

A CREATIVE APPROACH TO THE CLASSICAL PROGYMNASMATA

Writing Rhetoric

BOOK 9: DESCRIPTION
& IMPERSONATION

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Writing & Rhetoric Book 9: Description & Impersonation
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Description & Impersonation

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A Typical Teaching Week

These guidelines are intended to help bring some predictability to lesson planning.

Although the elements of grammar are important aspects of this course, its primary focus is writing and rhetoric. We recommend that you teach a simple, but rich, grammar curriculum in parallel with the lessons in *Writing & Rhetoric: Description & Impersonation*. By simple, we mean to suggest that you avoid a grammar program with a writing component. Two different writing methods would most likely work against each other and cause an imbalance in the school day. Instead, look for a grammar program that focuses on grammatical concepts, provides plenty of practice sentences, and encourages diagramming.

You may want to provide same-day grammar instruction several days a week, preferably separating Writing & Rhetoric from grammar study by an hour or two. Or, you may want to alternate weeks between a grammar program and Writing & Rhetoric. This requires some negotiation in your language arts program for the year. If you aim to do two Writing & Rhetoric books per school year, that would equal approximately twenty lessons. If you spend one week on each lesson, that leaves you with about fourteen weeks to focus on grammar. However, as the reading selections grow longer and the writing tasks more extensive, you may need to spend more time on each Writing & Rhetoric lesson according to the needs of your students. You will have to choose a grammar program with these considerations in mind.

Please note that multiple opportunities for practice are built into the Writing & Rhetoric series. If you find that your students have mastered a particular form of writing, you should feel free to skip some lessons. In this case, some teachers choose to present the historical material from skipped lessons as part of their history lessons. Some teachers may also provide their students with practice in sentence manipulation by doing only the Sentence Play and Copiousness sections from skipped lessons.

The following tables illustrate two possible options for scheduling weekly lessons. As always with Writing & Rhetoric, teachers have the freedom to pick and choose the lesson elements, schedule, and pace that suits the needs of their classrooms. You can even schedule each lesson over two weeks if your students need the extra time.

Option 1

Day 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Read lesson introduction● Tell back (narrate) text (Tell It Back)● Annotate text if time allows, or assign for homework (Tell It Back)● Engage in Talk About It exercises	Day 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Discuss Memoria, assign memorization and commonplace book for homework● Work on Go Deeper or Writing Time exercises	
Day 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Continue to work on Go Deeper or Writing Time exercises	Day 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Engage in Speak It exercises (no work required for lessons 1 and 6)	Day 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Work through Revise It section (no work required for lessons 1 and 6)

Option 2

Day 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Read part of lesson introduction, assign remainder for homework● Assign annotation for homework (Tell It Back)	Day 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Tell back (narrate) text (Tell It Back)● Engage in Talk About It exercises● Discuss Memoria, assign memorization and commonplace book for homework● Work on Go Deeper or Writing Time exercises	
Day 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Continue to work on Go Deeper or Writing Time exercises	Day 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Engage in Speak It exercises (no work required for lessons 1 and 6)	Day 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Work through Revise It section (no work required for lessons 1 and 6)

Day One

1. The teacher models fluency by reading the introductory text aloud while students follow along silently. If the lesson introduction contains a longer reading, such as a short story or a biography, teachers may read part of the selection in class as a “teaser” and assign the remainder for homework, or simply assign the entire reading for homework.
2. Tell It Back (Narration) and Talk About It should immediately follow the reading of the text, while the text is still fresh in the students’ minds. Annotation can be an important aid to memory for longer readings, and it is included under Tell It Back in the second half of this book as part of the reading process. If time allows, students can complete their annotations in class, or annotation can be assigned for homework. If the lesson reading is assigned as homework (see previous step), annotation also can be assigned for homework and teachers can engage students with Tell It Back and Talk About It the following day.

Narration, the process of “telling back,” can be done in a variety of ways. Pairs of students can retell the text to each other, or selected individuals can narrate orally to the entire class. Solo students can tell back the text into a recording device or to an instructor. At this age, students can write narrative summaries, outlines, and dramatic reenactments with skill. The process of narration is intended to improve comprehension and long-term memory.

Here are some tips for facilitating effective narration:

- Avoid rereading a passage to students. Let them rely on the strength of their memories. Children will pay more attention if they know they will hear a passage only once and be expected to tell it back.
- Remember that narrations are detailed retellings in chronological order, complete with names, events, and rich vocabulary words. If you are looking for a summary of the passage, rather than a detailed retelling, make sure that you specify this to students.
- Ask other students to assist if the narrator falters in his or her retelling. Be sure, however, to give enough quiet space for the narrator to think clearly about what he or she has just heard. Don’t be hasty to jump in and “rescue” a narrator.

Annotation can help a student easily locate vocabulary words, proper nouns, and important concepts for drafting essays.

Talk About It is designed to help students analyze the meaning of their reading and to see analogous situations, both in the world and in their own lives. This book also includes several opportunities for picture analysis.

Days Two and Three

1. The Memoria feature can be discussed during class, and students can work on memorizing the quote and completing their commonplace notebooks as homework. Memoria is one of the five canons (or principles) of classical rhetoric and can be viewed as a support to invention in writing, to improvisation in oration, and to all manner of debate.
2. If annotations were completed as homework, the teacher might engage students in conversations about the important ideas they underlined or the questions they jotted down in the margins.
3. Students work with the text through the Go Deeper and Writing Time exercises. Go Deeper is a feature in lessons 1 and 6 and is all about practicing important skills essential to each lesson. Writing Time, which appears in most lessons, includes sentence play, copiousness, and the description or impersonation exercises themselves. You will probably want to take more than one day for this step.

Day Four

1. If students complete the first draft of their descriptions or impersonations on day three, we recommend that they take a breather from writing while they work on their speaking skills. Keeping a day between essay completion and revision helps students to look at their work with fresh eyes. However, teachers may find it valuable to pair students together to read their essays out loud and give each other ideas for revision. A rubric is included in most Speak It sections as an aid to partner feedback or grading by teachers.
2. The Speak It section creates opportunities for students to memorize, recite, discuss and debate, read dramatically, or playact. Please consider using a recording device whenever it suits the situation. When using electronics, the student should listen to his recording to get an idea of what sounds right and what needs to be improved. Have students read the elocution instructions at the back of the book to help them work on skill in delivery. Speak It does not appear in lessons 1 and 6, and no work is required on day 4 for those lessons.

Day Five

At this level, students will continue to work toward a foundation in revision. The Revise It section provides basic exercises that introduce students to revision and proofreading. Revise It also provides a list that covers some of the most important steps toward improving an essay. Most students can do rudimentary self-editing at this age and provide some useful feedback to each other. However, teachers are still the best source for giving editorial feedback and requesting rewrites. Revise It does not appear in lessons 1 and 6, and no work is required on day 5 for those lessons.

Introduction to Students

Oh, hello again!

The book you have just cracked open is a bit of a hybrid. You know, a hybrid like a zorse—half zebra and half horse—or a liger—half lion, half tiger.

This book is half about description and half about impersonation, so I suppose you could call it a descriponation. Or a despersionation. You get the picture.

You never know when you'll have to be a good descriponator. This kind of mash-up is very useful for actors, for spies, for advertising agents, for singing instructors, for detectives, and for anyone who wants to write and deliver a persuasive paper. That includes *you*, I believe!

You see, someone who writes a persuasive paper or gives a persuasive speech needs to have great powers of description. A first-class description gives the audience an experience outside of themselves and helps them to connect with the writer or speaker. Whether it's a description of rafting Hells Canyon on the Snake River or dinner by candlelight on the Loire River in France, descriptions have the power to move emotions and open people's minds to ideas and arguments. Through description, the audience shares an experience with you, the speaker or writer. Just as important, you will be understood better because you use description. A good description can serve the same purpose as an illustration for a picture book—it helps people to see things more clearly. Do you miss reading picture books? Same here! That's why I love descriptions—they're pictures for grown-ups. Whenever I read a description, I'm much more likely to understand a writer and go along with her thinking. Finally, descriptions can convince people that you have the experience—the knowledge—to support your convictions. If your descriptions are captivating, your audience will be satisfied that you're the "expert," that you've done your research, that you are the "real deal."

And how do you know what your audience is thinking in the first place? That's where impersonation comes in. Impersonation helps you to climb into the heads of other human beings. It stretches your imagination so you can anticipate what it will take to convince your audience. When you study how people (other than yourself) think, you know better how to "read" them. You know better whether you need to tell them a heart-wrenching story or to tout your own expertise or to quote numbers and statistics. These appeals to the audience are known as pathos, ethos, and logos, and every audience requires a different strategy, or all three strategies at once. This tremendous trio is coming at you in lesson 6 of this book.

For now, suffice it to say that descriponating is highly useful to your growth in rhetoric, which is the art of persuasive writing and speaking. And that's what this series of books is determined to be—highly useful in sharpening your rhetorical skill for now, for later, for keeps.

So enough of this chitchat. Crack this book open wider and dive on in!



▲ Image of a liger.

Introduction

Two thousand-plus years ago, the Greeks developed a system of persuasive speaking known as rhetoric. The Romans fell in love with rhetoric because it was both practical for the real world and served the need of training orators in their growing republic. In order to prepare their students for oration, the Romans invented a complementary system of persuasive writing known as the *progymnasmata*: *pro-* meaning “preliminary” and *gymnas* meaning “exercises.” The *progymnasmata* were the primary method used in Graeco-Roman schools to teach young people the elements of rhetoric. This happened in a grammar school (called a *grammaticus*) sometime after a student reached the age of ten.

There are several ancient “*progymns*” still in existence. The most influential *progymns* were by Hermogenes of Tarsus, who lived in the second century, and by Aphthonius of Antioch, who lived during the fourth century just as the western Roman Empire was collapsing. Even after the great cities of Rome lay in ruins, the *progym* continued as the primary method for teaching writing during the Middle Ages and even into early modern times.

The Writing & Rhetoric series is based on the *progymnasmata* of ancient Rome. This method assumes that students learn best by reading excellent examples of literature and by growing their writing skills through imitation. It is incremental, meaning that it goes from simpler exercises to more complex exercises, and it moves from the concrete to the abstract. One of the beauties of the *progym* is that it grows with the student through the stages of childhood development termed the “trivium”¹ by modern classical education, effectively taking a young writer from the grammar phase through the logic phase and finally to the rhetoric phase.

In a democracy such as Athens or a republic such as Rome, rhetoric was a powerful way to enter into public conversations. In the words of Yale rhetorician Charles Sears Baldwin, “Rhetoric is conceived by Aristotle as the art of giving effectiveness to the truth.” He adds that “the true theory of rhetoric is the energizing of knowledge, the bringing of truth to bear upon men.” Rhetoric thus had an intentional public purpose, that is, to persuade people to embrace truth and its corollaries: virtue and beauty. It is designed to enjoin right behavior by holding up to public scrutiny examples of goodness and wickedness.

There is an urgency and a real purpose to rhetoric. It was never meant to be empty forms of speaking and composition. It was never meant to be only eloquence and skill of delivery. It was certainly never meant to be manipulative sound bites and commercials made to benefit an unscrupulous political class. Rather, it was intended for every citizen as a means to engage articulately with the urgent ideas of the day. As the old saying goes, “Whoever does not learn rhetoric will be a victim of it.”

The best preparation for rhetoric is still the *progymnasmata*, the preliminary exercises. In this book you will find these exercises creatively updated to meet the needs of modern children. We have embraced the method both as it was used for Roman youth and as it develops the skills demanded by contemporary education.

- It teaches the four modes of discourse—narration, exposition, description, and argumentation—while at the same time blending them for maximum persuasive impact.
- It is incremental, moving from easier forms to harder forms. The level of challenge is appropriate for students as they mature with the program.

1. In medieval times, the trivium was originally the lower division of the seven liberal arts. For the modern idea that these studies correspond to childhood development, please refer to Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*.

- It uses “living” stories, from ancient to modern, and is not stuck in any particular time period. Rather, it follows a timeline of history so that the stories can be integrated with history lessons.
- Its stories engage the imagination and also spark a desire in young people to imitate them. In this way, Writing & Rhetoric avoids the “blank-page syndrome” that can paralyze many nascent writers by giving students a model from which to write.
- It promotes virtue by lifting up clear-cut examples of good and bad character.
- It fosters the joy of learning by providing opportunities for creative play and self-expression as well as classroom fun.
- It uses speaking to enhance the development of persuasive writing.
- It teaches students to recognize and use the three persuasive appeals to an audience: pathos, ethos, and logos.
- It provides opportunities for students to learn from other students’ work as well as to present their own work.

As educators, we need to admit that teaching writing is difficult. This is because writing makes big demands on cognitive function and, for many young writers, can easily become overwhelming. Our brains need to simultaneously

- utilize motor skills
- process vocabulary
- sequence and organize ideas
- employ grammatical concepts
- and draw upon a reservoir of good writing—hopefully the reservoir exists—as a template for new writing

That’s a tall order. Also, writing contains a subjective element. It’s not as clear-cut as math. And when you add argumentation to the mix, you have a very complex process indeed. To be properly educated, every person needs to be able to make and understand arguments.

It is from this list of complexities that a desire for a relatively easy-to-implement curriculum was born. While the task of teaching writing is difficult, it is my sincere belief that reconnecting the tree of modern composition to its classical roots in rhetoric will refresh the entire process. Regardless of your personal writing history, I trust that these books will provide a happy and rewarding experience for your students.



Best Foot Forward

The *Progym* and the Practice of Modern Writing

Although the *progym* are an ancient method of approaching writing, they are extraordinarily relevant today. This is because modern composition developed from the *progym*. Modern writing borrows heavily from many of the *progym*’s various exercises. For example, modern stories are essentially unchanged from the ancient fable and narrative forms. Modern expository essays contain elements from the ancient commonplace, encomium/vituperation, and other *progym* exercises. Persuasive essays of today are basically the same as the ancient thesis exercises, although often (un-

fortunately) missing the robust challenge of antithesis. In this series, you can expect your students to grow in all forms of modern composition—narrative, expository, descriptive, and persuasive—while at the same time developing unique rhetorical muscle.

The *progym* cover many elements of a standard English and Language Arts curriculum. In *Description & Impersonation* these include:²

- experiencing both the reading of a story (sight) and listening to it (hearing)
- identifying a variety of genres, including description, history, short story, biography, and autobiography
- determining the meaning of words and phrases, including figures of speech, as they are used in a text
- increasing knowledge of vocabulary by considering word meaning, word order, and transitions
- analyzing text that is organized in sequential or chronological order
- demonstrating an understanding of texts by creating outlines, annotating, summarizing, and paraphrasing in ways that maintain meaning and logical order within a text
- gathering relevant information from multiple sources, and annotating sources
- drawing evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
- articulating an understanding of ideas or images communicated by the literary work
- establishing a central idea or topic
- composing a topic sentence and creating an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped into coherent paragraphs to support the writer’s purpose
- supporting claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources, facts, and details
- writing informative (explanatory) and descriptive texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly
- developing the topic with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples
- providing a concluding statement or section that follows from the topic presented
- using precise language and domain-specific vocabulary
- using appropriate transitions to clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts
- producing clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
- avoiding plagiarism through summary
- with some guidance and support from peers and adults, developing and strengthening writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach
- using technology as an aid to revision and oration
- using pictures and photos to analyze and interpret the past
- participating civilly and productively in group discussions

2. This list was derived from the Texas Administrative Code (TAC), Title 19, Part II, Chapter 110: Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading (<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter110/index.html>), the Core Knowledge Foundation’s Core Knowledge Sequence: Content and Skill Guidelines for Grades K-8 (http://www.coreknowledge.org/mimik/mimik_uploads/documents/480/CKFSequence_Rev.pdf), the English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/elacontentstnds.pdf>), the English Language Arts Standards of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>), the English/Language Arts Standards Grade 6, Indiana Department of Education (<http://www.doe.in.gov/standards/englishlanguage-arts>), and the English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, Grade 7 (http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/english/2010/stds_all_english.pdf).

While these standards are certainly worthwhile and are addressed in this curriculum, the *progym* derive their real strength from the incremental and thorough development of each form of writing. The Writing & Rhetoric series does not skip from form to form and leave the others behind. Rather, it builds a solid foundation of mastery by blending the forms. For example, no expository essay can truly be effective without description. No persuasive essay can be convincing without narrative. All good narrative writing requires description, and all good persuasive writing requires expository elements. Not only do the *progym* demand strong organization and implement many of the elements of modern language arts, but they also retain all of the power of classical rhetoric.

Here is how the *progym* develop each stage of modern composition:

1. Fable—Narrative
2. Narrative—Narrative with descriptive elements
3. Chreia & Proverb—Expository essay with narrative, descriptive, and persuasive elements
4. Refutation & Confirmation—Persuasive essay with narrative, descriptive, and expository elements
5. Commonplace—Persuasive essay with narrative, descriptive, and expository elements
6. Encomium & Vituperation—Persuasive essay with narrative, descriptive, and expository elements
7. Comparison—Comparative essay with narrative, descriptive, and expository elements
8. Description & Impersonation—Descriptive essay with narrative, expository, persuasive, and comparative elements
9. Thesis—Persuasive essay with narrative, descriptive, expository, and comparative elements
10. Defend/Attack a Law—Persuasive essay with narrative, descriptive, expository, comparative, and technical elements

As you can see, the *progym* move quickly to establish the importance of one form to another.

Objectives for *Description & Impersonation*

The following are some of the major objectives for the exercises found in each section of this book:

Reading

1. Expose students to various forms of descriptive, process, fiction, nonfiction, biographical, and autobiographical writing as well as culturally important narratives from American history during the early- to mid-twentieth century.
2. Model fluent reading for students and give them practice reading diverse texts.
3. Aid student reading and recall by teaching techniques for annotation.
4. Facilitate student interaction with well-written texts through discussions and exercises in evaluation and critical thinking.

Writing

1. Enhance research skills by giving students multiple texts to read and having them summarize, outline, and create a topic from the material.

2. Support the development of invention (inventing topics and ideas to write about).
3. Encourage students to map (prewrite) their information before they write a paragraph.
4. Strengthen descriptive capabilities with an emphasis on specific, vivid words and sensorial language.
5. Emphasize the importance of “showing” in addition to “telling.”
6. Support students in writing descriptive essays focused on people, nature, and processes, as well as a short story focused on a character in a natural setting.
7. Support students in writing well-crafted, four-paragraph descriptive essays featuring the modes of appeal. Ethos is used in the first body paragraph, pathos in the second, and logos in the conclusion. These essays include the development of an awareness of transitions, tone, and writing style.
8. Practice the concepts of topic sentence and narrative overview.
9. Practice the use of sequence words.
10. Strengthen the skill of deriving information from texts and organizing and summarizing it in expository paragraphs.
11. Continue the development of revision, proofreading, and joint critiquing.
12. Reinforce grammatical concepts such as subordinating conjunctions, gerunds, colons, and semicolons.
13. Practice sentence manipulation and imitation.

Related Concepts

1. Aid in the development of vocabulary and analysis of language.
2. Strengthen students’ power of observation.
3. Reinforce the ability to summarize and paraphrase, as well as to amplify through description, for greater rhetorical flexibility.
4. Strengthen working memory through recitation (*memoria*), thus improving storage of information and rhetorical power.
5. Employ a number of rhetorical devices—alliteration, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, *aetiologia*, *anthypophora*, parallelism, repetition, anaphora, epistrophe, *expeditio*, and illustration and conclusion—for more thought-provoking writing and speaking.
6. Increase understanding of the flexibility and copiousness of language by practicing sentence variety.

Speaking

1. Strengthen students’ oratory skills by providing opportunities for public speaking and for working on delivery—volume, pacing, and inflection.
2. Practice tone and inflection by means of dramatic reading.
3. Encourage students to see the relationship between writing and speaking as they consider their ideas orally and to use oration as an aid to the process of revision.



Lesson 1

Description: The Fireworks of Writing

Off in the distance, I hear the low rumble of thunder. The curtains puff into my room, and the soft breeze freshens as it chases away the warm air. Lightning turns the sky milky white, and then everything goes black. Is a storm coming my way? You bet it is! It's coming my way across the pages of the book I'm reading—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. You see, I'm caught up in a vivid¹ description of a lightning storm. Take a look:

[The sky] darkened up, and begun to thunder and lighten. . . . Directly it begun to rain, and it rained like all fury, too, and I never see the wind blow so. It was one of these regular summer storms. It would get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside, and lovely; and the rain would thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spider-webby; and here would come a blast of wind that would bend the trees down and turn up the pale underside of the leaves; and then a perfect ripper of a gust would follow along and set the branches to tossing their arms as if they was just wild; and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest—*FST!* it

1. The word “vivid” comes from the Latin *vividus*, which means “spirited,” “animated,” “lively,” and “full of life.” Vivid words are therefore more alive than general words—more colorful, more energetic, and more memorable!

was as bright as glory, and you'd have a little glimpse of tree-tops a-plunging about away off yonder in the storm, hundreds of yards further than you could see before; dark as sin again in a second, and now you'd hear the thunder let go with an awful crash, and then go rumbling, grumbling, tumbling, down the sky towards the underside of the world, like rolling empty barrels down stairs.

When I read this paragraph, I feel as if I'm right there in the middle of the hard rain and crashing thunder. Twain's descriptive writing helps readers to experience the story almost the same way we experience a movie—complete with moving pictures, colors, sounds, and other sensations.

A **description** is a picture made of words, and it is exactly the point of this new writing exercise. Its purpose is to grow your ability to capture the interest and imagination of your readers through descriptive writing. In the first half of this book you will practice writing descriptions. In the second part of the book, where you will learn another exercise called “impersonation,” you will use your newfound descriptive skills to make your essays come alive.

The Importance of Description

When we encounter a story, a speech, or an essay, it's description that picks us up out of our seats and drops us—plunk!—right down in the middle of an experience. We aren't *actually* living through the experience, but good description can make events and people seem real all the same. Without description, speeches would be less inspiring, ideas would be harder to understand, and stories would fall flat.

For instance, without description we would never be able to experience a tale of terror properly. Without stormy nights and lightning, without vulture-like eyes and misty graveyards, without creepy old houses and slimy cellars, horror would be a walk in the park. The following excerpt is a spine-tingling moment from a story called *The Monkey's Paw*. It occurs right after an old man, Mr. White, wishes on a magic monkey's paw that his dead son would be alive again. Notice how description makes the ordinary sound of a knock on the door seem terrifying.

The candle end, which had burnt below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. . . . A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive. . . . The husband took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle. At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door. The matches fell from his hand and spilled in the passage. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house. —from *The Monkey's Paw* by W.W. Jacobs

What if the author of this excerpt, W.W. Jacobs, had avoided all description in this scene? The narrative plot would read like this:

The candle went out. The match went out. Three knocks were heard at the door.

That's a big yawner, and I'm sure you don't find it scary at all. Unless you are writing a story or essay as dull as boiled fish, description is essential.

Here's another example of good descriptive writing. It's the first stanza of *The Highwayman*, a story poem that tells about a robber on the dark roads of England. Poet Alfred Noyes uses vivid images to create a stormy, troubled mood.

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman² came riding—
Riding—riding—

The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

Again, try removing description from the poem. What do you get?

It was night. The wind blew the trees. A rider rode up to an inn.

Not very interesting, is it? You know what happened, but you don't really know what it was like to be there in the scene.

