

Writing a Descriptive Paragraph

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1. **Make sure to choose a meaningful person, place, or thing.** Before you begin your paragraph, you have to be sure to pick something that is worth describing. If you want to describe a character, make sure the person is interesting in some way. If you want to describe an object, make sure it has some deeper meaning beyond itself so you have enough to write about. If you pick a place, make sure you can describe it in a unique way that can capture a reader's attention.

- For example, in the opening pages of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield describes a baseball mitt. The mitt itself is not that remarkable, but he describes it in a way that fills it with meaning because it used to belong to his deceased brother. Though not every object you describe needs an elaborate backstory, if it has some meaning behind it, this can help the description carry weight.
- If you want to pick a place, don't just pick any old spot at a beach, but one that is meaningful to you -- or, if you're writing fiction, to one of your characters -- in some way. This can add a layer of depth to the place in question.

2. **Introduce the person, place, or thing you are describing.** If you want to get the reader's attention, then you should let him or her know what you're describing as soon as possible instead of leaving them guessing. Here is an example of some opening lines in a descriptive paragraph:

- *Natasha's basement was our sanctuary. I return to it in my best dreams and wake up feeling like I could die happy.*
 - These opening sentences introduce the subject that is being described, the basement of the narrator's friend. They make it clear that this place is very important to the narrator.

3. **Engage your reader's sense of sight.** You can start with what the reader can see and appeal to his or her sense of sight to help introduce the object. Since sight is the most helpful sense, any good descriptive paragraph must first discuss what the writer wants the reader to visualize. Using strong adjectives to illustrate your scene, moment, experience or item to the reader will help provide a visual picture in your reader's mind. Keep in mind that, while adjectives can help convey a sense of the subject, overusing them can lead to boring, overwrought writing. Here's an example of the opening of a descriptive paragraph:

- *Even today I could paint a perfect picture of it, right up to the last piece of neglected pizza crust festering under the ping-pong table.*

- Immediately, the reader is given a visual description of some things in the basement: old pizza crust and a ping-pong table. The reader is given a sense of a messy, chaotic place.

4. **Describe smells and tastes if you can.** Think about how you can describe the topic, scene, or moment to the reader in terms of how it smells and tastes. The best descriptive paragraphs make the reader feel as if he or she were actually experiencing the thing he or she was reading about, not just reading about it. Include a sentence or two about how your topic smells and use a few poignant adjectives to relay the smell of it to the reader. "It tastes good" is not going to provide a specific experience for your reader. However, "It tastes like Grandma's apple pie when it's fresh and still bubbling around the edges - crunchy, flavorful and sweet" helps describe the distinct flavor of your item. Of course, not everything you describe will have a relevant taste or smell; if it does, though, it can help to include it. Here's the next part of our paragraph:

- *The spilled root beer and duck sauce shining over the nappy brown carpet indicated nights of giggles and prank calls, times when we were far too occupied to consider the absurd possibility of cleaning up. Popcorn got crushed into the carpet and was never quite cleaned up. You could smell*

this mixture of sweetness and butter even when you stood on the front porch.

5. **Describe how the moment or item feels.** As you continue writing your paragraph, write a sentence or two about how the experience feels. What does it remind you of as you imagine yourself running your hand along its surface, or the tingling feeling you feel run down your back? How are you reacting to the moment? Again, use descriptive adjectives to describe how the moment feels. Avoid using general statements like "it feels nice", which isn't descriptive at all. Opt for specific, definitive examples that relay the feeling of something to the reader. If you're describing how the object or item feels for a certain character, this can also give readers a sense of what it was like. Continuing on:

- *Nothing ever got erased, either. It was like memory. With enough time and will power, you could find almost anything down there. Katie had once recovered her third grade Tamagotchi from the storage closet. Another time, Nora had unearthed a disposable camera with undeveloped pictures I had taken during our fourth grade trip to Ellis Island.*

- Note that, in the above sentences, the narrator is showing that the basement that is being described was never cleaned up, while also using these details to show that the basement is important to her because it serves as a time capsule of her childhood. This is both conveying the feeling of being in the basement and also uses figurative language to add a deeper meaning to the place.

6. **Describe how your subject sounds.** What can you hear? Is there a deafening silence? If there is a buzzing sound, avoid simply saying "All of a sudden I heard a loud buzzing sound", rather "I jerked as all of the sudden I heard an undefinable buzzing sound, so loud I put my hands over my face and ears. I assumed it was the fire alarm..." and the reader would be able to relate with the "fire alarm" description, as most people have experienced the startling noise of a fire alarm. Here is how the sounds are described in our paragraph:

- *The television in the basement was always on, but no one ever seemed to watch it. We were too busy laughing over our latest stupid game of Rummikub, prank calling our crushes, or listening for the doorbell that told us the pizza was here.*

- Here, the narrator uses the sounds in the basement to help give a sense of what it was like to actually be there, and to indirectly tell the reader what was commonly done there.

7. **Make unique observations.** When you're describing something, give your readers an image, feeling, smell, or sight that they wouldn't normally expect. If you're describing a lawyer, for example, don't just tell the readers things that they would expect to hear about him, like that he wears a suit and works too much; tell them about his secret love for his pet iguanas. Make sure to keep your descriptions sounding fresh and surprising. Continuing on with our paragraph:

- *The silver Christmas garland around the banisters was pretty much a permanent fixture; the same birthday steamers celebrated three shoe-sizes of birthdays, eventually lost their color, and seemed to peel off the walls on their own accord.*

- This sentence makes it sound as if the basement has a life and will of its own.

8. **Include some figurative language.** Using other effective writing techniques to top off your paragraph will make it all that more appealing and evocative. If you include all these elements in your paragraph, your reader will be able to fully experience and appreciate your writing. You can describe a person, place, or thing while using both literal language and speaking on the level of metaphor or simile to fully give a person a sense of the thing that is being described. Here is some figurative language:

- *As it was, with a net-less ping-pong table and a set of bare mattresses facing the TV, the basement looked more like the Fiona Apple "Criminal" video than a place to raise your children.*

- This sentence uses simile to compare the basement to a notorious music video, adding an extra layer of meaning.

9. **Wrap it up.** Though you don't need to have a neat concluding sentence for this creative paragraph (unless it is part of an assignment for school), you'll need to end the paragraph in some way to remind readers of what you had described and to leave a lasting idea of the person, place, or thing in their minds. Here's how this paragraph ends:

- *And that was exactly why three extra toothbrushes made their way to the downstairs bathroom. All of us could have lived and died there.*
 - The second to last line, while it doesn't say that the other girls used to spend all of their time there explicitly, uses the images of the extra toothbrushes to show that this basement was once a sanctuary for the young girls, which reminds the reader of the first sentence. These sentences show that the basement was incredibly important to the girls who "grew up" there without explicitly saying so.

