THE WRITING STYLES: DESCRIPTIVE AND PERSUASIVE WRITINGS

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING:

A good example of descriptive writing in modern literature is the Hobbit series by J. R. R. Tolkien.

What is descriptive writing?
Descriptive writing is the act of -- or art of -- writing to describe. Writers often seek to describe places, people, objects, sounds, tastes, smells -- or anything, really--which they feel can be captured in words. The descriptive writes are painters. The way a painter plays with numerous colours to disperse details on his canvas, exactly the same way a descriptive writer plays with his words especially with the colourful adjective and adverbs to render description so precisely that the reader sees (or hears or smells or tastes or touches) the object of the description in exactly the way that the writer intends or he experienced. I mean, the writer does not tell the reader that the flower is beautiful; it shows them the flower is beautiful. The reader feels like he/she is a part of the writer's experience of the subject.

If you were going to describe biting into an apple, you would not simply say: "He bit into the apple and it tasted good". Descriptive writing would convey the same sentence as follows: "He slowly closed his teeth on the ripe, succulent, ruby colour apple. The crunch of his teeth piercing the apple's skin was deafening and the sweet juices of the apple ran down his chin. The taste of the meat was as sweet as candy and he felt euphoric."

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Examples of descriptive writing:
Descriptive writing is used in all modes of writing (Expository, Narrative, and Persuasive) to create a vivid and lasting impression of the person, place or thing.
For example: Stories, Poems, Essays and Reports

Characteristics of Good Descriptive Writing

1. Good descriptive writing includes many vivid sensory details that paint a picture and appeals to all of the reader's senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste when appropriate. Descriptive writing may also paint pictures of the feelings the person, place or thing invokes in the writer.

2. Good descriptive writing often makes use of figurative language such as analogies, similes and metaphors to help paint the picture in the reader's mind.

3. Good descriptive writing uses precise language. General adjectives, nouns, and passive verbs do not have a place in good descriptive writing. Use specific adjectives and nouns and strong action verbs to give life to the picture you are painting in the reader's mind.

4. Good descriptive writing is organized. Some ways to organize descriptive writing include: chronological (time), spatial (location), and order of importance. When describing a person, you might begin with a physical description, followed by how that person thinks, feels and acts.
DOMS’ AND DON'TS OF DESCRIPTION

Dominant Impression

The key element in writing a memorable description is the point of view of the writer (or speaker) of the passage. The dominant impression can be thought of as the way the writer feels about the object of the description; for instance, a writer may regard a place as hospitable and inviting, or as cold and forbidding. Likewise, a writer may regard a person as warm and friendly, or aloof and reserved. In conveying the chosen dominant impression, the writer must both select details carefully, and presents them with the impression in mind. All good descriptions are crafted with steady attention to the dominant impression.

"Show, Don’t Tell"

There’s a simple reason that this is perhaps the most commonly used phrase where descriptive writing is concerned (and that you may well have heard it plenty of times already): this is truly the fundamental principle of descriptive writing. When it comes to describing something, ‘telling’ the reader about it comes off as flat, vague, and not particularly memorable; ‘showing’ the reader the object -- describing it in such a way as to paint it in words, and bring it to life in the reader’s eye -- renders the object far more vivid, visible, and active.

But what exactly, are "telling" and "showing?"

Telling is another way of saying ‘summarizing.’ Here’s a writer ‘telling’ readers about a room: "It was a nice room, a warm room. It was a happy place to be."

The reader reads this and says to her or himself, "okay, but why? What did the room look like? Why was it a happy place to be? Was it warm, or hot? Or does the writer mean warm in terms of temperature? I can’t really see or feel this room; I wish I’d been given more details." These two sentences may represent exactly how the writer feels about the room, but to the reader they aren’t vivid enough to register this room as any different from any other room. More importantly, the reader is unable to experience the qualities of this room that the writer intends; because the reader has only been ‘told’ about the room (and told in very vague terms), the room itself remains fuzzy and unclear (essentially invisible), and the qualities of niceness, warmth, and happiness are merely the writer’s impressions of the room, nothing the reader can connect to.

Far more vivid and communicative is to show the reader the room (with emphasis on the aspects of the room which provoke in the writer the feelings she or he receives). Here’s a brief passage which attempts to ‘show’ that the room is ‘warm’:

“Sunlight pours through the window, pooling on the down comforter which lies across the bed. A block of light also angles across the wall opposite the bed, highlighting the pale orange color of the room. A thick red carpet sprawls over the floor, a corner of it lit too by a sunbeam; the room’s windows admit the sun along two walls, and tiny dust motes hover in the bright streaks which glaze the room.”