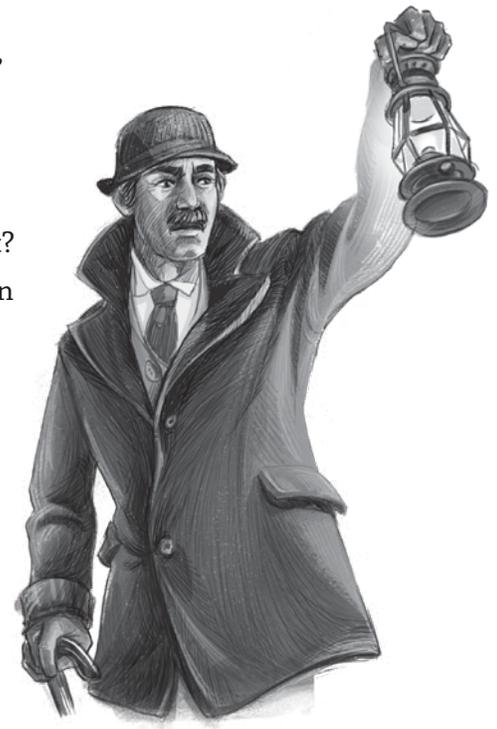
Description is important in almost any form of writing. For example, it can be used to make an essay or a speech more clear or interesting. Check out the way Martin Luther King Jr. employs the descriptive language of heat and storms to make his point about justice:

This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. . . . Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. —from "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King Jr.³

King's descriptions give his words more power and more feeling. A person's quest for freedom seems more heroic when he is "battered by storms of persecution."

Description also can help to explain an idea. King goes on to say, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" What does he mean by living out "the true meaning of its creed"? Description supplies the answer. Take a look:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table



2. highwayman: a mounted robber who preyed on travelers who used the high roads (or highways) of England

3. This speech can be found in its entirety at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>.

of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Do you see how effective description can be? The purpose of description is to help readers experience what they are reading, to capture their attention and give them details that will aid in their understanding.

Appeal to the Senses

Description appeals to the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. We experience the world with our senses, and writing that piques these senses will be the most vivid. In fiction writing, when you write cleverly for the senses, your readers forget where they are and find themselves in the middle of the adventure. For example, in his novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Arthur Conan Doyle expertly describes the approach of a fog bank over a swampy waste called Grimpen Mire. The fog conceals a monstrous dog that is swiftly approaching the story's heroes, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, as they stand in the dark outside an old house. Take a look:

Every minute that white woolly plain which covered one-half of the moor was drifting closer and closer to the house. Already the first thin wisps of it were curling across the golden square of the lighted window. The farther wall of the orchard was already invisible, and the trees were standing out of a swirl of white vapor. As we watched it, the fog-wreaths came crawling round both corners of the house and rolled slowly into one dense bank on which the upper floor and the roof floated like a strange ship upon a shadowy sea. . . . We fell back before [the fog] until we were half a mile from the house, and still that dense white sea, with the moon silvering its upper edge, swept slowly and inexorably on.

“Hist!” cried Holmes, and I heard the sharp click of a cocking pistol. “Look out! It’s coming!”

- To what sense does the author mainly appeal in this description?

In *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Washington Irving appeals to a different sense to set an eerie stage for the arrival of the Headless Horseman.

It was the very witching time of night that Ichabod, heavy-hearted and crest-fallen, pursued his travel homewards. . . . In the dead hush of midnight, he could even hear the barking of the watchdog from the opposite shore of the Hudson; but it was so vague and faint as only to give an idea of his distance from this faithful companion of man. Now and then, too, the long-drawn crowing of a cock, accidentally awakened, would sound far, far off from some farmhouse away among the



hills—but it was like a dreaming sound in his ear. No signs of life occurred near him, but occasionally the melancholy chirp of a cricket, or perhaps the guttural twang of a bull-frog, from a neighboring marsh, as if sleeping uncomfortably, and turning suddenly in his bed.

► To what sense is the author appealing in this description?

Writers are more sparing in their use of the senses of touch, smell, and taste, but their effect can be even more striking. This is because touch, smell, and taste are often more intimate and personal. Sight and hearing are senses experienced at a safe distance. With touch, an object must necessarily come into contact with the skin. Smell and taste must be taken internally.

In this next passage from *The Woman in White*, author Wilkie Collins uses the sensation of a kiss to create surprise and attraction in the heart of an art teacher when he gives directions to a young woman who is lost in London. The woman is a total stranger, and yet her inexplicable kiss causes the man to want to call her back as she drives off.

My hand was on the cab door. She caught it in hers, kissed it, and pushed it away. The cab drove off at the same moment—I started into the road, with some vague idea of stopping it again, I hardly knew why—hesitated from dread of frightening and distressing her—called, at last, but not loudly enough to attract the driver’s attention. The sound of the wheels grew fainter in the distance—the cab melted into the black shadows on the road—the woman in white was gone.

Tactile imagery, description that uses the sense of touch, is used effectively here. Collins starts with the touch of the cab door, the press of a kiss, and the push of a hand. He ends with the tactile idea of melting—melting is often linked with touching, as with the melting of butter or ice cream in the mouth.

Here again is Wilkie Collins, this time giving a weather forecast with the sense of smell:

It was dark and quiet. Neither moon nor stars were visible. I smelled rain in the still, heavy air, and I put my hand out of the window. No. The rain was only threatening, it had not come yet. —adapted from *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins

And let’s not leave out taste. **Gustatory imagery**, as descriptions of taste are called, appear only rarely in writing, and are often paired with the sense of smell. Herman Melville really whets his reader’s appetite with this tasty scene adapted from his otherwise unearthly book, *Moby-Dick*:

The smoking chowder came in. It was made of small juicy clams, scarcely bigger than hazel nuts, mixed with pounded biscuit, and salted pork cut up into little flakes; the whole enriched with butter, and plentifully seasoned with pepper and salt. Our appetites being sharpened by the frosty voyage, we devoured it quickly. This inn was the fishiest of all fishy places. Chowder for breakfast, and chowder for dinner, and chowder for supper. The area before the house was paved with clamshells. The milk tasted fish-flavored, too, which I could not at all account for.

Notice how all of these examples use **vivid language** to create a mental picture. The words are chosen precisely. The nouns are specific, not general. The verbs are strong and energetic. The adjectives are bright and colorful.

- A knock sounded on the front door.
- The fog-wreaths crawled around the corner of the house.
- The cab melted into the black shadows.
- I smelled rain in the still, heavy air.
- The milk tasted fish-flavored, too.

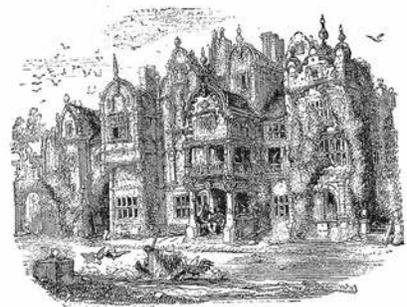
When you write your own descriptive essays and stories, you will also be asked to use vivid and specific language. It works just as well in a description of a famous person or an explanation of the process of metamorphosis as it does in a scary story. *Show* rather than *tell* is the name of the game. By appealing to the five senses of your readers, you will help bring your subject clearly to their eyes, ears, noses, mouths, and hands.

Tell It Back—Narration

- ⋮ Why is description essential to a story, essay, or speech? In other words, what are some purposes for using description?
- ⋮
- ⋮

Talk About It—

- ⋮ 1. Look at the images of the Maypole Inn from Charles Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge* and the Lyme Park estate in Cheshire, England. Which building would make a better haunted house and why? How do artists make some houses look creepier than others?
- ⋮ 2. The following descriptive passage comes from *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, an adventure novel by John Buchan. How does the writer engage the senses in his description? In other words, how does Buchan create the impression of a carefree, happy day by saying more than simply "It was a gorgeous evening"?



▲ The Maypole Inn, 1841



▲ Lyme Park Estate, 1819

- ⋮ It was a gorgeous spring evening, with every hill showing as clear as a cut amethyst. The air had the queer, rooty smell of bogs, but it was as fresh as mid-ocean, and it had the strangest effect on my spirits. I actually felt light-hearted. I might have been a boy out for a spring holiday tramp, instead of a man of thirty-seven very much wanted by the police. I felt just as I used to feel when I was starting for a big trek on a frosty
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morning on the high veld. If you believe me, I swung along that road whistling. There was no plan of campaign in my head, only just to go on and on in this blessed, honest-smelling hill country, for every mile put me in better humor with myself.

