen, with stalls connected to the barn. Behind the barn was a small area designated for a garden, but mostly snakes and Johnson grass grew there. The right side of the barn was the culmination of two of the fence lines that made up the goat pasture.

Peggy L. Sanger

The Playhouse

The whitewashed playhouse stands under the apple tree, forlorn and empty. It has been years since any little girl snatched up the ancient skeleton key that lies dormant under the big boulder used as a front step. The key fits uneasily into the rusty lock. Noisily and protestingly, the knob turns. Then, groaning with age and disuse, the door inches open. The stench of must and old forgotten crayons permeates the air. Dust covers the cluttered furniture that has been neglected for so long. The real glass windows are discolored with age. One pane is cracked. A faint buzzing hum is heard in the high southeast corner where a wasp has built a nest among the cobwebs. Outside again, away from the stifling heat in the playhouse, is the water pump. Here a drink of well water can be obtained to quench the thirst of dust-dry throats.

Description Paragraph Checklist

- Topic creates a vivid picture.
- Clear content—reader visualizes what is being described.
- Topic sentence is clear and located at the beginning of the paragraph.
- Paragraph limited to topic only.
- Audience understands what is being described.
- Development—details used to support and intensify the topic sentence.
 - Specific, concrete, significant detail that appeals to all of the reader's senses: sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste.
 - Striking quality.
 - Useful comparison.
 - Length—sufficient to support topic sentence.
- Organization—ideas follow each other in a proper sequence. Transitions make ideas flow smoothly and guide the reader.
- Sentence style—sentences build on each other to add to the overall image and to enhance the topic sentence. Sentences vary in patterns, length, and word choice.
- Effective title that captures the essence of the paragraph.
- Mechanics do not distract the reader—three or more major errors within the paragraph constitute a failing grade.

Comments: