

Sensory Impressions

Of the five senses (see, hear, touch, taste, smell), most of us tend to want to document what we see; sight seems to be a dominant sense by default. Well-written description, however, incorporates multiple senses, so that the reader not only sees what the writer saw but also hears the sounds, smells the smells, tastes the tastes, and so on. Your goal is to use sensory details to provide close, detailed observation.

Dominant impression

The door to the house was partially off its hinges. As I gently pulled on it, the door let out a loud moan, perhaps a warning that I shouldn't proceed further. Stepping in anyway, I nearly gagged on the dust my shuffling feet kicked up from the floor. It was quite dark inside. I felt for a light switch, found one and flipped it down--nothing. I pulled back my hand, which was now tangled in cobwebs.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could make out the living room on my left. Huge, heavy drapes covered the windows. The smell of stale, trapped air permeated the room.

If you've ever read a scary novel, descriptions like the one above are probably not new to you. Notice how every sentence is intended to contribute to the creation of an eerie setting; every sentence is intended to make you a little nervous.

Novel writers do this kind of thing all the time. It's called creating a dominant impression. Dominant impression is the overall feeling you are trying to create in your writing. As a writer, you may choose to create a dominant impression of joy, anger, fear, sadness, or just about any other emotion you care to name. Not all descriptions set out to create a particular dominant impression, but many do.

The key to creating an effective dominant impression is being selective in your details. For example, consider the following re-write of the previous passage.

The door to the house was partially off its hinges. As I gently pulled on it, the door let out a loud moan, perhaps a warning that I shouldn't proceed further. Stepping in anyway, I nearly gagged on the dust my shuffling feet kicked up from the floor. It was quite dark inside. I felt for a light switch, found one and flipped it down--nothing. I pulled back my hand, which was now tangled in cobwebs.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could make out the living room on my left. Huge, heavy drapes covered the windows. On the coffee table, the vase full of fresh-cut lilacs brightened the otherwise dark room and filled the room with the smell of springtime.

If the author's purpose is to create an eerie dominant impression that makes the reader nervous, that last sentence is working against her or him. When creating a dominant impression, you must be careful to choose details that contribute to that impression.

Vantage Point

Description can be written from a fixed or a moving vantage point. A fixed vantage point involves describing something as observed from a single location. For example, if I were to look out my window and describe what I see, hear, feel, taste, and smell, I am working from a fixed vantage point. On the other hand, if I were to go outside and walk around the neighborhood describing what I see, hear, feel, taste, and smell, I am working from a moving vantage point. Either perspective can be effective; it's important that you recognize your vantage point and that the reader recognize your vantage point

Organization

Most descriptive pieces are organized spatially (by direction). If you were going to describe one of the walls in the room you're in right now, you might start at the top and work toward the bottom or you might start at the left and work toward the right; both are logical, spatial approaches to description. What you wouldn't want to do is describe something on the upper left portion of the wall, then something on the lower right, then something right in the middle, then something on the lower left...such a scattered description would confuse the reader.

Frequently, descriptions are incorporated into other types of writing. For example, narratives often include some description. Process writing includes some description. Argumentation probably includes some description. So, description is not an isolated form of writing; it is a mode of writing that shows up in a lot of other kinds of writing.

This realization impacts the organization of a document. Narratives are generally written chronologically. Perhaps you're writing a narrative of a walk through your local mall. At one point in your narrative, you observe a very peculiar photograph in the window of a store. You stop your narrative long enough to provide a spatial description of the photograph. Then you continue on with your narrative. The modes of writing (e.g., narrative, description, argumentation, process, etc.) rarely occur in isolation; typically, they work in combination with one another. Most of the time, however, one mode dominates; your piece may be primarily narrative, primarily descriptive, or primarily one of the other modes, but it likely incorporates multiple modes.

Examples of Description

See the Online Writing Center's "WINK: An Online Journal" to read well-written examples of descriptive writing by Western Technical College students.