



**Academic Support Center
Writing Center**

The Descriptive Essay

Resource: portions are from OWL at Purdue

The **descriptive essay** is a type of essay that asks the student to describe an object, person, place, experience, emotion, situation, etc.

This type of essay encourages the student to create a written account of a particular experience, and it allows for a great deal of artistic freedom to paint a vivid image for the reader. The reader should be able to form an impression of the thing that the writer is describing. *The reader should be easily able to see, touch, smell, hear, and feel the description while being led through the narrative experience.*

How to Write a Descriptive Essay

More than many other types of essays, the goal of a descriptive essay is to create a deeply involved and vivid experience for the reader. Great descriptive essays achieve this effect by using detailed observations and descriptions instead of facts and statistics.

1. Choose what to describe.

A descriptive essay will often focus on portraying one of the following: person, a place, a memory, an experience, or an object.

2. Determine any qualities about your topic that you want to focus on.

When writing a descriptive essay, you often have particular qualities about your topic that you want to bring to life in your writing. Identifying these qualities can help focus your description and help you choose language that shows a particular perspective or emotion to emphasize those qualities.

- **Example:** You are writing a descriptive essay about your grandfather. You want to focus on his physical appearance and how he interacts with people, but you also want to convey your admiration for his strength

and kindness. In one of your paragraphs, you might describe how your grandfather's hands were rough from a life of labor, but you might also describe how he would gently hold your hands when talking or walking with you.

3. Use descriptive language to write your essay.

Create a vivid experience for your readers by focusing on the five senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste). Focusing your descriptions on the senses provides vivid and specific details that *show* your readers what you are describing instead of *telling* them about it.

The difference between showing and telling can be found in the following examples:

- I grew tired after dinner. (*Telling*)
- As I leaned back and rested my head against the top of the chair, my eyelids began to feel heavy, and the edges of the empty plate in front of me blurred with the white tablecloth. (*Showing*)

4. Stay on topic.

It is easy to fall into an incoherent rambling of emotions and senses when writing a descriptive essay. Remember that, as with any essay, you must still present an organized and logical description that makes it easy for the reader to understand what you are describing.

One way to stay on topic is to avoid including unnecessary details that will only distract your reader. Using the previous example about a grandfather, do not describe your memories of a fly buzzing around your grandfather while he held your hand. The fly, while part of the scene, has no relevance to your grandfather's strength and kindness.

Similarly, *do* include *relevant* details. If your grandfather showed his kindness by holding the fly gently in his hands instead of swatting at it, share that relevant memory with your readers.