**St. Catherine High School**

**English A**

**Topic: Descriptive Writing**

Descriptive writing is the clear description of people, places, objects, or events using appropriate details. An effective description will contain sufficient and varied elaboration of details to communicate a sense of the subject being described. Details used are usually sensory and selected to describe what the writer sees, hears, smells, touches, and tastes.

* Elaborate use of sensory details (often those that others might overlook) that enrich or define the central impression.
* Details which go beyond the general eg. The house was big and nice
* Details which enable the reader to picture or relive what the writer is telling eg. The massive brick structure sprawled across a quarter acre of ground and rose more than sixty feet in the air.

Guidelines: students should include

* Include plenty of details
* Use figurative language if appropriate
* Organise details
* Show, not tell
* Use precise language eg. The girl walked down the road

Sarah walked briskly down the busy highway.

Using the Five Senses

Descriptive essays are great because, in a sense, - pun intended - they can help us see places we might not be able to go ourselves, hear new things, taste different flavours, smell foreign smells, or touch different textures. Descriptive essays do this through the use of more concrete concepts, which most often include our five senses.

Behold, the power of using the five senses in a descriptive essay:

'As the waves leisurely collided with the shore, I could hear the delicate lapping of the water as it met the sand. The smell of salt air and a warm afternoon wafted through the sky. Slowly, I awoke from my slumber, cuddled in a hammock that surrounded me like a cocoon. The warm sun brightly shone on my face and greeted me, 'Good afternoon'.'

Based on this paragraph, where is the author? What is going on? Thanks to the five senses, you can gather that they are just waking up from what seems like a really peaceful nap in a hammock on a beach somewhere. How do we gather this?

Based on the description, we can see waves hitting the shore as the tide comes in, hear the water as it hits the sand, smell the salty air, and feel the warm sun. See how the senses use concrete things we've all probably experienced to some degree in our own lives to help you visualize a new scene? This is how a descriptive essay uses things we are familiar with - in this case, our five senses - to take us to a tropical paradise.

Showing vs. Telling

Even more, the description helps set a mood by using more vivid language to complement the sensory-based description. The author shows us, rather than tells us, what the afternoon on a beach is like.

Rather than saying, 'I heard the waves as the tide came in,' the author says, 'As the waves leisurely collided with the shore, I could hear the delicate lapping of the water as it met the sand.' The extra detail really helps us visualize the scene that the author is trying to create. They show us what it's like to be out there on the beach when the tide comes in during the afternoon, rather than just giving us a play-by-play.

The same vivid language also helps the author to create a mood for this description. We can begin to experience the same peacefulness through the use of words like 'leisurely' and 'delicate'. Again, rather than just telling us it was a really relaxing and peaceful day, they let the descriptive language show us.

Another useful technique for setting a mood with your descriptive writing is to use similes and metaphors. A simile is a phrase comparing two unlikely things using 'like' or 'as' in order to make a description more vivid. You've probably heard the phrase, 'running like the wind' before. This is an example of a simile. Rather than saying, 'running really fast,' you replace the speed with something that might represent running quickly, like the wind.

A metaphor has the same function as a simile, but the comparison between objects is implicit, meaning there is no 'like' or 'as' used to signal the comparison. Here's an example of a metaphor from good old Shakespeare: 'All the world's a stage and the men and women merely players.' Rather than saying life is just like a play, he compares the world to where a play is acted out.

As you can see, similes and metaphors are another tool to help make your descriptions more vivid. They paint a more detailed picture for your reader, making it easier for them to understand what you're saying, not to mention more interesting, because you are showing them what you have in your mind's eye, rather than just telling them.

**Examples of Descriptive Passages**

**A Friendly Clown**

On one corner of my dresser sits a smiling toy clown on a tiny unicycle--a gift I received last Christmas from a close friend. The clown's short yellow hair, made of yarn, covers its ears but is parted above the eyes. The blue eyes are outlined in black with thin, dark lashes flowing from the brows. It has cherry-red cheeks, nose, and lips, and its broad grin disappears into the wide, white ruffle around its neck. The clown wears a fluffy, two-tone nylon costume. The left side of the outfit is light blue, and the right side is red. The two colours merge in a dark line that runs down the centre of the small outfit. Surrounding its ankles and disguising its long black shoes are big pink bows. The white spokes on the wheels of the unicycle gather in the centre and expand to the black tire so that the wheel somewhat resembles the inner half of a grapefruit. The clown and unicycle together stand about a foot high. As a cherished gift from my good friend Tran, this colourful figure greets me with a smile every time I enter my room.

**The Blond Guitar**

My most valuable possession is an old, slightly warped blond guitar--the first instrument I taught myself how to play. It's nothing fancy, just a Madeira folk guitar, all scuffed and scratched and finger-printed. At the top is a bramble of copper-wound strings, each one hooked through the eye of a silver tuning key. The strings are stretched down a long, slim neck, its frets tarnished, and the wood worn by years of fingers pressing chords and picking notes. The body of the Madeira is shaped like an enormous yellow pear, one that was slightly damaged in shipping. The blond wood has been chipped and gouged to grey, particularly where the pick guard fell off years ago. No, it's not a beautiful instrument, but it still lets me make music, and for that I will always treasure it.

**Gregory**

Gregory is my beautiful grey Persian cat. He walks with pride and grace, performing a dance of disdain as he slowly lifts and lowers each paw with the delicacy of a ballet dancer. His pride, however, does not extend to his appearance, for he spends most of his time indoors watching television and growing fat. He enjoys TV commercials, especially those for Meow Mix and 9 Lives. His familiarity with cat food commercials has led him to reject generic brands of cat food in favour of only the most expensive brands. Gregory is as finicky about visitors as he is about what he eats, befriending some and repelling others. He may snuggle up against your ankle, begging to be petted, or he may imitate a skunk and stain your favourite trousers. Gregory does not do this to establish his territory, as many cat experts think, but to humiliate me because he is jealous of my friends. After my guests have fled, I look at the old fleabag snoozing and smiling to himself in front of the television set, and I have to forgive him for his obnoxious, but endearing, habits.