

Descriptive Essay

What is Description?



You use description to tell readers about the physical characteristics of a person, place, or thing.



Description relies on five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

A Description Essay

- A descriptive essay tells what something looks like or what it feels like, sounds like, smells like, or tastes like.
- However, description often goes beyond personal sense impressions; novelists can create imaginary landscapes, historians can paint word pictures of historical figures or events, and scientists can describe physical phenomena they have never actually seen.

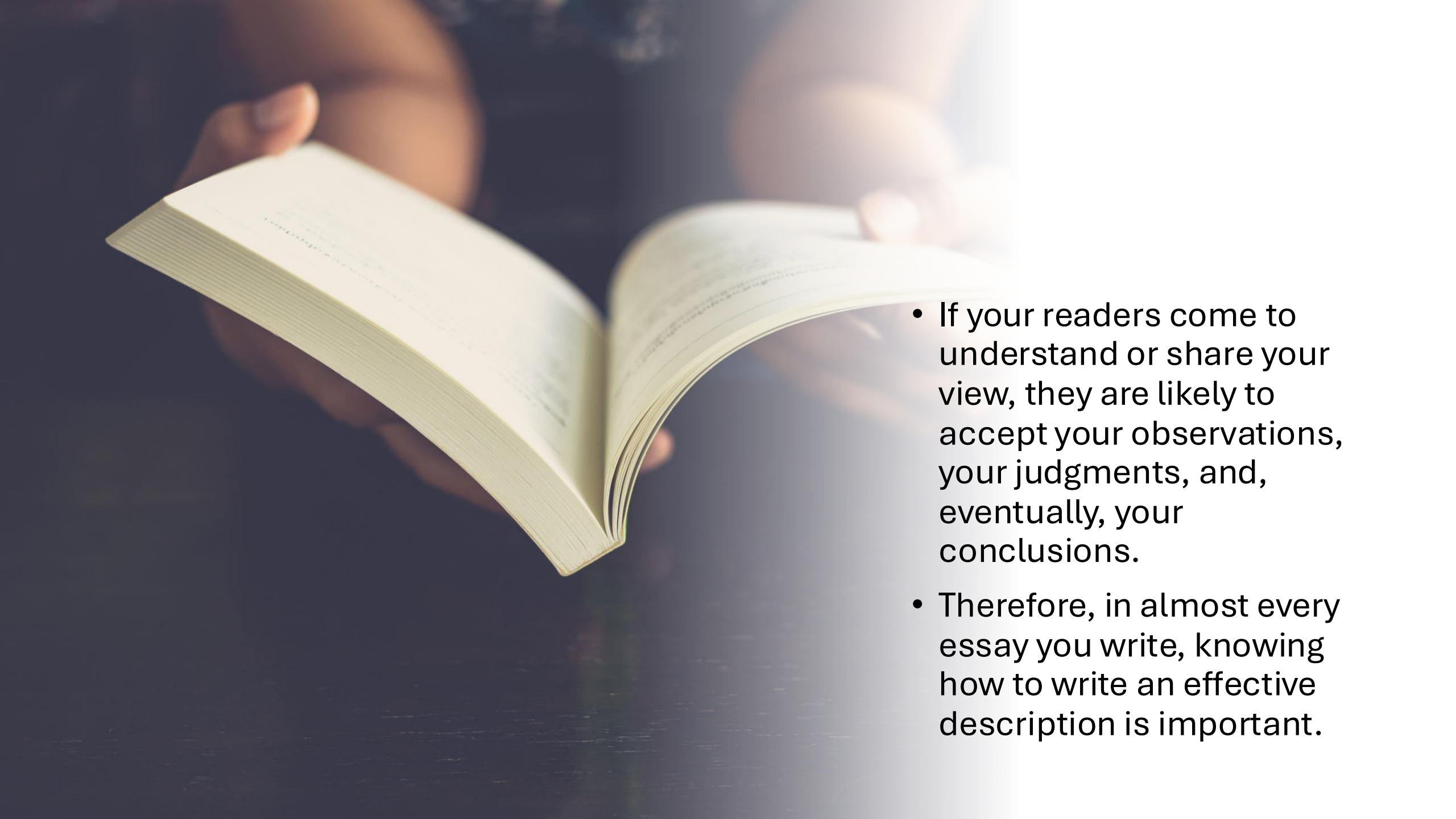


College Writing

In your college writing, you use description in many different kinds of assignments.

In an argumentative essay, for example, you may describe a fish kill in a local river to make the point that industrial waste dumping is a problem.

Through description, you communicate your view of the world to your readers.

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- If your readers come to understand or share your view, they are likely to accept your observations, your judgments, and, eventually, your conclusions.
 - Therefore, in almost every essay you write, knowing how to write an effective description is important.

Understanding Objective Description

Description can be ***objective*** or ***subjective***.

