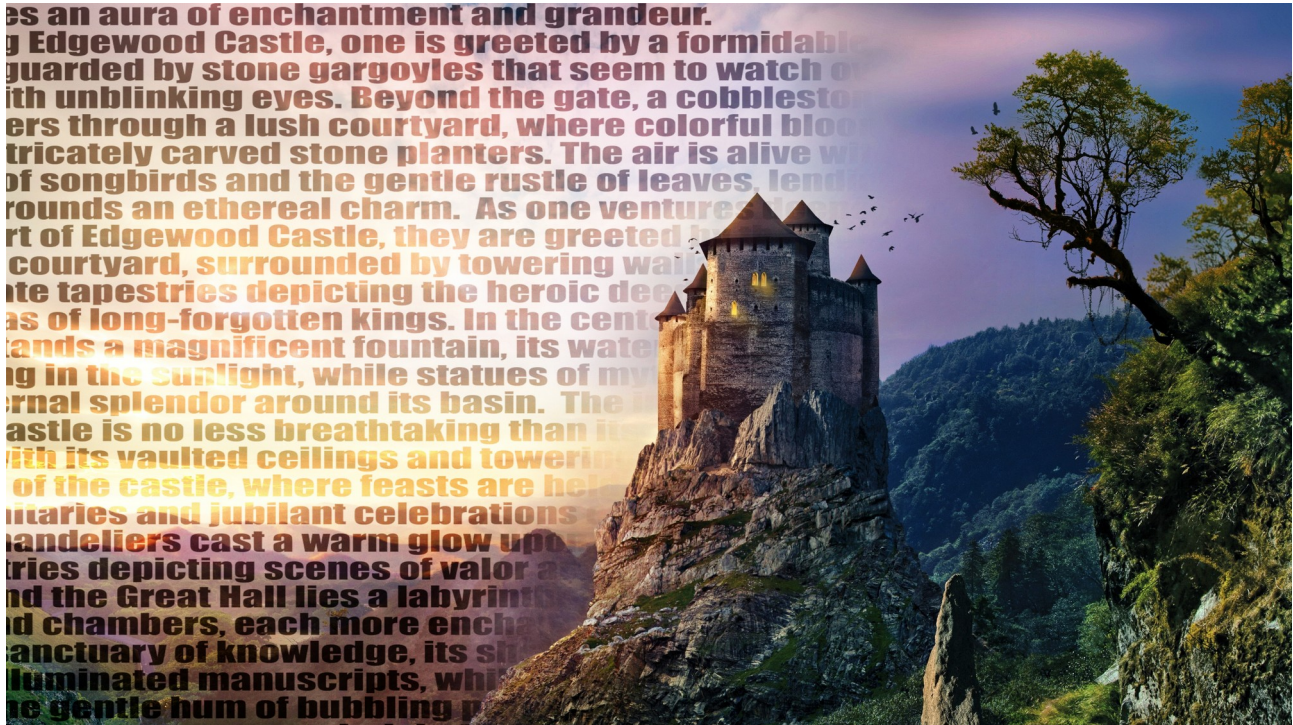


Using Description



Descriptions are a vital piece of writing. We are storytellers, after all, and that means we need to show our readers what's going on, pull them into the world we've created, and evoke emotions and connection. Description is a large part of how we do that.

Despite being vital, writing descriptions, even simple ones, can be a major challenge. A few common reasons for this may be;

- We don't actually know what things look like ourselves
- We know the details but just forget to include them
- It's just not how our brain works
- We're more focused on other aspects of the story

Good description is vibrant, interesting, and active. Every passage of description should do two or more of the following things:

- ground the reader in the setting (time, place, and/or culture) so that they know when and where they are
- symbolize or foreshadow something important to the story
- enhance the theme
- add subtext
- show something about the viewpoint character's personality
- show the viewpoint character's emotions
- add conflict or complications
- hint at backstory

When we make our description serve multiple purposes, it becomes valuable to the story as a whole. If readers skip it, they'll be missing something important.

How the Amount of Description has Varied

Classic literature was dense with description whereas modern literature usually keeps description to a minimum.

Compare the elaborate descriptions in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy with the descriptions in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Both series relied on description to help readers visualize an imagined, fantastical world, but Rowling did not use her precious writing space to describe standard settings whereas Tolkien frequently paused all action and spent pages describing a single landscape.

This isn't unique to Tolkien and Rowling; if you compare most literature from the beginning of the 20th century and earlier to today's written works, you'll see that we just don't dedicate much time and space to description anymore.

