

Descriptive Writing

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Journalism – English Language Arts

Overview & Purpose

Vivid, colorful and detailed description makes a news or feature article more interesting. Using words to paint a picture helps to engage the reader in a very powerful way, by eliciting emotion. In print articles, using descriptive language makes stories more three-dimensional. Readers are able to put themselves in the place or perspective of the story, and more readily identify with the content and the source of the incident.

For new writers and reporters, a key to writing good descriptive copy is not to rely on memory, but rather to think about the five senses when in the field reporting. Reporters should take notes about their perceptions and impressions, how they are moved and how their senses relate to what they are seeing and experiencing. In his way, vivid description helps writers to portray their stories with confidence that they are truly sharing a unique experience with readers, and not just relating a set of dry facts.

State Common Core Curriculum Standards

www.isbe.net or www.corestandards.org

This lesson applies the State Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state learning performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. *Scroll down to bottom of lesson plan for individual standards and their relevance to this lesson.*

Materials/Sources for Teaching the Lesson

Descriptive Writing with Virginia Hamilton, Steps 1-4

www.teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/diary/descriptive_journal.htm. This learning activity helps students increase their skills in descriptive writing by following helpful tips and suggestions (see below).

Louise Kiernan, award-winning Chicago Tribune reporter and 2001 Pulitzer Prize winner, excerpts from her story on flaws in the nation's air travel industry.

Learning Links for the Classroom

In this section of the lesson plan are classroom teaching options, discussion and question/answer prompts and journaling and writing assignments for assessment and evaluation of student learning and knowledge.

Definition of Descriptive Writing

Descriptive writing engages the reader by employing vivid, colorful language to paint a picture of an event, a place, a person, a thing or an experience. The writer uses all his or her senses to convey the experience, and allow the reader to sense and experience something even though not present.

Teach 1

Writing Review

Louise Kiernan, award-winning *Chicago Tribune* reporter, wrote the 2001 Pulitzer Prize winning piece on the flaws in the nation's air travel industry. She began the article like this: "The air smells like stale hamburgers and unbrushed teeth. It smells like cold coffee, like sour beer. It smells like exhaustion.

The air smells as if it has been inhaled and exhaled by too many people for far too long and they are breathing it still, snoring and snuffling, sighing and murmuring as they sprawl about O'Hare International Airport like refugees from some invisible war.”

Activity

The following activity can be assigned to your students to sharpen their senses and observation skills for descriptive writing. Kiernan was a guest at the Columbia Links Reporting Academy high school class session. She emphasized that good writing starts with good reporting. She assigned each student a sense, i.e. touch, taste, smell, sight and sound. She then sent them to a local restaurant and told them to spend five minutes honing in on that sense and writing adjectives that described the experience.

The students headed off to the local Panera Bread Restaurant. The student assigned to taste, for example, didn't buy a Danish. Instead, she described the look on people's faces as they ate, ie., Sweet. Satisfied. Ask your students to select a sense and spend five minutes during their next lunch session in the school cafeteria observing and feeling the experience through their sense. Ask them to observe the smallest details and tap into their emotions to describe the experience. In the next class session, have students explain their descriptions.

Teach 2

Activity

[Descriptive Writing With Virginia Hamilton, Step 3 – Write Your Own Description](#) (see web link above)

Excerpt: As you write your own journal entry, you will practice sharpening your powers of observation. Good writers try to clearly see and describe the world around them. They also try to understand themselves through their writing. Focusing on details is the key to descriptive journal writing.

Here are some challenging questions that can help as students begin to write a journal. Give them a try!

[Who are you?](#)

[Observe and describe your world.](#)

[Describing the characters around you](#)

[Revise your writing](#)

1. Who are you?

Make a list of all the qualities that describe who you are. For example: Are you a student? A musician? An athlete? Are you friendly? Outgoing? Serious? Happy? Come up with a list of five to ten qualities. Understanding who you are will make it easier for you to describe yourself in your journal entry.

2. Observe and describe your world.

Think and write about an event — for example, a birthday party, a trip to the zoo, or a ride on the school bus. As the event unfolds, concentrate on what happens not only to you but around you. Record in your memory the details of what you experience. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What do you see?
- What can you hear — voices? music?
- What can you smell?
- What do you taste?
- How does the place feel — temperature, textures, etc.?
- How do you feel — excited? scared? happy? sad?
- What are you thinking?

3. Describing the characters around you

Fiction sometimes plays a role in descriptive writing. As you describe an event, you may observe someone who is unfamiliar but whom you want to write about. In order to describe this person, you will need to use your imagination. For example, if you see someone with paint on her shirt, you may decide that she is an artist. You can then build a whole story — or journal entry — starting from this single detail. Observe a person you don't know but who seems interesting to you. Pick one detail about that person that you find interesting. Then write a short description of this person based on that detail. Be as creative as you can.

