DESRIPTIVE WRITING

• What does it look like?
  o "His ashen face looked like he had seen the horror of horrors."

• What does it sound like?
  o "A sound like a thousand crashing cymbals assaulted our ears"

• What does it feel like?
  o "The soft gooey mass clung to my by now shivering flesh"

• What does it taste like?
  o "The taste was heavenly - like something you'd looked forward to all your life."

• What does it smell like?
  o "The smell was indescribable; nothing this side of Hell's gates could come close."

Description is a most important kind of writing but is one that is never, in the real word, used as an end in itself. Description is always used to support some other purpose, such as narration (story-telling), explanation, persuasion, argument, etc.

Effective descriptive writing makes its reader feel as if he or she is actually experiencing the scene described. If you look closely at how this kind of writing is created, you'll find many references to one or more of the senses such as what can be seen or heard. This is called sensory description. This use of the senses allows the reader to enter the scene more effectively by involving them directly and by evoking a more emotional response. It works because it creates imagery in the mind.

In the following brief extract you'll see how writer Bruce Chatwin achieves this. It's taken from his book, *In Patagonia*. Look closely at the writing to detect his methods (you'll be finding out more about these later). Notice how Chatwin gives his reader the sense that he is showing us the woman rather than merely telling us about her. This is a central aspect of effective descriptive writing: wherever possible, show, don't tell! Also, notice that the 'showing' works because of Chatwin's use of vivid and original figurative language.

She was waiting for me, a white face behind a dusty window. She smiled, her painted mouth unfurling as a red flag caught in a sudden breeze. Her hair was dyed dark-auburn. Her legs were a Mesopotamia of varicose veins. She still had the tatters of an extraordinary beauty.

She had been making pastry and the grey dough clung to her hands. Her blood-red nails were cracked and chipped. [p.61]

Now, your turn! Can you imagine a car journey? What might you see, touch, smell, taste and hear?
seen
- Like a fiery red fist, the Ferrari Testarossa punched its way past our ageing Ford Fiesta...

touched
- the open window allowed a cool spring breeze to caress my cheeks...

smelt
- an ancient jalopy of a school bus spluttered along in front of us spewing out nauseous black clouds of exhaust...

tasted
- the bitter taste of the pre-trip travel sickness pill still clung to back of my throat...

heard
- the screeching siren of an ambulance forced us to pull in and wait till it passed...

It works, doesn't it? And you can make it work for you. You'll gain a higher grade, too, so it must be worthwhile.

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**HOW TO WRITE DESCRIPTIVELY**

Here is a good way to tackle this kind of writing:

- Imagine yourself to be a kind of ‘human video camera’! With your searching zoom lens you are going to ‘record’ what was in the particular scene or situation the question asks you to describe:
  - a selection of the ‘stills’ from your video will provide the substance for what you describe;
  - a **good structure** is crucial to a high grade. This can be achieved in several ways, for example, by describing each of the ‘stills’ from your ‘video’ **location by location**: 'In the corner...'; 'By the hot dog stall...'; 'In the sky...'; ‘Over there...’;
  - other structures that work are: from inside to outside..., from then to now..., from the 'general' to the 'particular'... **Structure provides 'shape' to your writing and can gain many marks.**

- **Describe** - as **appropriate to the scene** - what you **saw**, **heard**, **tasted**, **smelt** and **felt** - that is, use **sensory description**.
  - Notice the time frame is set in the **past**: 'saw', 'heard'... **be safe and stick to writing about a past events using past tense verbs throughout!**
• **Writing as if the event you describe were happening in the present** (i.e. using present tense verbs) can be exciting to read. Sadly, and worryingly, it's far too easy to forget the time frame and flip back into using past tense verbs without realising. This is poor style, very confusing for the reader and worst of all... **will lose m-a-n-y marks!**

• So... unless you are a very sure writer, **avoid writing about 'now'; instead, always choose to write about 'then'!**

• **It's a common but mark-losing habit** to 'tack on' an adjective - or even two - to each of the nouns you use. Instead, choose **precise vocabulary**.
  
  o Precise vocabulary means choosing what can be called 'muscular' words - the kind of words that almost contain their own description and which etch themselves into the mind of your reader.
  
  o Here are two examples that contain precise vocabulary. What do you think? You could easily do the same! 'The water gushed out of the fountain' and 'The rain spilled out of the heavens'. This is the kind of description that gains high marks - for more examples, click here.

• Of course you will need to use some adjectives and adverbs; but when you do use them, **add them with thought and care**.
  
  o Always **avoid excessive, flat or boring description**, e.g. 'the luxuriously warm and golden yellow sand sparkled brightly under the deep blue sky". This will gain low marks.
  
  o If you do describe all of your nouns with extra adjectives the effect is actually to weaken the description and **marks will be lost**.