In a roadside planting I cut a walking-stick of hazel, and presently struck off the highway up a bypath which followed the glen of a brawling stream. . . . It was some hours since I had tasted food, and I was getting very hungry when I came to a herd's cottage set in a nook beside a waterfall. A brown-faced woman was standing by the door, and greeted me with the kindly shyness of moorland places. When I asked for a night's lodging she said I was welcome to the "bed in the loft," and very soon she set before me a hearty meal of ham and eggs, scones, and thick sweet milk.

3. The following descriptive passage comes from *The Conquest*, an autobiographical novel by Oscar Micheaux. Based on the passage, in which the author describes the process of building a house, try to define what a sod mason and a contractor are.

At Hedrick I hired a sod mason at three dollars a day and we soon put up . . . a sod house sixteen by fourteen with a hip roof made of two by fours for rafters, and plain boards with tar paper and sod with the grass turned downward and laid side by side, the cracks being filled with sand. The house had two small windows and one door, that was a little short on account of my getting tired carrying sod. I ordered the "contractor" to put the roof on as soon as I felt it was high enough to be comfortable inside. The fifth day I moved in. There was no floor, but the thick, short buffalo grass made a neat carpet.

Memoria—



This icon points to more tips on memorization at the back of the book.

- There are three schoolmasters for everybody that will employ them—the senses, intelligent companions, and books. —Henry Ward Beecher
1. After reading this quotation by Henry Ward Beecher, a famous abolitionist, define any words you may not know. Then discuss the meaning of the quotation.
 2. How can books make use of the senses to teach us like a schoolmaster? Give an example of how this might work.
 3. Memorize this quotation and be prepared to recite it during your next class.
 4. Write this quotation in your commonplace book, along with any thoughts you have about it.

Go Deeper—

- 1. **SPECIFIC VERSUS GENERAL WORDS:** Label each of the following words with a part of speech (noun, verb, or adjective) and then write a more vivid or specific word that could be used in its place. Keep in mind that some words may be used as more than one part of speech.

Example:

dance noun, ballet

a. young _____

b. queen _____

c. walk _____

d. game _____

e. big _____

f. tea _____

g. desert _____

h. toss _____

i. laugh _____

j. write _____

k. blue _____

l. illness _____

m. good _____

n. murder _____

o. dark _____



2. **VIVID WORDS:** Descriptive writing requires vivid language. In each of the following sentences, change the general words into more colorful or specific words that help the reader picture the scene more intensely. Write your new sentence in the space provided.

Examples:

The dog ate a bone.

Change to: The Rottweiler puppy gnawed on a leg of lamb.

Try as she might, the girl could not fit her foot into the shoe.

Change to: Breaking into a sweat, the stepsister could not squeeze her foot into the glass slipper.

a. A person sat under a tree reading a book.

b. The food smelled good but tasted bad.

c. Our cat likes to be petted.

d. When the person next door plays the piano, it sounds nice.

e. The sky is very pretty as the sun goes down.

3. **THE SENSES:** Using the prompts after each section, add to the following story sentences that appeal to the senses. Use your imagination! After you're finished, read the whole story aloud—including your changes—and see if you've amplified the description to make it more vivid.

a. Long, long ago, there lived in Daneland a king called Hrothgar. The old men of his country loved him and bowed the knee to him gladly, and the young men obeyed him and joyfully did battle for him. For he was a king mighty in war, and valiant. No foe could stand against him, but he overcame them all, and took from them much spoil.

So this king wrought peace in his land and his riches grew great. In his palace there were heaped gold in rings and in chains, armor finely welded, rich jewels which glowed as soft sunlight.

Add a sentence that appeals to the sense of sight.

Example: And the amber—yes! glorious, yellow amber—bloomed like a flower on every drinking horn and pewter cup.



-
-
- b. Then King Hrothgar looked upon this great treasure and brooded thereon. At last he said, "I will build a great hall. It shall be vast and wide, adorned within and without with gold and ivory, with gems and carved work. The fame of it shall spread over all the earth, and men shall sing of it for all time. And when it is built, therein shall I call all my warriors, young and old and divide to them the treasure that I have. It shall be a hall of joy and feasting."

Then King Hrothgar called his workmen and commanded them to build the hall. So they set to work, and day by day it rose quickly, becoming each day more and more fair, until at length it was finished.

It stood upon a height, vast and stately, and as it was adorned with the horns of deer, King Hrothgar named it Hart Hall.

In the Hall there was laughter and song and great merriment.

Add a sentence that appeals to the sense of hearing.

- c. Every evening when the shadows fell, and the land grew dark without, the knights and warriors gathered in the Hall to feast.

Add a sentence that appeals to the sense of taste.

- d. And when the feast was over, and the wine-cup passed around the board, and the great fire roared upon the hearth, and the dancing flames gleamed and flickered, making strange shadows among the gold and carved work of the walls, the minstrel took his harp and sang.

Within the Hall was light and gladness, but without there was wrath and hate. For far on the moor there lived a wicked giant named Grendel. Hating all joy and brightness, he haunted the fastness and the fen, prowling at night to see what evil he might do.

Add a sentence that appeals to smell.

- e. And now when night by night he heard the minstrel's song, and saw the lighted windows gleam through the darkness, it was pain and grief to him.

Very terrible was this ogre Grendel to look upon. Thick black hair hung about his face, and his teeth were long and sharp, like the tusks of an animal. His huge body and great hairy arms had the strength of ten men.

Add a sentence that appeals to touch.

4. **PURPOSE:** Descriptive writing can serve a number of different purposes. It can help the reader *experience* a narrative more fully and intensely by engaging his senses. It can *explain*, helping a reader better understand a complicated idea. As you will see in lesson 5, it also can illustrate the steps and stages in a *process*. Choosing from these three purposes, identify the purpose of each of the following short descriptions. Write “experience,” “explain,” or “process” in the space provided.

- a. _____ Night closed in on the sloop⁴ before it reached the land, leaving her feeling the way in pitchy darkness. I saw breakers⁵ ahead before long. At this I turned the ship away from the wind and stood offshore, but was immediately startled by the tremendous roaring of breakers again ahead and on the lee⁶ bow.⁷ This puzzled me, for there should have been no broken water where I supposed myself to be. I kept off a good bit, then turned round, but I found broken water there also, and I was forced to throw her head again offshore. In this way, among dangers, I spent the rest of the night. Hail and sleet in the fierce squalls cut my flesh till the blood trickled over my face; but what of that? It was soon daylight, and the sloop was in the midst of the Milky Way of the sea, and it was the white breakers of a huge sea over sunken rocks which threatened to engulf her!

- b. _____ Both the booby and the noddy are birds of a tame and stupid disposition. They are so unaccustomed to visitors, that I could have killed any number of them with my geological hammer. The booby lays her eggs on the bare rock; but the noddy makes a very simple nest with seaweed.

- c. _____ There is no reason why you should not make your own bow and arrows. Take a perfectly sound, straight, well-seasoned stick five or six feet long (your bow should be about as long as yourself); mark off a five-inch space

4. sloop: a sailboat with one mast

5. breaker: water that “breaks” or crashes against rocks

6. lee: the side of the boat away from the wind

7. bow: the front of a ship

in the middle for the handle; leave this round and a full inch thick; shave down the rest, flat on one side for the front and round on the other for the back, until it is about one inch wide and three fourths of an inch thick next the handle, tapering to about one half that at the ends, which are then “nocked,” nicked, or notched. These notches are for the string, which is to be put on early.

- d. _____ To make chocolate sauce, heat one pint of milk almost to a boil. Shave two ounces of chocolate, and put the shavings in a small pan with four tablespoons of sugar and two of boiling water. Stir over the stove until smooth and glossy, and add to the hot milk. Beat together for eight minutes the yolks of four eggs, three tablespoonfuls of sugar, and a scant spoon of salt, and then add one quarter cup of cold milk.
- e. _____ One day, as I was running through the grass, pursuing a bird, I got entangled in a spider web, by far the biggest web built by any spider. The threads of the web are sticky and yellow, the same color as part of the spider. Some of these spiders grow to be of immense size; I have frequently seen them with a body as large as a sparrow’s egg. Happily, the bite of this spider is not dangerous. I looked round to see and get out of the spider’s way, but before I was aware I got a bite which was almost as painful as the sting of a scorpion.
- f. _____ Wingsuit gliding will never be a safe sport. Jumping from a helicopter or a mountain ledge and gliding through the air in a suit that makes the flyer look like a flying squirrel may seem like fun, but too often the stunt ends in tragedy. The flyer may misjudge the terrain or his parachute may fail to open, and a crash landing is the result.





