Writing
Descriptive/Observational Essays

Mr. Blaber
Essay/Exposition

Why is Descriptive Writing a Discrete Rhetorical Mode?

- Descriptive writing is a skill most high school writers believe they have already mastered. Why? Because they have included descriptive passages in longer expository essays many times over their high school careers,
  - in a narrative, for example, description can make the setting of the story more vivid; in a process paper it can ensure that the audience understands the finished product.
- Because description is a mode of expository writing which is relied upon in other expository modes, we sometimes find difficulty in imagining a purely descriptive essay.
- Try this now: identify writing situation in school this year where you expect to have to use descriptive writing to complete an assignment. Try to think of subjects other than English class.
- Turns out most of us use this skill our whole lives. Let's play “stump the chump.” Try this now: name 1 or more types of work/careers that interest you. Let me see if I can come up with a way you’ll use descriptive writing in that line of work.
Descriptive Essays: purpose and characteristics

• Students often ask, "But how do I write a purely descriptive essay? What's the point of description? What's so different about it?"
• You tell me: what makes for good descriptive writing?

Principles of Descriptive Writing

There are three characteristics of a purely descriptive essay which are worthy of remembering.
1. **A descriptive essay has one, clear dominant impression.**
   - If, for example you are describing an ice storm, it is important for you to decide and to let your reader know if it is threatening or lovely; in order to have one dominant impression it cannot be both.
   - The dominant impression guides the author's selection of detail and is thereby made clear to the reader in the thesis sentence.
Principles of Descriptive Writing (cont.)

There are three characteristics of a purely descriptive essay which are worthy of remembering. (cont.)

2. A descriptive essay can be **objective** or **subjective**, giving the author a wide choice of tone, diction and attitude.

   - For instance, an objective description of one’s dog would mention such facts as height, weight, coloring and so forth.
   - A subjective description would include the above details, but would also stress the author’s feeling toward the dog, as well as its personality and habits.

3. The purpose of a purely descriptive essay is to **involve** the reader enough so he or she can **actually visualize** the things being described.

   - Therefore, it is important to use specific and concrete details. The granular nature of these details gives rise to the term “microdetails.”
Conventions of Descriptive Essays

1. The descriptive essay relies on concrete, sensory detail to communicate its point. Remember, we have five senses, not one or two. Can you name them?

2. The author of a descriptive essay must carefully select details to support the dominant impression. In other words, the author has the license to omit details which are incongruent with the dominant impression unless the dominant impression is one which points out the discrepancies.

3. Description very often relies on emotion to convey its point. Because of this, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives convey more to the reader than do nouns.

4. Unless the description is objective, you must be sure that the dominant impression conveys an attitude.

Strategies for Descriptive Essays

• Try giving all the details first; the dominant impression then is built from these details.

• Check your details to be sure that they are consistent with the dominant impression. You might even want to write down the five senses on a scratch piece of paper and check to see that you have covered them all.
Strategies for Descriptive Essays (cont.)

• Try moving your reader through space and time chronologically. For instance, you might want to describe a train ride from start to destination, or a stream from its source to the point at which it joins the river.
• Use a then-and-now approach to show decay, change, or improvement. A person you knew well as a child might now be unrecognizably changed. The variations on this strategy are endless.

Strategies for Descriptive Essays (cont.)

• Above all do not underestimate the difficulty of accurate, effective description and don’t discount its potential as a profound rhetorical strategy.
Joseph Conrad, author *Heart of Darkness*

“My task that I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.”

The role of imagery in description

- Literal imagery is purely descriptive, representing an object or event with words that draw on or appeal to the kind of experiences gained through the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell).
- A chief element in descriptive writing—and in poetry—imagery provides the reader with a sense of vividness and immediacy.
- Try this now: List the types of imagery you see in the following two poems; then decide if the poem is objective or subjective and explain how the selection of detail and imagery contribute to the meaning of the poem.
Description as Poetry

Gypsies
by John Clare
The snow falls deep; the forest lies alone;
The boy goes hasty for his load of brakes,
Then thinks upon the fire and hurries back;
The gypsy knocks his hands and tucks them up, 5
And seeks his squalid camp, half hid in snow,
Beneath the oak which breaks away the wind,
And bushes close in snow like hovel warm;
There tainted mutton wastes upon the coals,
And the half-wasted dog squats close and rubs, 10
Then feels the heat too strong, and goes aloof;
He watches well, but none a bit can spare,
And vainly waits the morsel thrown away.
'Tis thus they live--a picture to the place,
A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.

Description as Poetry

A. Here is a poem full of verbs, that details an action, and that uses its imagery as a means of making a social commentary.

B. Notice how unembellished the imagery is. There is nothing we could legitimately call “metaphor”: rather, simple details do the job of conveying a picture. This is like photo-reportage.

C. Finally, the closing couplet packs the wallop Clare intended. By waiting until the end for his political summary, Clare has successfully prepared his audience by means of the seemingly innocuous details he has been building up. In other words, the succession of images depicting the gypsies’ lifestyle prepares the reader for the poet’s assertion or argument that they are a “quiet, pillering, unprotected race.”
Description as Poetry

The Buck in the Snow
Edna St. Vincent Millay 1892-1950
1 White sky, over the hemlocks bowed with snow,
2 Saw you not at the beginning of evening the antlered buck and his doe
3 Standing in the apple-orchard? I saw them. I saw them suddenly go,
4 Tails up, with long leaps lovely and slow,
5 Over the stone-wall into the wood of hemlocks bowed with snow.
6 Now lies he here, his wild blood scalding the snow.
7 How strange a thing is death, bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers
8 The buck in the snow.
9 How strange a thing,—a mile away by now, it may be.
10 Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass
11 Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow—
12 Life, looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe.

Description as Poetry

A. Like Clare, Millay wants to combine detailed visualization with a social commentary.
B. The picture of the deer and the direct address to the sky establish a semi-reverie in the first stanza, which is both shattered and continued by the sixth line and the semi-metaphoric participle “scalding.”
C. Millay wishes to use her visual senses to make a statement about human intrusiveness in nature, but she does so without overt condemnation. Notice the diction (“How strange a thing is death”), and the very absence in the poem of the real cause of death—the human hunter who has brought the buck down.
D. The poem ends with the image of the doe looking out on the scene.
John Ruskin, the father of modern art criticism

“The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion—all in one.”

Sources

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/general/gl_describe.html