
Level 1 Workshops

The Descriptive Essay

Supplies: writing notebook, pen, computer, scanner; “Spotlight on Word Choice” and “Descriptive Essay Handouts”; a copy of the picture book, *Winter Is the Warmest Season*, by Lauren Stringer (library copy okay). *If you need to order it from the library, please do so before you begin the workshop. If it is not available, please let me know right away.*

Goal: to master the concept and process of the descriptive essay form

Suggested time: Follow the prompts throughout the workshop for pacing. In order to keep your project fresh in your mind, however, I suggest you don’t let more than one day go by without working on it (except for the weekend), unless you’re directed to do otherwise.

Remember: *Begin your study with a 10-15 minute warm-up in your notebook (lesson 2, your choice).*

SESSION 1

Introduction

Welcome to the Descriptive Essay Workshop, the second of five workshops in level 1 that will teach you how to write variations on the basic expository essay. Each workshop consists of the same three parts: a short lesson on the essay variation, a model essay followed by some analysis, and a writing project. The goal of each of these workshops is for you to produce a polished, single-paragraph essay. You will follow each step of the writing process, sending me your work from each step. I will

make comments on each step, as needed, to help you produce your best work. This may require several revisions, but your efforts will pay off when you produce an essay you are proud of. Not only that, you will come away with a firm grasp of that essay form. Let's begin!

The Descriptive Essay

Close your eyes. In your mind's eye conjure up an image of your house or apartment from the outside. Picture the building, the grounds around it, even the street just beyond. Try to see every detail, as if you are standing right in front of it. Go on, it'll just take a moment; then hold the image in your mind as you open your eyes again. Okay, can you see it?

Now take out your writing notebook and find a clean page in your "Writing Exercises" section. Grab a pen or pencil, and write "My Home" in the middle of the page. Then jot down words and phrases at random and anywhere on the page that would help someone else see the picture in your mind. Brainstorm as many words and phrases as you can, write as quickly as possible, and use vivid, specific words.

STOP and complete the exercise above. Then continue with the workshop. Do your best; you will need it later.

Painting pictures with words, such as you just did, is what we call "description." We will study two kinds of description in this workshop: technical/scientific and emotional. You will write one practice essay for each type, and then you will choose one type for your final project. The first type of descriptive essay we'll study is technical/scientific. For both types you will need the "Descriptive Essay Handouts."

STOP and open the handout. Then continue with the workshop.

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PART 1: TECHNICAL/SCIENTIFIC DESCRIPTION

At the top of your handout you will see the title, “Using Graphic Organizers,” and several graphic organizers march down the right side of the page. If you are someone who finds that visuals help you learn concepts and organize ideas, then you may want to use the graphic organizers as you prewrite for your descriptive paragraphs. There are many different types of graphic organizers for many different purposes, but these will give you a start. Knowing how to use them will give you another tool that can help you when you need to craft a paper.

At the top left side of your handout you will see the heading, “Technical or Scientific description.” This type of description focuses on something that is made up of precise elements that can only be discussed in objective terms—that is, factual and unbiased. Read the bullet points underneath the heading. Notice that this type of description is not only objective, it is unemotional. Poetic, flowery phrases do not belong in this type of description. You are not trying to evoke any sort of emotional response in your reader but instead provide an accurate, objective, verbal portrait. Let’s look at an example of this type of description.

STOP and open the handout, “Technical/Scientific Description (3-45).” Read the examples, and then continue with the workshop.

On this handout you have read a description of the internal combustion engine and another one of bacteria. Both descriptions provide a factual, precisely-worded, verbal picture of objects. There are no opinion phrases or statements, and there is nothing about the essay that intentionally evokes any type of emotion in the reader. The writer describes the object like it is, and that’s it.

Now read this partial description of a finback whale from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online:

Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*), also called **finback whale, razorback whale, or common rorqual**, a slender baleen whale, [is] second in size to the blue whale and distinguishable by its asymmetrical coloration. The fin whale is generally gray with a white underside, but the right side of the head has a light gray area, a white lower jaw, and white baleen at the front of the mouth.

The fin whale is 18–27 metres (59–89 feet) long, with short baleen and 56–100 grooves along its throat and chest. It is found in all the world’s oceans in groups of a few to several hundred. Some fin whale populations live and feed in temperate waters during the summer and migrate to warmer waters in winter to breed. The fin whale’s diet is unusually diverse for a cetacean, ranging from small crustaceans, such as copepods and krill, to fish and squid...

Again, this description is technical and scientific. It does not express any sort of emotion or opinion—just the facts, ma’am. Just enough to allow us to accurately visualize this animal in broad brushstrokes.

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Exercise 1

I’d like you to give this type of description a try, now. Go back to the brainstorming exercise you did at the beginning on “My Home.” Review what you wrote, and then take your paper and pen outside to the street side of your home. Be sure to take something hard with you to serve as a writing surface. When you are in front of your home, I want you to take a few minutes to examine it as if you are an impartial observer seeing it for the very first time. Be sure to examine the building, the grounds, and the surrounding area.

As you examine your home, take care to push all emotional connections aside. Avoid noting whether it is beautiful or ugly, cozy or cold, or any other such

description that derives from opinion and experience. You are a camera taking a picture—and that’s all. What would a camera show a viewer?

Not only do you need to avoid expressing opinion and emotion in your description, you need to be sure to use precise words. If your house is made of brick, specify whether it is red, yellow, or brown brick. If your house has a flagstone path, don’t say it is a stone path. Stones and flagstones are almost the same thing—but not *exactly*.

Okay, get the idea? Put your verbal camera on, now, and show me what you can do. Add to your previous brainstorming any further details that will help me see your home.

STOP and follow the instructions above, adding to the brainstorming you did at the beginning of this workshop. Remember, you are not writing your essay, yet. You are only brainstorming words and phrases that you can use in your essay. Write down as many as you can come up with, but you do not need to repeat anything you wrote during the opening exercise. Note that you will probably not have room to use all of these details, but having an abundance of them will give you plenty of material to draw from as you write your essay.

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Exercise 2

Now that you are finished brainstorming, it is time to write your essay. Get comfortable either inside or outside of your home, and then study your brainstorming exercise. You may want to cross out any words/phrases that you know you won’t use and circle any words/phrases that you think you’ll want to use. Then decide where you will begin your description. At the roof? The street? The sidewalk? Perhaps the front door? When you are ready, draft your essay, taking care to write with complete objectivity. In other words, don’t use any kind of phrasing that is personal, emotional, poetic, or opinionated. Also remember that formal,

factual writing like this is always in third-person. In other words, don't refer directly to yourself or your reader.

When you have a clear idea of how you want to begin and what you want to include, you may either write an informal outline to lay out your essay in short form before you write it, or you may just dive in and write. Either way, you should end up with a technical/scientific essay that is 8-12 sentences long. Your essay should be written in your writing notebook after your brainstorming.

STOP and follow the instructions above. When your essay is finished (rough draft only), scan or type it. If you scan it, save it as a new document (PDF preferred; no .jpg, please). If you type it, you may type directly in the body of the email. This is not your final project, so I will not be grading it in detail. I just want to see that you understand how to write this type of description. Do not continue with the workshop until I have responded.

End of sample