Lesson 2

Description of a Person

A description can be long, short, or medium in length. When you're writing one, you have to be a little like Goldilocks and find the length that's not too long or too short, but just right. If you're writing a novel, you might spend a whole chapter describing a turtle crossing a road, as John Steinbeck does in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Most of the time, however, short or medium-length descriptions do a better job of awakening readers' senses without losing their attention. If you're writing a short article, two or three sentences of description will probably suffice.

No matter their length, many descriptions have familiar or common subjects. The Greeks (and later the Romans) actually made up special names for some common types of description. Here are several:

- *astrothesia*: a description of the stars
- *dendrographia*: a description of a tree
- *anemographia*: a description of the wind

As fun as it would be to describe the stars, a tree, or the wind, in this book you will be touching on other types of description, including:

- *characterismus*: a description of a person’s physical qualities or character¹
- *topographia*: a description of a place
- *pragmatographia*: a description of an action (such as a wedding, a battle, or the baking of a cake)

In this chapter you will start with the description of a person, *characterismus*.

Outer Aspects

When I search my memory, the first description of a person that I can remember is one of Santa Claus from *A Visit from St. Nicholas* by Clement C. Moore. It goes like this:

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
 And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot.
 A bundle of Toys he had flung on his back,
 And he looked like a peddler, just opening his pack.

His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!
 His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
 His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
 And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow.

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
 And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.
 He had a broad face and a little round belly
 That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly!

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
 And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself!

Moore does a nice job of using vivid words such as “tarnished” and “soot,” “bowlful” and “jelly.” He also makes copious use of similes, which are comparisons using the words “like” or “as.”

► Look back through the poem. Can you find all seven similes?

Moore’s descriptive writing gives us a clear picture of Santa’s appearance—what he looks like. This is one of the outer aspects of a person that you can describe. By outer aspects, I mean all the details about a person that you can see with your eyes.

What a person looks like can of course include the texture of a person’s hair or the color of his eyes, but it isn’t just the raw material we get from Mom and Dad. To a significant degree a person’s appearance is shaped by his behavior. For example, a man who doesn’t shave will grow a beard. If he doesn’t brush his teeth, he will someday grin like a toothless jack-o’-lantern. A woman who wears thick makeup may look like a porcelain doll. If she doesn’t use an umbrella in the rain, her



1. Descriptions of people can be divided into several specialized types. *Effictio* is a description of someone’s body. *Ethopoeia* is a description of a person’s habits. *Prosopographia* is a description of a face.

“face” may run down her neck. We also look very different depending on whether we are grinning or grimacing, blinking or squinting, puckering our lips or wrinkling our noses. A person’s clothing, his grooming, and even his facial expressions are part of his appearance.

What a person is doing is another outer aspect that you can describe. You can show your character running down a street after her runaway dog or weeping over a letter from a lost love. As already mentioned, sometimes what a person does can affect how he or she looks—the running woman may be sweaty and red in the face, and the weeping woman’s shoulders may be slumped and her face tear-streaked. In other words, appearance and actions often go together.

Here is a partial list of the outer aspects of a person that you can describe:

Appearance		
Physical Features	Clothing	Behaviors
face	hat	expressions (smiling, grinning, frowning, smirking, etc.)
hair	shirt	
height	pants	
weight	skirt	
limbs	dress	
strength	shoes	
grooming (tidy, sloppy, brushed, shaved, etc.)	accessories	
Actions		
movements (unconscious—scratching, twitching, blinking, etc.)		
actions (conscious—sitting, standing, pushing, pointing, etc.)		

Inner Aspects

Because appearances and actions are observable to the human eye, when we write descriptions of people, we are most likely to detail what they look like and what they do. But what about the things we can’t see? The eye can observe appearances and actions, but it can’t see inside a person’s heart to his character and motives. “Character”² refers to a person’s moral strengths and weaknesses. It is often said to be “who you are when nobody is looking.” **Motives** are a person’s desires and the reasons for acting the way she does.

These qualities are invisible, but sometimes what we write about a person’s outer appearance and actions can give hints about what’s on the inside. For example, tidy gray hair on top can hint that a person is wise and dignified. On the other hand, hair sprouting out of the nose or ears can hint that a person—even a genius such as Albert Einstein—is a little crazy. Chewing the fingernails can hint that a person is nervous, while picking the nose in public can hint that a person is uncouth.

2. As you probably remember, the word “character” can also refer to a person in fiction, a movie, or a play.

Now, in real life we usually don't want to make assumptions based on a person's appearance. Appearances can be deceiving, after all. The man who weekly gets his hair cut and smoothed with a little hair gel might be totally self-centered and shallow. And wisdom doesn't necessarily come with age, so a younger man with hair in crazy places may actually be wiser and more trustworthy than one who appears older and more dignified. However, when it comes to the written word, writers often expect readers to make such assumptions. They rely heavily on descriptions of appearance as a way to help their readers get to know their characters.

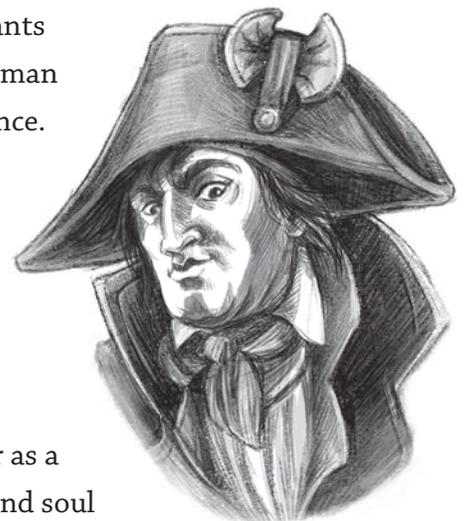
For example, here's a description of an infamous figure from the French Revolution, Jean-Baptiste Carrier:

The great man came in, stepping quickly. Of middle height, very frail and delicate, his clay-colored face was long and thin, with arched eyebrows, a high nose, and a loose, coarse mouth. His deeply sunken dark eyes glared fiercely, and wisps of dead-black hair hung about his livid brow. He was wrapped in a riding-coat of bottle-green, heavily lined with fur, the skirts reaching down to the tops of his Hessian boots, and the enormous turned-up collar almost touching the brim of his round hat. Under the coat his waist was girt with the tricolor of office, and there were gold rings in his ears.

Standing by a chair, one of his lean hands resting upon the back, he surveyed the committee, disgust in his glance, a sneer curling his lip, so terrible and brutal of aspect despite his frailness that more than one of those stout fellows quailed now before him. —adapted from *The Historical Nights' Entertainment* by Rafael Sabatini

Based on this description, do you think that the author, Rafael Sabatini, really believes that Carrier is a “great man”? The author undoubtedly has an opinion, which he conveys to the reader by the details he chooses. Although Carrier is “frail” and “delicate,” he wears heavy Hessian boots and a biggish riding coat. His mouth is “loose” and “coarse,” his eyes sunken under a brutish forehead. He glares “fiercely” and sneeringly, meaning to intimidate the people around him. His earrings are hooped like a pirate's. Clearly, Sabatini wants his reader to see Carrier as a bully. True to the description, this wicked man ordered the drowning of hundreds of innocent people at Nantes in France.

If Sabatini had wanted to add even more to his portrait of Carrier as a beastly man, he might have appealed to the sense of smell and given him an animal odor, like this: “After his long ride from Paris, he reeked of the sweat of horses and manure.” Or he could have appealed to the sense of touch by telling us that “his calloused hands whacked the smooth table like twin mallets.” In any case, Sabatini uses description of Carrier's physical features, his clothing, and his behavior as a way of getting at something deeper. He is trying to show us the heart and soul of the man.