• What strengthens description a great deal is to use a few but **carefully chosen and vivid similes and metaphors**, e.g. 'He looked like a man just back from a journey to Hell'; 'Her cheeks were glowing like the ripest of ripe strawberries!'
  
  o Notice how in each of the above two examples a certain mood or atmosphere is also being hinted at.
  
  o **It's important to use your description to create, develop or assist a mood suited to your subject matter or theme. Doing this will boost your mark!**

  o For exam answers only (such as for the WJEC examination board), **never write in the form of a short story**. You will have already written a story for your coursework; the exam question on 'Writing to Describe' requires a different approach.

  • **Instead of a story** simply write a short piece of purely descriptive writing: 'zoom in' and 'focus' the lens of your 'video camera' on the kind of scene asked in the exam question. **Help your reader feel as if he or she were actually there, experiencing the thing being described.**
• In short exam answers of this kind, again, it can be best not to be a part of the action; instead, be merely an observer and a reporter of the event (so... no 'I saw...').

An Error to Avoid!

Look at the following piece of description. It contains perhaps a common problem teachers see in students' descriptive writing. Oddly this error doesn't occur at all so often in other kinds of writing.

The old-fashioned room surrounding me. My grandmother welcoming me. My parents smiling at me. The visit was beginning...

Can you sense what is wrong with the above? The error is in the grammar of the first three sentences. They don't contain full verbs and however 'active' and 'immediate' they might appear to sound, they are not 'complete' and so are not good English. They will lose marks. And yet so many students must think that they are full sentences because they use similar constructions in their own descriptive writing.

This is how the above should be written. Be sure not to base any your own sentences on bare '-ing' verbs and so avoid this trap!

The old-fashioned room surrounded me. My grandmother welcomed me. My parents smiled at me. My weekly visit was beginning...

PROFESSIONAL DESCRIPTION

In the following poem, Dulce et Decorum Est, Wilfred Owen certainly uses effective description - but as you will see, that is not his primary purpose. In professional writing, writers never describe for the sake of describing - the description always underpins a second purpose - often to persuade. But Owen's poem certainly contains description at its very finest and most realistic seeming: the dreadful images of First World War trench warfare feel as if they are being etched onto our minds.

Owen's description relies heavily on original and vivid figurative language to engage us and create powerful images. You will notice how the descriptive effects work to create a realistic seeming scene, one that helps to persuade you to accept Owen's view of warfare. Owen's description helps you to understand the actual experiences through which these pitiful men were forced to go.

Dulce et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)
Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame all blind  
Drunk with fatigue deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped gas bombs that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

NOTE: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' was a famous and patriotic army motto. It is Latin and means, 'It is sweet and right to die for your country'.

- If, like Owen, you can use your descriptive writing to support another purpose, you will stand the chance of gaining a much higher grade.
- This will mean working out, once you have been given the title for your writing, what 'deeper meaning' such a piece of writing might allow.
- Using your description to allow your reader to consider deeply some aspect of life they find interesting is the way to do this.
  - A description of a lonely beach might have as its underlying purpose an attempt to persuade your reader to consider the importance of peace and solitude in this busy world.
  - A description of a room might be used to allow the reader to understand more about the owner of the room, rather than know about the room itself.
  - A description of a crowd at a football match might be used to develop the idea of the need to be a part of something bigger than just ourselves... and so on.
How to create effective description:

If you can, explore an underlying theme or purpose (as discussed above)

Choose words that create vivid and original imagery: both mental pictures and emotional feelings.

- At its best, vivid description almost seems to etch its images onto its reader's mind.

Use description to create the illusion of showing your reader what a thing is like - this is always more effective (and persuasive) than telling.

- If you are told an animal is dangerous, well... you might believe it; but if the danger is vividly described, you will not only be convinced, you will feel the action as if it were real.
- Imagine being told that someone is evil; imagine being shown that evil in action: which is more effective?

Avoid describing every noun or verb with one or more adjectives and adverbs; instead, choose precise vocabulary. The adjectives and adverbs - of course, they will be needed - should more often than not take on a near secondary role to 'help out' those words that in themselves really do need extra description.

- You will find examples of 'precise vocabulary' below.

Excessive use of adjectives and adverbs can actually detract from the effectiveness of your description. It will lose marks!

- Much better - as suggested - choose a more precise word; these 'muscular' words create 'economical' writing that is more succinct.
- Such precise words work well because they seem to contain their own adjectives within their meaning, e.g. rather than write, 'He walked in a carefree way to school', why not write, 'He strolled to school'? See below for more!
- Carefully chosen precise verbs and nouns can transform a piece of writing giving it life and energy - and marks!