For contemporary writers, the trick is to make the description as precise and detailed as possible while keeping it to a minimum. Most readers want characters and action with just enough description so that they can imagine the story as it's unfolding.

If you've ever encountered a story that paused to provide head-to-toe descriptions along with detailed backstories of every character upon their introduction into the narrative, you know just how grating description can be when executed poorly.

However, it's worth noting that a skilled writer can roll out descriptions that are riveting to read. Sometimes they're riveting because they're integrated seamlessly with the action and dialogue; other times, the description is deftly crafted and engaging on its own. In fact, an expert descriptive writer can keep readers glued through multiple pages of description.

Not Too Much

If every single little thing is described in great detail then we run the risk of confusing, overwhelming, boring, and losing our readers.

Prioritise and have our descriptions focus on the important bits and let our readers' imaginations fill in the rest. When describing a place or person, be creative and concise and let the reader fill in the visual blanks. Painting pictures in light brushstrokes can be evocative because you're asking the reader to do the work of imagining.

Everyone has a different sweet spot of how much is too much. This will depend on your personal writing style and the story itself. Look at others writing and see if you can determine what level of description you prefer and use that to guide your own writing. A good rule of thumb is to write description when a character notices something that needs describing, or it is essential to events.

Not Too Little

While we don't want too much description, it is just as important not to have too little.

Our story shouldn't take place in a blank void because we have failed to provide a backdrop. It is vital we provide sufficient description to ground our readers in the story.

Essentially we want to make sure we consistently set the stage, introduce characters, and then add periodic reminders of our surroundings.

At the start of each scene we want to make sure the setting and characters are established and then every so often we want to slip in reminders to reground us in the scene. These reminders may be a reference to the setting, a sound in the background, a comment on the time, or any simple mention of who is where or what they are doing.

It doesn't need to be complicated, just a little sprinkle of information to remind us where we are.

Using Description

Be Specific

Is our character having a drink or is it an ice cold glass of pink lemonade? Is their car a shiny silver BMW or a beat up white Geo Metro with a 3-cylinder engine?

Details matter. Adding 1-2 specific descriptions to a scene can help the reader envision what is going on and make it come alive.

Delve Deeper

It is important to include details but these details shouldn't always be surface-level observations. Our first descriptions are almost always simple and/or based on cliches, resulting in a scene that looks like any other scene or a story that sounds like any other story. In order to not bore our reader, we need to go deeper.

For instance: A clear winter morning in North Canterbury is cold - including that in our story that doesn't really tell us much. Is it a brisk cold that makes you push your hands deeper into your pockets? Does the low sun throw a golden glow across the frost? Is there a slight mist clinging to the fields?

Helpful hint: It can be useful to jot down a list of possible words or sights, sounds, smells, and images that could be used in a scene or situation. Write the first few that come to your head and then write at least five more. Often it's those less obvious images further on that can prove to be more specific or interesting.

Describing Characters

The same tricks and techniques used for describing scenes can be used to describe characters, but a character is active and so allows many more opportunities to describe them as they interact with the world around them. How they behave and interact with those around them gives a great deal of depth to them and helps the reader understand them more deeply.

As writers, the reader's imagination is our most powerful tool. You don't have to describe every detail – instead, you can “hijack” your readers' imaginations with a few simple words, fueling a far more interesting description. Who is more interesting?

- *Joan, who had short blond hair, strong arms, and blue eyes.*
- *Joan, the woman who could swing a broadsword better than most men.*

When you can show your characters, without explicitly telling readers what they look like, you will make your characters feel more organic, and will keep your readers immersed in your story.

How Do They Act?

There are hundreds of ways to use actions to describe your characters.

- How they act towards themselves. This includes personal habits and quirks.
- How they act towards others.

Where Are They? Where Do They Come From?

Your tone, your atmosphere, and your setting will play a major role in how people view your characters. For example, imagine Harry Potter at Hogwarts...

...and Harry Potter in a grim, post-apocalyptic wasteland swarming with bands of cannibals. Do they look different?

When you show your character in their environment, this can give backstory, show their moods, and their reactions to what's around them. All of these tell us just a little more about the character.

What Does Your Character Do?

Describing what a character does is a short cut that provides a lot of detail about the character very quickly. A theoretical physicist conjures up a very different type of character from a blacksmith's apprentice. They will dress differently, act and speak differently, and likely interacting with different circles of people. In the case of minor characters, a quick description of what they do, is all the description they need.

Using Description

Make Other Characters React (or Talk about) Them

How other characters talk about, or react to, your character will make a huge difference in how readers perceive that character.