Notice, however, that Sabatini doesn't just rely on hints to tell us about his character's inner qualities. He also tells us, quite openly, that Carrier is "terrible" and "brutal." As you practice writing descriptions, you will learn to balance showing and telling. A good writer often uses both showing and telling to make his point clear.

In the following brief description from *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo reveals the character of a woman named Fantine by showing through her appearance and also by directly telling us about her. Take a look:

As for Fantine, she was a joy to behold. Her splendid teeth had evidently received a gift from God—laughter. Her rosy lips babbled enchantingly. The corners of her mouth were turned up. There was something indescribably harmonious and striking about her entire dress.

Brilliant of face, delicate of profile, with eyes of a deep blue, heavy lids, feet arched and small, wrists and ankles admirably formed, a cheek that was young and fresh, a strong and supple nape of the neck—such was Fantine; and beneath these feminine adornments and these ribbons one could see her soul.

Fantine was beautiful, without being too conscious of it. She was joy and she was also modesty. To an observer who studied her attentively, she seemed to be the epitome of reserve and modesty.

► What can you say about Fantine's appearance and character based on this passage? Do you suppose she has any motives for acting so cheerfully and with such modesty?

Through his description Hugo gives us an idea not just of what Fantine looks like on the outside, but of who she is on the inside as well.

Here's a partial list of the inner aspects of a person that you can describe:

Emotions	Character	Motives
<p>How does this person feel inside?</p> <p>Some emotions are: happy, sad, angry, shy, compassionate, resentful, jealous, disgusted, in love, contented, frightened.</p>	<p>What are the core qualities of the person?</p> <p>Some positive qualities include: wise, truthful, sincere, responsible, patient, loyal, meek, joyful, humble, enthusiastic, kind.</p> <p>Some negative qualities include: foolish, deceitful, insincere, irresponsible, impatient, traitorous, sassy, sorrowful, arrogant, apathetic, cruel.</p>	<p>What causes the person to act the way he or she does?</p> <p>Some strong motivations or desires include: fame, friends, disapproval, hunger, revenge, romance, power, justice, spiritual fulfillment, sacrifice, safety, shame, success.</p>

There are a lot of different reasons for describing a person, and a lot of different ways to do it. You might want to describe a character in a short story, or you might need to describe a person so that she could be picked out in a crowd. You will find that the type of writing you're doing will help you decide which of all of the possible details to include.

Keep in mind that in many types of writing the details you choose can influence your reader to take a liking or a disliking to that person. You are making an introduction between your reader and your character. Will your reader be pleased to shake the character's hand, or will he want to wash his hands immediately after the handshake? Your choices make all the difference. If your reader doesn't care one way or the other, it's possible you haven't described the person with enough detail.

You are now ready to write your own character descriptions. You can use vivid words, details about appearance and actions, and hints about inner qualities to paint a picture of your character. If you do it well, your readers will likely feel as if they know your character, at least a little bit. Instead of handing your reader a piece of paper with lifeless scribbles on it, you will be introducing her to a living, breathing person—or at least a character who seems that way!

Tell It Back—Narration

1. Why is it best in most compositions to stick to short or medium-length descriptions?
2. Define the concepts of character and motives.
3. Give an example in which outward appearances could hint at the invisible inner qualities of a person.

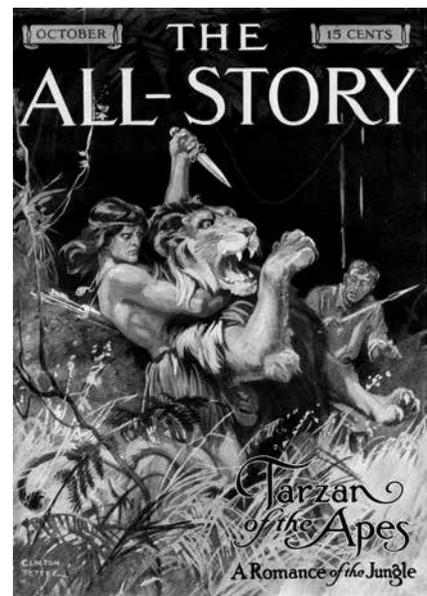
Talk About It—

1. Three of the following descriptions are of characters from twentieth-century American novels, and one description is of a real-life character from the last days of the monarchy in Russia. After reading each excerpt, answer the questions that follow.

A. About his waist was a deerskin breechcloth and a belt of tiny strips of rawhide fashioned by himself as a support for the home-made scabbard in which hung his father's hunting knife. The long bow . . . hung over his left shoulder.

The young Tarzan was indeed a strange and war-like figure, his mass of black hair falling to his shoulders behind and cut with his hunting knife to a rude bang upon his forehead, that it might not fall before his eyes.

His straight and perfect figure, muscled as the best of the ancient Roman gladiators must have been muscled, and yet with the soft and sinuous curves of a Greek god, told at a glance the wondrous combination of enormous strength with suppleness and speed.



▲ *The All-Story Magazine*,
October, 1912

A personification, was Tarzan of the Apes, of the primitive man, the hunter, the warrior.

With the noble poise of his handsome head upon those broad shoulders, and the fire of life and intelligence in those fine, clear eyes, he might readily have typified some demigod of a wild and warlike bygone people of his ancient forest. —from *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs

Is this a positive or negative description of Tarzan? How can you tell from the wording of the text? What can you discern about Tarzan's character?

B. I opened the door between to see who it was. [Second Planting]³ was a big man from the waist up and he had a big chest. He looked like a bum. He wore a brown suit of which the coat was too small for his shoulders and his trousers were probably a little tight at the waist. His collar had the snug fit of a horse-collar and was of about the same shade of dirty brown. A tie dangled outside his buttoned jacket, a black tie which had been tied with a pair of pliers in a knot the size of a pea. Around his bare and magnificent throat, above the dirty collar, he wore a wide piece of black ribbon, like an old woman trying to freshen up her neck. He had a big flat face and a high-bridged fleshy nose that looked as hard as the prow of a cruiser. He had lidless eyes, drooping jowls, the shoulders of a blacksmith and the short and apparently awkward legs of a chimpanzee. If he had been cleaned up a little and dressed in a white nightgown, he would have looked like a very wicked Roman senator. —from *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler

Is this a positive or negative description of Second Planting? How can you tell from the wording of the text? What can you discern about Second Planting's character?

C. Once on a dark winter's day, when the yellow fog hung so thick and heavy in the streets of London that the lamps were lighted and the shop windows blazed with gas as they do at night, an odd-looking little girl sat in a cab with her father and was driven rather slowly through the big thoroughfares.

She sat with her feet tucked under her, and leaned against her father, who held her in his arm, as she stared out of the window at the passing people with a queer old-fashioned thoughtfulness in her big eyes.

She was such a little girl that one did not expect to see such a look on her small face. It would have been an old look for a child of twelve, and Sara Crewe was only seven. . . .

She was a slim, supple creature, rather tall for her age, and had an intense, attractive little face. Her hair was heavy and quite black and only curled at the tips; her eyes were greenish gray, it is true, but they were big, wonderful eyes with long, black lashes, and though she herself did not like the color of them, many other people did. Still she

3. "Second Planting" is the character's name.

was very firm in her belief that she was an ugly little girl. —from *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Is this a positive or negative description of Sara Crewe? How can you tell from the wording of the text? What can you discern about Sara Crewe’s character?

- D. One day, having been called by telephone to the house of His Excellency, I found, seated in his big luxuriously furnished room, and chatting confidentially, a strange-looking, unkempt, sallow-faced man of thirty or so, with broad brow, narrow sunken cheeks, and long untrimmed beard, who, as soon as he turned his big, deep-set eyes upon mine, held me in fascination. His was a most striking countenance, broad in the protruding forehead which narrowed to the point of his black beard, and being dressed as a monk in a long, shabby, black robe I recognized at once he was one of those bogus “holy” men we have all over Russia. . . .



