

Writing that describes

- What can you **see**?
- What can you **hear**?
- What do you **taste**?
- What can you **smell**?
- How do **you feel**?
- How does **the place 'feel'**?

Writing to describe is an interesting type of writing. In effective description, you'll find 'answers' to questions like those above - often answered using original and effective **similes** or **metaphors**. But writing to describe is especially interesting because professional writers never use description for its own sake. And yet that is precisely what you are being asked to do. *Professional writers do, of course, use description. But they use it to support other purposes for writing such as creating a character or setting a scene or mood. But for your coursework or exam, you need a rather different approach.*

- It's best to imagine yourself as a kind of human camera looking in on a scene and taking '**snapshots**' describing what you see, hear, smell, feel and taste.
- This keeps you doing what the examiner wants and stops your writing wandering into, for example, story telling.
- In writing to describe, your aim is not to tell a story, or even to 'be there' yourself within the writing; rather, it is to focus your 'camera' on details - close up and ultra-close up at times - **to help your reader feel as if he or she were actually there, experiencing the thing being described.**

Some key features of effective description:

- *it should create **vivid** and **original imagery**: both mental pictures and emotional feelings.*
- *At its best, vivid description seems to **etch** its images onto its reader's mind.*
- *it can help to give the illusion of **showing** a reader what a thing is like - which is always far more effective than mere **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?*
- *what comes as a surprise to younger writers is that the most effective description never relies wholly on descriptive words such as **adjectives** and **adverbs**. Instead, the most effective description is developed through careful choices of vocabulary - **precise vocabulary**; the adjectives and adverbs - of course, they will be needed - quite often will be taking on almost a secondary role to 'help out' those words that in themselves really do need extra description.*
- *the use of excessive adjectives and adverbs can easily **detract** from the effectiveness of the description - and it loses marks!*
- *try to avoid overuse of describing words; instead, work hard to choose a more precise word - one that seems as if it contains its own adjectives within its meaning, e.g. rather than write, 'He walked very slowly and in a casual manner', why not write, 'He strolled along breezily'?*
- *Carefully chosen precise verbs and nouns can transform a piece of writing.*
- *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.*

Theme and 'Controlling Idea'

No one enjoys writing without a good reason; but never forget, too, that no one likes to *read* without feeling that their time spent reading has been worthwhile.

But what makes reading worthwhile? 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 'behind' a piece of writing is controlling idea. This is another word for the theme or message of the writing, i.e. what the writing is really all about.

- *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.*
- *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; and a description of a journey could act as a metaphor for a person's life.*

SIX STEPS TO SUCCESS

1. Read the question with thought and care

Decide if the topic of the question would allow you to develop an underlying message of some kind in your writing. For example, a question that asks you to describe a scene at a busy shopping centre could allow you to write a piece that has an underlying message concerning the increasing rush of modern life and the need for peace and escape; similarly, a description of a visit to the dentist could have as its underlying theme bravery; a description of a room could actually be "describing" the person whose room it is.

This message becomes your **controlling idea**. Always remember that readers prefer to feel their reading has been worthwhile. It would help to 'switch places' and for a moment reflect on becoming your own reader. When you read you like to be made to feel:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• interested• excited• involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• moved• tense and fearful• a sense of wonder
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Work out how you could describe your topic to make your reader feel like this. We are always especially interested in people too, because we live alongside them all the time and are naturally rather nosy!

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

2. Avoid storytelling!

Even though all narrative - storytelling - depends upon description to set a scene or mood, in your

coursework or exam, when writing to describe, it's best to avoid writing a story. Stick to just describing!

- *Equally, avoid being 'in' your description, i.e. 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 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**.

PRECISE AND SENSORY DESCRIPTION

Here are some descriptions that use precise vocabulary and vivid **similes** and **metaphors**. You might think of such vocabulary as 'muscular' for it creates powerful images without relying on lots of extra adjectives. Can you detect the sensory images here, too?

- The swollen mass of people 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 soused 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 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.

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!**