Here the writer never says "warm," but attempts to present a series of details which demonstrate this quality of the room. Perhaps just the first sentence of this description conveys this quality; however, the writer has decided to continue describing the room in order to render a clear picture (and feeling) of the room for the reader. Each reader will respond differently to this description; however, it’s fairly clear in its presentation of this room as a warm and comfortable place, and the writer is well on the way to describing it in such a way as to make this room unique.
Observation

It isn’t possible to create a unique description of an object without first taking time to observe it. But to observe something means more than just to look at it -- the writer seeks not only the general details which comprise the basic profile of this object (the apple is red, roundish, and large for an apple), but the specific details which make the object unique:

“The apple has two leaves still attached to the stem; it doesn’t stand straight when resting on a tabletop, on its left side a streak of yellow shines underneath the red, a small bruise hangs just below the apple’s crown on its back side.”

As a writer, one must ask why this object is not any object; what details about it make it unlike any other -- and specifically, unlike any other of its kind (in the case of the apple, the writer seeks the details which make this apple not just another red apple; the writer seeks to write such a precise description that the reader could pick this apple out of a bowl of six other apples).

Using All Five Senses

Up to here, most of the emphasis has been placed on visual details; there’s little doubt that in describing most things, visual properties form the dominant portions of our descriptions. This is because for most of us, our sight is the sense which is the primary -- and dominant -- sense through which we perceive our world. What something looks like is extraordinarily important in our ability to perceive it, particularly when we are trying to perceive something solely through a written description.

However, the best descriptive writing evokes objects through the use of more than just sight. The more a writer can capture an object through senses such as sound, smell, touch, and even taste, the more vivid and unique the writer’s description becomes. If, in describing the apple above, the writer includes the aroma of the apple (if it had one), or a sense of what the apple’s skin might feel like, or even if the writer imagines the possible taste of an apple like this, the description of the apple becomes even more specific and memorable. In observing an object one aims to describe, the goal is always to try to see past the obvious -- and this most certainly includes observing not only the visual qualities of something, but attempting to perceive it through all five senses.

Strong Verbs

Good descriptive writing also employs the use of strong, specific verbs. Central in choosing verbs is -- as always -- the avoidance of the verb ‘to be.’ To say a thing ‘is,’ or ‘was,’ is not nearly as active -- and therefore specific -- as choosing a sharper verb. Consider these two versions of the same sentence:

The sunlight was on the propane tank.
The sunlight stretched over the propane tank.

Clearly the second sentence is more interesting; here the sunlight becomes active. In the first sentence, there’s nothing interesting about the sun’s presence -- it’s simply there. Here are a few more examples of active verbs in action (taken from writing teacher Natalie Goldberg):

The fiddles boiled the air with their music.
The lilacs sliced the sky into purple.
Her husband’s snores sawed her sleep in half.

A good rule of thumb is that the more unexpected the verb (as in ‘boiled’ in describing how fiddles sound, or ‘sliced’ in describing flowers), the more specific and memorable a sentence will be.

However, it’s also important to remember that active verbs can’t be used in every sentence; and sometimes, more general verbs like ‘run,’ ‘see,’ ‘go,’ ‘said,’ etc., are exactly what you need in a given sentence. The goal, as a writer, is to make your choice a conscious one -- choose the verb you want, not
the verb that comes to you most easily. Push yourself to use specific, active verbs whenever possible, and to choose your verbs (and all your words) carefully and deliberately all the time.

Example: "We had a really nice dinner" could become, "We enjoyed a tasty meal"

Have a look at these examples and see if you can spot the improvements:

- The street was empty and full of shadows. The street lay empty, full of shadows.
- The children had a great time at the circus. The children shared a thrilling night at the circus.

More on:
Place Description

Once a writer has become skilled at precise observation, and good at capturing the details which make for unique description, the next goal is to be able to describe pointedly. This means, simply, to be able to offer the reader the portrait of the object -- in this case a place -- which evokes the dominant impression the writer wishes the description to evoke. If a writer wants the reader to 'see' a sunset over the Golden Gate Bridge as beautiful and inspiring, he or she will attempt to present the description of this scene in just this way; similarly, a writer may intend this same sunset to register as a sad moment, and will then present the details of this scene in such a way as to evoke those emotions. Writers, when they describe, are usually aiming to do more than merely render a clear portrait of a place; usually the intent is to render a portrait which also evokes a feeling (as above, the description of the room was intended to capture its warmth).

Descriptions of People

As with descriptions of place, descriptions of people aim not only to portray the basic essential features of a person, but also to offer some presentation of the character’s personality. Again, this is done through the details the writer chooses to focus on, rather than through telling. The writer never says "he was quite uptight," or "she was lazy," but attempts to array her or his details to convey this impression of the person being described.