Have you heard the old saying, 'A picture is worth a thousand words'? If you can create mental pictures by using original, vivid similes and metaphors to describe sights, sounds, feelings, your description - and your grade - will be the better for it.
Here are some example descriptions that use precise 'muscular' vocabulary choices as well as vivid similes and metaphors. Can you detect the sensory images here, too? The 'muscular' nouns and verbs are highlighted in red.

- The swollen mass teemed forwards like a seething colony of crawling ants.
- The mingling spices tingled our senses to create a glorious surge of appetite.
- The summer rain spilled down and soured our sweltering faces with its refreshing coolness.
- The flashes of lightning flooded the land with a fearful display of Nature's power.
- The children were like bundles of concentrated energy exploding with delight.
- The very buildings themselves seemed to bow low as the town's new hero approached.
- The look of flame and anger in her eyes showed the world that she was indeed a rebel with a cause.
- The darkening sky ushered in a forbidding, sombre mood that set the scene for the grim news lying in wait for us.
- Our noses were assaulted by the putrefying smell of rotting flesh. It was like a wall of evil.
- The multitude of creatures created a cacophony of calls that assaulted our ears.
- The evening was aflame with the glorious sunset.
- The incessant trumpeting of the dying beast's cries filled their ears with sorrow.

Theme and Controlling Idea

What is it that makes reading worthwhile? We need to be interested, we need to be engaged and we need to be able to relate to what we read.

How can your description be made to fit the bill? Well, most of us seem to enjoy reading about the important things in life: fear, loneliness, friendship, growing up, getting old, facing problems... and most readers enjoy writing that creates a sense of excitement, tension, fear or wonder equally, and perhaps because we are rather 'nosy' or like to compare ourselves to others, we enjoy reading about interesting characters who succeed in overcoming the odds.

Writing that explores such ideas stands a good chance of being interesting to read. The technical term to describe the idea that lurks under the surface of writing is called its theme or controlling idea. This is what the writing is really
When you 'write to describe', you can easily gain more marks if your writing does more than just describe a place or a situation - try to use the description to develop an underlying theme of some kind.

- In professional writing, the writer's **controlling idea** is rarely evident 'on the surface'; rather, it begins to emerge as the reader reflects on what is written, often through layers of meaning created by the use of **symbolism, metaphor and irony**.
- As an example, consider a description of a landscape; this might have as its deeper meaning the wonders of nature or of creation.
- As suggested above, a description of a room might - at a deeper level - not be about the room at all but about the person who lives in it.
- Similarly, a description of a journey could act as a kind of metaphor for a person's life.
- **Click here** to read some famous extracts from professional descriptive writing that develop a controlling idea or theme.

**SIX STEPS TO SUCCESS**

**1. Read the question with thought and care**

Seems so obvious... yet every year students lose marks for not answering the question set! Don't be one of them. As described above, decide if the topic of the question would allow you to develop an underlying message of some kind in your writing. This message then becomes your **controlling idea**. It can help to 'switch roles' for a moment and 'become' your own reader - putting on your 'reader's hat' is always a good thing to do when writing.

**A theme based on something interesting is going to be far more sophisticated than a piece that merely describes a thing.**

**Read some typical questions** and try to work out what kinds of 'big', interesting controlling ideas you could create writing in response to such questions. For instance, if you were asked to write about a place you remember from early childhood, your theme or controlling idea could be the much bigger idea of innocence in childhood, or security, lack of fear and so forth.

**2. For short exam questions, avoid storytelling!**

Even though all narrative - storytelling - depends upon description to set a scene or mood, in an exam, when writing to describe, it's best to avoid writing a story. Stick to just describing!
• For coursework, your teacher might be happy for you to write an atmospheric, moody story - you must ask!
• Equally, avoid being 'in' your description - writing in the 'first person' using 'I'.
• Aim to be outside looking in, focusing on detail and, if you can, developing an underlying theme.

3. Write about a past time - avoid writing about the present!
However exciting 'present tense' writing might seem it is all too easy to fall into the trap of mixing tenses - moving from present tense to past tense without realising. It's best to start and continue in the past tense - maybe remembering a real scene from your own life?

4. Describe only what is relevant to helping develop your underlying message
Recognising what to include and what to leave out in a piece of descriptive writing is vital to making it effective and worthy of a high grade.

• Effective description is finely detailed but very carefully focused. The secret is in choosing a particular aspect of a scene to describe - one that helps reveal your underlying purpose - you need to avoid describing extraneous detail that would depart from this.

By including only with what is relevant, effective description adds unity and coherence to writing. This is important because it means the reader feels instinctively that each word and sentence is leading somewhere useful (i.e. it is coherent) and leading in one important direction towards a single purpose (i.e. it is unified).

• Thinking of writing as akin to a woven piece of cloth can be a useful metaphor: when you read back to yourself what you have written (both as you write each sentence and afterwards during redrafting), you should ensure it is coherent and unified by pulling out any 'loose' or 'wrong' threads and making sure that the pattern you have created will be attractive to your reader.