4. Revise your writing

Revise your descriptive writing. Have you written a first draft of your descriptive piece? If so, then you are ready to revise. Read your writing to yourself or to a friend. Did you include enough detail? Were you specific in your descriptions? Do you like what you've written? Is there something you think could be better? Here are some guidelines I find helpful when I begin revising my own work:

Be sure that each word or phrase you use is exactly the way you want to say it. Everything you write is important so be sure that it's the best it can be. Vary the way you begin your sentences so that they don't all sound exactly the same. For example, don't start every sentence with "Then" or "So." Avoid sentences like this: "Then I did my homework. Then I ate dinner. Then I went to bed." Start sentences with transition words like "After," "Next," and "Finally" to make sentences more direct and more interesting. For example, "I did my homework. After that I ate my dinner. Finally, I went to bed."

Be specific. If you see a tree swaying in the wind, describe exactly what you observe so that the reader can see what you see. Say what kind of tree is swaying. Adverbs and adjectives can also help bring your writing to life. For example, with just a few details the simple sentence "That tree is swaying in the wind," can become "That enormous evergreen is swaying wildly in the powerful wind." Or, "That pine tree is bending back in the strong wind."

Use a thesaurus to find new and specific words. For example, instead of the word house, a thesaurus may suggest more specific ideas such as home, cabin, mansion, cottage, etc. Short paragraphs are more telling. They help you gather your thoughts into tighter sequences or progressions of words. Once you've written a final draft, you can move on to publish your writing on the Web.

Assessments

Writing 1

Write a lead paragraph based on the facts in the "*Brenda's Got A Baby*" song. Ask students to volunteer to read their paragraph and tell which of the five W's and How that they emphasized first and why. What would they include in a second paragraph?

Writing 2

Provide students with the following facts, and ask them to write a lead paragraph, using their creativity to develop a story angle. Ask for volunteers to read lead paragraphs and note how each is unique in regard to story angle, tone or word usage.

Who: State legislators

What: Proposal to increase age for driver's license from 16 to 18 in IL

When: Voting in five days

Where: Springfield General Assembly

Why: Pro - Teens more responsible at age 18, fewer accidents, keep teens focused on high school studies to raise lagging academic achievement

Con – No data proving 16-year-olds are worse drivers than 18-year-olds, inconvenience to parents as teens help with errands and driving to events.

Writing 3

Provide students with the following facts, and ask them to write a lead paragraph, using their creativity to develop a story angle. Ask for volunteers to read lead paragraphs and note how each is unique in regard to story angle, tone or word usage.

Who: Daughter of Chicago Mayor John Sullivan, Clarise Sullivan (fictitious names), age 16

What: Robbed of \$50 and physically knocked down or assaulted

When: Saturday, June 23, around 9 p.m.

Where: On the L, Red Line while coming home early from a Cubs game, near the Addison stop

Why: More robberies in Chicago and on trains possibly due to recession and lack of jobs for people, later evening travel, isolated areas.

How: Safety tips from police, ie., stay in groups, don't carry large sums of money, use a backpack carried in front or hidden fanny pack.

State Common Core Standards

www.isbe.net or www.corestandards.org

Links Lesson Plan 4, News Literacy: Descriptive Writing

This lesson applies and reinforces the following selected Common Core Curriculum Standards for English Language Arts and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. To find other common core standards that may apply to this lesson, visit www.isbe.net or www.corestandards.org.

Grades 9-10

English Language Arts

Language – Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
 - 5.a. Interpret figures of speech (e.g., euphemism, oxymoron) in context and analyze their role in the text.
 5. b. Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

Writing- Text Types and Purpose

3. d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Writing – Production and Distribution

6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

Social and Emotional Learning Standards

Early High School

Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

Standard A. Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior.

- 1A.4a. Analyze how thoughts and emotions affect decision making and responsible behavior.

Grades 11-12

English Language Arts

Language – Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

- 5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- 5. a. Interpret figures of speech (e.g., hyperbole, paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.
- 5. b. Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

Writing – Texts Types and Purpose

- 3. d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Writing – Production and Distribution

- 6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

Social and Emotional Learning Standards

Late High School

Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

Standard A. Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior.

- 1A.5a. Evaluate how expressing one's emotions in different situations affects others.

For additional Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that relate to journalism, visit www.lionsquest.org. Lions Clubs International, Oak Brook, IL, has developed a set of lesson plans to teach social and emotional learning skills to teens, including listening, interviewing, questioning, communicating, researching, ethics and decision-making.