Value of a Wart

Give your character something incongruous about their appearance. It could be something they're wearing, something about their hair, or a wart on the end of their nose.

No matter what individual we're confronted with, they're unique. There is not, never has been, and never will be, another person exactly like this one. The problem confronting the writer is that we must, within the economy of our stories, pinpoint that specific difference between this person and every other.

Pay attention to specific details. A miller is a miller, but the Miller in the *Canterbury Tales* is an unforgettable character with a hair-sprouting wart on the very tip of his nose.

The distinguishing specific fact might be nothing larger than a wart, an everyday wart with hairs on it, but it is essential to effective characterisation. Have a think about your stories and your characters, are there "warts" or other distinguishing features that will make them stand out as a real individual?

Using All the Senses

One of the key tasks that a passage of descriptive writing has to perform is to appeal to all five of the senses.

The "picture" that your novel paints in a reader's mind should be so much more than a visual one - it should also be about how things sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Sight

Sight is the most important sense to engage in good creative writing.

Novels are made out of words on paper, not celluloid. To enable the readers to "see" you must paint pictures for them, and for that you obviously need to draw on their sense of sight.

Just because you want to try to engage all of the readers' senses, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't predominantly write visual descriptions. More than that, you should make these visual descriptions powerful. How? First, by not using too many unnecessary details. Second, by making the details you do use the best ones you can find.

Smell

Smell is the most nostalgic of the senses. Which of us isn't transported back to school when we smell over cooked cabbage, or to childhood summers when we smell freshly-mown grass?

The sense of smell, then, is a useful way of getting characters to remember an event from the past in the form of a flashback (assuming that this event is important to the understanding of the present story).

Evoking the sense of smell is also a useful way of saying a lot with very few words. Try to imagine the following ...

- The smell of dry summer grass.
- Sour milk in the refrigerator.
- The first smell of the sea through a car window.

The mere mention of those things likely conjured up entire settings for you. You can use this to conjure up similar associations in your readers.

Sound

Few settings are silent. And if they are truly silent, describing the absence of sound will be interesting in itself.

Using Description

Characters speaking and coughing and banging things with hammers is one way of adding a soundtrack to a scene. Another way is to incorporate the sense of sound into the description of settings and characters.

If you are describing a seaside setting, for example, you could mention screeching gulls and waves breaking on pebbles to add an extra dimension to the description.

If you are describing a character walking through a hotel lobby, you could mention his heels clicking on the marble or the jangle of loose change in his pocket.

Sounds can sometimes be tricky to describe accurately, but one solution is to use onomatopoeias as described in more detail in one of the later sections.

Another effective way to describe sound in your fiction is to compare the sound to something else - "the distant bleat of a goat on a hill sounded like a half heard call for help."

Taste

You will mostly evoke the sense of taste under two circumstances - when characters are eating and drinking, and when they are kissing and canoodling. (When they are actively using their mouths and tongues, in other words.)

But always look for ways to incorporate it in more unexpected situations in your novel ...

- When a character arrives at the coast, the usual thing would be to have them smell the sea. Instead, you could have them taste the salty breeze.
- When a character is returning to his childhood home, have him taste his mother's roast chicken and gravy when he is still 100 kilometres away.

Even if you don't actually describe a taste, just mentioning the thing we taste with - the tongue - can be powerful in descriptive fiction ...

- Your character is tramping in the Arthurs Pass and it starts to snow. They look up and try to catch the flakes on their tongue.
- A freezing Christchurch morning and a Canterbury University student acting on a dare, licks a metal pole.

Touch

Like all five of the senses, the sense of touch can be painful or pleasurable.

Make it pleasurable, like the feel of cool cotton sheets, and the readers will experience the pleasure along with the character.

Make it painful, like being head butted in the nose, and the readers will wince. Like you just did.

Sometimes, a touch is neither painful nor pleasurable but simply helps to describe the person or the place ...

- A greasy stove
- A character's cracked lips
- A cold, sweaty handshake

Sometimes, the touch itself is what is important, not what the thing being touched feels like. A character reaching out to touch another character can be extremely powerful under the right circumstances, as can the laying of a hand on a headstone.

The Sixth Sense

Don't forget this one - assuming you believe in that kind of thing and it is appropriate to the story you are telling.

Unscientific senses can be just as powerful, if not more so, than the conventional ones. And they also happen to be a great way of **foreshadowing** dramatic events to come.