A Master at Work

The following passage describes a pivotal scene from George Orwell's famous essay “Shooting an Elephant.” Orwell, the pen name of Eric Blair (1903-1950) is famous not only for his grim novels Animal Farm (1945) and 1984 (1948), but also for his passionate defence of the integrity of the English language. “Shooting an Elephant” focuses on the use and abuse of power. Notice how Orwell draws on the sense of touch and hearing as well as sight:

“When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick—one never does when a shot goes home—but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralyzed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time—it might have been five seconds, I dare say—he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered ….”

PERSUASIVE WRITING

WHAT IS PERSUASION?
The art of persuasion is the art of finding the best available means of moving a specific audience in a specific situation to a specific decision.
Persuasive writing analyzes the various sides of an issue while arguing a viewpoint. It may serve to clarify your own beliefs as you persuade others to accept a particular perspective.

**CREATING A THESIS**
The foundation of a persuasive paper is the thesis (often called a claim). To create an effective thesis, you must select an appropriate topic and decide on your position.

**SELECT A TOPIC**
Persuasive writing addresses topics that are somehow controversial or stimulate discussion because of their complexity. To select a topic, first consider your own opinions. Ask yourself these questions:

- What issues do I feel strongly about?
- What topic would I like to learn more about?

Once you have selected a topic, take time to write down everything you know about it. You probably will not use all the ideas you jot down, but this will get you thinking. From here, research the issue thoroughly; become an expert on the topic, and understand all sides of the issue. Through research, you will be prepared to decide on a position.

**DECIDE ON A POSITION**
The position you decide upon becomes your thesis statement or claim—what you want to argue or persuade. This claim will set limits on your topic and allude to the organization of your paper. When deciding on a position, be sure that your thesis is arguable. Avoid arguing about the following:

- **Indisputable facts** For example, there is no point in trying to argue that heart disease is deadly. Everyone knows that, so a better argument would revolve around how to stop the rise of heart disease within current American society.

- **Preferences** Opinions can be changed, but some people just prefer one thing over another. For example, some people do not like to scuba dive. You cannot convince them to enjoy something they simply do not.

- **Religion and other deep-rooted beliefs** Such issues are beyond empirical analysis and are therefore very difficult to argue. Take an angle that does not directly argue these issues. For example, you would not want to try arguing that Christianity is false. This would only incite anger in the people who hold Christianity as a core value.

**SUPPORTING YOUR THESIS**
After deciding on a claim or thesis, you will need to identify proofs—or premises—to support the thesis. These premises will be stated in your thesis statement in the same order they will be addressed in the paper. Use the persuasive techniques of logos, ethos, and pathos to support your viewpoint and address alternate perspectives.

**DEVELOP PREMISES**
Premises are the evidence that supports your thesis, and they make up the bulk of your paper. For example, if you are arguing that the United States should not trade with countries that commit human rights violations, your premises might be

1. Trading with violating countries philosophically encourages further violations.
2. US industries would also end up exploiting people.
3. The violating country will be harmed by lack of trade and thereby stop exploiting workers.

The body of your paper will address each of these premises in detail, so you will need sufficient evidence to support each one.
NOTE: Sometimes premises have unstated assumptions. If your reader might disagree with these assumptions, then you have the added task of proving the assumption. For example, by arguing that the US should not trade with countries that commit human rights violations, you are assuming that your reader believes it is wrong to abuse the working class.

THE TACTICS OF RHETORIC

To be persuasive, your argument must be solid and reasonable. In order to be convincing, you should appropriately apply the persuasive techniques of logos, ethos, and pathos.

Logos: Appeal to reason by using facts, statistics, research, logical arguments, etc. This is the most convincing technique in academic writing.

Ethos: Appeal to the credibility or character of the author or of the people quoted. Use credible sources, and prove your own credibility with good academic writing and tone.

Pathos: Appeal to emotion, values, and beliefs to support your own feelings or passion about the issue. Include personal stories from yourself or others, and use appropriate word choice to emphasize emotion. In academic writing, this technique should be used with care.

Pathos Principle 1:
Know your Audience.
They are concerned about local issues and local people
• Make local arguments
They make decisions with both their minds and hearts
• Appeal to both
They feel financially pressured
• Show how your programs save money or bring new money into the community

Pathos Principle 2:
Know what moves your Audience.
Ask yourself:
What do they all commonly want?
• What have you done for me lately?
• What are your program’s results?