5. Put your reader into the right frame of mind to become involved in your writing
Interest and involvement are central to a good reader response. Without it your writing will not work well. Always set a suitable mood for your scene. This mood, which must be suitable to support the purpose of your writing, will help engage and absorb your reader.
6. Aim to describe 'how you felt at the time' - make the reader feel as if they are 'there'
Even though it is usually an imaginary or dramatised time in your writing, you will help your reader if you try to make them feel as you did. Using sensory description can achieve this:

Describe what you see, hear, taste, smell, feel. You probably do need adjectives to do this, but try hard to find words that do not need an adjective if you can. Choose precise vocabulary as this will be far more interesting to read. And use vivid - and preferably original - similes and metaphors: these help to etch an image into your reader's imagination.

7. Avoid excessive or boring (y-a-w-n!) 'flat' description
Thinking you must describe everything, and even worse everything with an adjective or even two is a fundamental error to avoid. Far from improving your description (and grade!), the opposite will be the case. It is better to follow the advice given above and choose precise vocabulary. Excessive description fails to make writing effective and can even create what is known technically as purple prose.

8. Create a clear structure that is interesting to your reader
Aim to describe aspects of a scene in an interesting and logical order -one that seems 'natural' to your reader.

- This might mean working from inside to outside, from the past to the future, from the general to the particular, from the small to the large, and so on.
- A planned structure will give 'shape' to your writing and add enormously to its effect. Writing that appears to the examiner or your teacher to be 'consciously shaped' work will gain a higher grade.

Practise by writing a few short descriptions of your own. Avoid excessive adjectives and adverbs - rather, using the above examples as 'style models', choose precise vocabulary and create vivid metaphors or similes. Show your work to your teacher or email it to Englishbiz!

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING AT ITS VERY BEST

The following extract is from the novel 'Hard Times' by nineteenth century writer, Charles Dickens.
Try to notice how each part of what Dickens writes helps to create a single idea. This is his **controlling idea** or **theme**. He describes nothing that does not develop this main idea. This is because, like all good writers, Dickens writes in a way that is entirely **coherent** and **unified**. His choice of words is very precise indeed. Notice too how Dickens has **consciously shaped** the meaning of his writing using a precisely crafted **structure** (work out how Dickens does this by making a list of the ideas he describes. Look at the sequence he creates and consider its **effect** and **purpose**).

'IT WAS A TOWN OF RED BRICK, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, arid vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next... '

Finally, always check what you write *as you write it*!

**Each year, literally thousands of students fail to achieve the marks they could. Don't be one of them ALWAYS CHECK YOUR WRITING BEFORE HANDING IN!**

**Read each sentence immediately after you write it**

Use a variety of sentence types and styles and remember that shorter sentences are often clearer and crisper sounding. An occasional ultra-short sentence can add real impact to writing. Read each sentence before you proceed to the next to check it is fluent, accurate and complete. Does it follow on logically from the previous sentence?

**Check every paragraph**

A paragraph is a series of sentences (often at least five) that develop from a single topic sentence used to introduce the point of the paragraph.
Avoid creating overly short paragraphs as this suggests either a) you do not know what a paragraph is or b) that you have no explained the point of the paragraph in sufficient detail. Try to make sure that each paragraph flows naturally on from its predecessor by using the final sentence of each paragraph to subtly 'hook' into the topic of the next paragraph.

To correct a missed paragraph simply put this mark where you want in to be: // then, in your margin write: // = new paragraph. The examiner will not mark you down for this so long as you have not forgotten all of your paragraphs.

Examine each comma
A very common error and poor style is to use a comma instead of a full stop to end a sentence. This makes two or more stylish, short and crisp sentences into one long, drawn out and boring sentence! Always end each sentence with a full stop - or a semi-colon if you know how to use this punctuation mark.

Look at every apostrophe
Apostrophes are only ever used for two reasons, but many students fail to use them effectively and reduce the readability and quality of their written work.

If two words are 'squeezed together' into one and a letter is missed out in the process, you should show where this missing letter used to be by inserting an apostrophe in its place so the phrase should not becomes the single word shouldn't.

When one of two nouns belongs to the other, show which one owns which by adding apostrophe + s to its end so the school's entrance is correct because the entrance is 'possessed' by the school similarly Alan's book shows a similar 'possession' of a book by Alan. If the thing that does the possessing is a plural noun such as, for example, dogs, the a phrase such as the dogs' kennels, shows that the kennels belong to many dogs by placing the apostrophe after the final plural s.

But watch out for it's: with an apostrophe this is always a shortened form of it is or occasionally, it has, as in it's cold. But if you meant 'belonging to it', as in its fur is shiny and smooth, no apostrophe is needed.