Descriptive Writing Tools

There are lots of different ways you can make your writing more descriptive. Here are a few of the most common descriptive writing techniques:

Metaphors

A metaphor is a descriptive technique that likens one thing to another. Take a look at these examples of common metaphors:

My child is the light of my life.
He's the black sheep of our family.
She's a tornado that destroys everything in her path.

By stating that one object is another, you're saying they share certain traits. You aren't saying they're indistinguishable or that they're actually the same object; you're expressing that the reader will encounter these specific traits in a very similar way in both objects.

Similes

A simile is like a metaphor. And yes, that was a simile.

Just like a metaphor, a simile describes something by comparing it to something else. The difference between the two is that a simile uses the word "like," "so," "than," or "as" to make the comparison. For example:

The building was as tall as Mt. Fuji.
She drives faster than a NASCAR racer.
They ate like a bunch of vultures.

With a simile, the comparison typically isn't literal—it's hyperbole that emphasizes the statement being made, much like it does with a metaphor. If you aren't familiar with the term "hyperbole," don't fret—we're covering it later on in this section.

Sensory writing

Sensory writing depicts a scene through your senses. Take a look at these examples:

When the cool water splashed my face, the contrast made me realize just how red-hot my skin had gotten.
Their home always smelled like freshly baked cookies; a constant cloud of chocolatey, sweet warmth wafted through the house.
The sticky substance reached every centimeter of my skin, oozing into my pores and gluing my fingers and toes together.

As you can see, sensory writing typically incorporates other kinds of descriptive writing, like similes, metaphors, and hyperbole.

Freewriting is a great way to channel your senses and craft some spot-on sensory writing. Just open your word processor or notebook and start writing what you think, feel, or have experienced. There are no rules, no restrictions—just move everything that's happening in your mind onto the page, walking through sensations like how you feel, what you hear, what you see, and what these sensations are driving you to do.

Hyperbole

When you use an extreme statement to make a point, you're using hyperbole. Here are a few quick examples:

It was a million degrees out yesterday.
I haven't heard that name in a hundred years.
He was the sweetest boyfriend ever.

Using Description

You know it wasn't actually a million degrees, you most likely haven't been alive long enough to not have heard a specific name in the past century, and surely there are many other boyfriends who are kind and thoughtful. But when you say things like this, you aren't confusing or lying to your listener—you're intentionally exaggerating to express just how extreme something was: It was very hot outside, you haven't heard that name in a long time, and your boyfriend was very romantic.

Personification

It was a joyful bouquet. Each flower had a distinct, vibrant face and together, they were a happy choir of enthusiastic friends, ready to break into song at any moment.

We're talking about flowers here and, as you know, flowers don't have faces, voices, or friendships. But see how giving the flowers in this description human qualities like faces, voices, and interpersonal bonds gives you a clear image of the bouquet being described? It's not just a collection of flowers; it's a coherent group of fresh, healthy, colorful flowers.

Onomatopoeia

Pop!

Bang!

Cha-ching!

Roar!

Onomatopoeia are words for specific sounds. If you've ever watched the live Batman TV show from the 1960s, you've seen such onomatopoeia as "bam!" and "thwap!" flash across the screen during the fight scenes, creating a comic book-like feel. That's what onomatopoeia does—it immerses you in the scene by giving it a "soundtrack."

Description and Pacing

How much description we want can depend on the pace of the story.

If we are starting our story off nice and slow we may have time for a leisurely description of the gardens and the climate, however if we are in the middle of a chase scene then we only have time to identify possible escape routes and further description would just slow us down.

If we are trying to build suspense, menace and other atmospheric effects, then adding layers of descriptive detail are an essential tool for achieving the emotional effects we seek.

We want to pay attention to the pacing of the story and adjust our descriptions accordingly.

Exercises in Writing Description

Here are some descriptive writing activities that will provide opportunities to practice writing description. Have a shot at doing one of these. Work at crafting descriptions that are compelling and mesmerizing.

- Go to one of your favorite spots and write a description of the setting: it could be your bedroom, a favorite coffee shop, or a local park. Leave people, dialogue, and action out of it. Just focus on explaining what the space looks like.
- Since modern fiction is light on description, it is too easy to fail to include details, even when the reader needs them. Go through one of your writing projects and make sure elements that readers may not be familiar with are adequately described.
- Sometimes in a narrative, a little description provides respite from all the action and dialogue. Make a list of things from a story you're working on (gadgets, characters, settings, etc.), and for each one, write a short description of no more than a hundred words.

Using Description

- Tolkien often spent pages describing a single landscape. Choose one of your favorite pieces of classic literature, find a long passage of description, and rewrite it. Try to cut the descriptive word count in half.



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