Objective description focuses on the object itself rather than your personal reactions to it.

Your purpose is to create a precise verbal picture of your subject.

Objective Description

- A biologist describing cellular structures seen through an electron microscope and a historian describing a Civil War battlefield would both write objectively.
- The biologist would not, for instance, say how exciting the observations were, nor would the historian express disappointment at the outcome of a battle.
- Many reporters also try to achieve this level of objectivity.

Objective Description cont.

- Objectivity is an ideal that writers strive for but never fully achieve.
- In fact, selecting some details and leaving out others, writers are making subjective decisions.
- Visuals, like drawings and photographs, make it possible for writers to describe what would be difficult (or impossible) to depict otherwise.



Understanding Subjective Description

Subjective description conveys your personal response to your subject.

Here your perspective is not necessarily stated explicitly; often it is revealed indirectly, through your choice of words and phrasing.

If the first-year composition assignment asks you to describe a place that has a special meaning to you, you could give a subjective reaction to your topic by selecting and emphasizing details that show your feeling about a place.

- For example, you could write a subjective description of your room by focusing on particular objects – your desk, your window, and your bookshelves – and explaining the meanings these things have for you.
- Thus, your desk could be a "warm brown rectangle of wood whose surface reveals the scratched impressions of a thousand school assignments."



- A subjective description should convey not just a literal record of sights and sounds, but also your reaction to them.
- For example, if you objectively described a fire that destroyed a house in your neighborhood, you might include the fire's temperature, duration, and scope.
- In addition, you might describe, as accurately as possible, the fire's movement and intensity.





If you subjectively described the fire, however, you would try to re-create for your audience a sense of how the fire made you feel – your reactions to the noise, to the dense smoke, to the destruction.



Mark Twain subjectively describes a sunset on the Mississippi River (p 152).

Using Objective and Subjective Language

- We have already discussed this a bit.
- **Objective** descriptions rely on precise, factual language that presents observations without conveying a writer's attitude toward the subject.
- Objective descriptions rely more on **denotations**, or more literal meanings (such as those found in a dictionary).



Subjective Descriptions



Often use richer and more suggestive language than objective descriptions do.



They are more likely to rely on the **connotations** of words, their emotional associations.

Figurative Language (a.k.a. Figures of Speech)

Simile – uses *like* or *as* to compare two dissimilar things.

- Happy as a clam, hungry as a bear, free as a bird.

Metaphor – compares two dissimilar things without *like* or *as*.

- Instead of saying something is *like* something else, a metaphor says it *is* something else.
- Couch potato, time is money.

- **Personification** – speaks of concepts or objects as if they had life or human characteristics. If you say the wind whispered or that an engine died, you are using personification.
- **An Allusion** – is a reference to a person, place, event or quotation that the writer assumes readers will recognize. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," for example, MLK Jr. enriches his arguments by alluding to biblical passages and proverbs that he expects his audience of clergy to recognize.



Your purpose and audience determine whether you should use objective or subjective language.



An assignment that specifically asks for your reactions calls for a subjective description.



Legal, medical, technical, business, and scientific writing assignments, however, usually require objective descriptions because their primary purpose is to convey factual information.

Selecting Details

- Sometimes inexperienced writers pack their descriptions with bland, overused words such as *nice*, *terrific*, *great*, or *awful*, substituting their own general reactions to an object for the qualities of the object itself.
- To produce an effective description, however, you must do more than say something is nice or great; you must also use language that evokes this response in the readers.

Specific Details

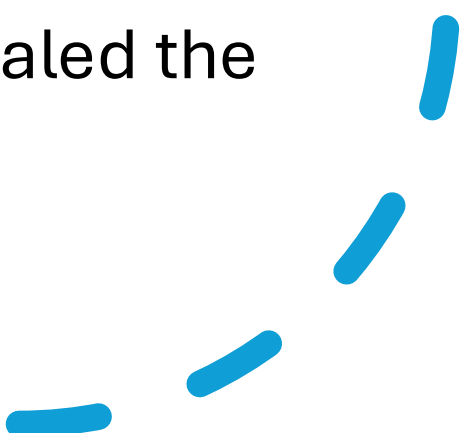
All good descriptive writing, whether objective or subjective, relies on specific details.

Show as much as you can.

Every person, place, or thing has its special characteristics, and you should use your powers of observation to detect them. Then, you need to select specific details that will enable your readers to imagine what you describe.

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Example of specific details

- Don't be satisfied with "He looked angry" when you can say, "His face was flushed, and one corner of his mouth twitched as he tried to maintain control."
 - The difference – In the first case, you simply identify the man's emotional state. In the second, you provide enough detail so that readers can tell not only that he was angry but also how he revealed the intensity of his anger.
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You could have provided even more detail by describing the man's beard, his wrinkles, or any number of other features.

Keep in mind, however, that not all details are useful and desirable.