And give it to me straight!
• Since I have lots of competition for my attention, give it to me short and simple
• Tell me the facts & figures that prove your program helps
• Show me how people were helped

Ethos Principle 1:
Write like a Professional
• To trust you, your readers must believe you are a competent person, a professional
• Make sure you get the information down correctly:
  • The data
  • The names
• The spelling
• The grammar

Ethos Principle 2:
Write like a Person
- Never talk down to or over the heads of your audience
- Tell your story simply
- Aim for a 10th grade level
- Use simple familiar words
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Use short simple sentences
- Show rather than tell

Logos Principle 1:
Make your argument clear.

Don’t forget: An argument involves the process of establishing a claim and then proving it with the use of logical reasoning, examples, and research.
- Answer the basic questions (5W’s & 1H)
- State your activities and results plainly
- Choose clear words
  - Choose a common vocabulary
  - Choose active verbs
  - Choose concrete nouns, adjectives, & adverbs

Logos Principle 2:
Organize your argument. An organized argument:
- Guides an audience through your reasoning process
- Offers a clear explanation of each argued point
- Demonstrates the credibility of the writer

UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE
Supporting only your own viewpoint is not sufficient for writing a persuasive paper. You must also understand your audience, so you can find ways to support your thesis in a manner convincing to them.

Ask yourself the following questions to help you identify and persuade your audience more effectively:
  - What is the audience’s knowledge level about your topic?
  - What is their attitude towards the topic?
  - What are the audience’s values and beliefs?

These questions will help you identify the character of your audience and establish a tone for your paper that is both professional and reasonable. Assume your audience is intelligent—never sound condescending or know-it-all—but be sure to thoroughly explain concepts. Knowing your audience will also help you determine areas to research in order to effectively address counterarguments.
LOOK AT ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES
A large part of understanding your audience is addressing alternative perspectives. This can be done just after the introduction, just before the conclusion, or throughout the paper. Addressing other viewpoints can be intimidating, yet it is essential. Alternative perspectives should be treated fairly—think about what others believe and why they believe so, and focus on the most common arguments. From there, you can either refute or concede. Conceding means that you agree with the argument and acknowledge the issue is complex; follow with a discussion of your next strong point. When refuting arguments, show why your view is more reasonable or stronger. Always build on common ground.

TIPS
- Use third person rather than first or second person point-of-view.
- Use examples and vivid descriptions rather than telling your reader what to feel.
- Avoid absolutes and hasty generalizations such as always, never, or all people. See the Writing Center’s Logical Fallacies handout for other examples of improper logic.
- Use evidence that is recent, relevant, and impartial. Have sufficient evidence to justify each point.
- Follow basic essay format with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Make sure to include proper in-text citations and a Works Cited/Bibliography/References page.
- While this handout provides basic guidelines for persuasive writing, always tailor your paper to your audience and the specific assignment.

TRADITIONAL STRUCTURE IN PERSUASIVE WRITING
Here is a list of the traditional parts that can be used to strengthen an argument presented in persuasive writing. While these do not have to be followed exactly or in this order, they are helpful in forming the structure in persuasive writing.

- Exordium, or introduction
- Narration, or background statement of the facts
- Partition, or forecast of the topics to be presented
- Conformation or the confirmation of the piece. In contemporary English classes, this would be called the body of the text.
- Refutation, or discussion of alternatives
- Peroration or a conclusion. It’s often helpful to tie the conclusion back to the introduction in order to strengthen your claim.

COMMON TECHNIQUES
1. Emphasizing benefits while ignoring drawbacks
2. Writing in active voice rather than passive voice
3. Writing in short sentences and shorter words
4. Creating a list of 'For and Against' points
5. Capturing the reader's interest from the first sentence
6. Using connectives e.g. Furthermore, Moreover and Therefore

7. Making opposing facts seem like problems

8. Using a lively anecdote to persuade your reader

9. Asking rhetorical questions

10. Using "in fact" and "indeed" to strengthen your viewpoint

11. Using "however" to offer a contrasting viewpoint

12. Ending with a positive and interesting statement

**Visual Appeals**

Visual appeals can add to the effectiveness of the written word alone. Using complementing visuals can help strengthen arguments. This improves the visual rhetoric by making the page more appealing and allowing the reader more access to the page.

**FOUR RHETORICAL DEVICES**

1. **PARALLEL STRUCTURE**

Example:
Churchill’s speech to the House of Common, 4 June 1940:
“We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight on the seas and oceans. We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the streets and in the fields. We shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”

2. **TRIADS**

Martin Luther King’s Famous “I Have a Dream”
“When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

3. **ANTITHESIS**

Motto of the state of New Hampshire: Live Free or Die.

President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address in January 1961:
“And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

4. **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS**

Patrick Henry’s speech in March 1775 on American Revolution:
“Gentlemen may cry, “Peace! Peace!” but there is no peace. The war has actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle! Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!”

Source: Utah Valley State College Writing Center