▲ Grigori Rasputin (c. 1864–1916)

On being introduced to me [as Grigori Rasputin], the unkempt, uncleanly fellow crossed his arms over his chest, bowed, and growled in a deep voice a word of benediction. I expressed pleasure at meeting him, for all Russia was at the moment ringing with the renown of the modest Siberian “saint” who could work miracles. . . . My eyes met the piercing gaze of the unkempt scoundrel, and, to my surprise, I found myself held mystified. Never before had any man or woman exercised such an all-powerful influence over me by merely gazing at me. That it was hypnotic was without doubt. The fellow himself with his sallow cheeks, his black beard, his deep-set eyes, and his broad brow was the very counterpart of those portraits which the old artists of Italy painted of criminal aristocrats. —adapted from *The Minister of Evil* by William Le Queux

Is this a positive or negative description of Grigori Rasputin? How can you tell from the wording of the text? What can you discern about Rasputin’s character?

2. We live in a time when people are very concerned about appearances, and no one seems more concerned about “image” than celebrities and movie stars.

However, sometimes even people who aren’t famous post selfies on social media to try to make others think they live more glamorous lives than they really do. What do you think are some problems with people obsessing about physical appearance or how glamorous their lives appear to others?

3. Magazine editors and movie directors make a lot of decisions about how to depict celebrities in order to give them a certain image. They are concerned about every detail, from clothes to pose to hairstyle. How is the celebrity Marilyn Monroe depicted in this portrait? In other words, what do you suppose the photographer wants people to think about her? How true to real life do you think a celebrity picture such as this is?



▲ Marilyn Monroe in *The Prince and the Showgirl*, 1957

Memoria—



- The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance. —Aristotle
- 1. After reading this quotation by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, define any words you may not know. Then discuss the meaning of the quotation.
- 2. Do you agree with this quotation?
- 3. Do you think that Aristotle’s opinion about art applies to the description of a person as well? Explain your answer.
- 4. Memorize this quotation and be prepared to recite it during your next class.
- 5. Write this quotation in your commonplace book, along with any thoughts you have about it.

Writing Time—

- 1. **SENTENCE PLAY—**
- A. **SHOWING VS. TELLING:** All people have a “movie projector” inside their heads. That “projector” is their ability to see a description. When a good writer engages the senses, the movie projector turns on and displays the description in the reader’s imagination. Just the suggestion of glowing embers or a bloody nose causes the movie to play in our heads. On the other hand, lazy writers tell—rather than show—everything the reader needs to know. In a few strokes of a pen, they rush pell-mell through their compositions and the movie screen inside the reader’s head goes blank. You want to be a *show* writer and not merely a *tell* writer.

In the space provided, rewrite the following “telling” sentences as “showing” sentences by appealing to the senses and changing general words to specific, vivid words.

Example:

Telling: The clown looked hilarious.

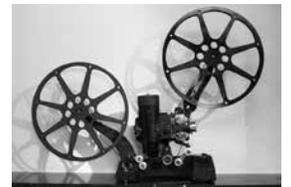
Showing: The clown’s cherry-red nose dripped with whipped cream.

- a. Telling: Standing by the grave, the woman looked miserable.

Showing: _____

- b. Telling: You could tell that Bart was a mean kid.

Showing: _____



c. Telling: While stuck on the roller coaster, the girl felt sick.

Showing: _____

d. Telling: The man knew immediately that pigs were nearby.

Showing: _____

e. Telling: No one at the dance was more beautiful than Heather.

Showing: _____

f. Telling: I was injured when my foot stepped on the nail.

Showing: _____

g. Telling: He wanted to rest after work.

Showing: _____

h. Telling: As she met the queen, she was nervous.

Showing: _____

i. Telling: He thought the meat was delicious.

Showing: _____

j. Telling: The singer had a nice voice.

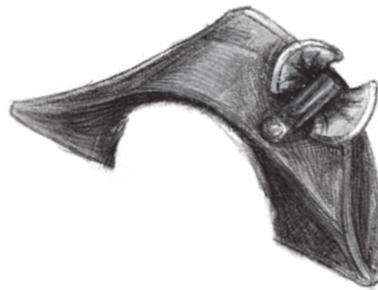
Showing: _____

B. **CONJUNCTIONS:** Remember that a conjunction links together two clauses or sentences. You are very familiar with coordinating conjunctions such as “and,” “or,” and “but,” but there is another type of conjunction as well. This type is called a “subordinating conjunction,” which you last learned about in *Writing & Rhetoric: Commonplace*. A subordinating conjunction is the word that introduces a subordinate clause. It provides a transition between two ideas and can indicate a time, place, or cause-and-effect relationship. Here are some examples:

- We can share an umbrella while we walk in the rain. (time)
- My parents don’t know where they hid the Christmas presents. (place)
- Because I played with a scorpion, I got stung. (cause and effect)

Here are a few common subordinating conjunctions:

- although
- because
- if
- since
- so that
- that
- until
- unless
- where
- while



For each of the following pairs of sentences, use one of these common subordinating conjunctions to link the clauses together into one sentence. The conjunction could come at the beginning or middle of the sentence. Keep in mind that adding a subordinating conjunction may slightly change the wording or the meaning of the text.

Example: I have a dream. My four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Change to: I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

a. I sing often. I sing in the shower.

b. She didn’t fall asleep. He brought her strong coffee.

c. You look pale. Perhaps you’ve seen a ghost!

d. They waited on the platform. Finally, the train arrived.

e. Money is important. It is not the most important thing.

2. **COPIOUSNESS:** You learned about hyperbole in *Writing & Rhetoric: Encomium & Vituperation*. Hyperbole is a rhetorical device that uses deliberate exaggeration to emphasize an idea or appeal to people’s emotions. It can help a writer to show rather than tell. For instance, Mark Twain uses hyperbole to give his readers a shiver of disgust in the following passage in which his character Huck describes his scary father:

There warn’t no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man’s white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body’s flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white. —
from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain



Twain exaggerates the pallor of the man’s face to help his readers understand Huck’s strong reaction to it, and to make readers feel the revulsion the boy felt when he saw his father again.

Decide whether the following sentences use hyperbole or not. If a sentence uses hyperbole, write “hyperbole” in the space provided. Then rewrite the sentence *without* hyperbole. If the sentence doesn’t use hyperbole, write “not hyperbole” in the space provided, and rewrite the sentence *with* hyperbole.

Examples:

hyperbole

Sir, your nose is a rock! . . . a peak! . . . a cape! An entire continent!

Sir, your nose is very big.

not hyperbole

It was so cold you could see your breath.

It was so cold your words spilled from your mouth as snowflakes.



A. _____

His clothes were enormously too large for him in every measurement.

B. _____

As a schoolboy John was not brilliant, but he was persistently persevering.

C. _____

In Leonardo da Vinci, there was a beauty of body that could never be praised enough, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so great was his genius that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease.

D. _____

She had a little thin face and a little thin body, and a sour expression.

E. _____

I was quaking from head to foot, and could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.





This icon indicates where you will be doing prewriting.

3. **COMPARATIVE DESCRIPTION:** Take a look at the two photographs of Winston Churchill. The first is of Churchill in his army uniform at the age of twenty (1895). Shortly after this photo was taken, Churchill would be stationed in North Africa to fight in the River War along the Nile in Sudan. The second photo was taken at age sixty-nine (1943), when Churchill was prime minister of Great Britain during World War II. He is flashing his famous “V for Victory” sign.

Churchill was considered a courageous man in the thick of battle. In 1899, during the River War in Sudan, he wrote, “I was very nearly killed two hours ago by a shrapnel. But though I was in the full burst of it God preserved me. . . . My nerves were never better and I think I care less for bullets every day.” In addition to being courageous, Churchill refused to be discouraged by setbacks. In his famous “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech, which appears later in this book, Churchill said, “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 never surrender!” This combination of courage and perseverance made him the ideal leader of Britain while the island was being attacked by Nazi Germany.

Use the following prompts to write a short description of Winston Churchill. You will prepare for your description by comparing his appearance in the two photos. Then you’ll use that comparison to craft your description.

First list ways that the young Churchill and the old Churchill are similar in physical appearance, in dress, and in attitude.

Next, list the differences in physical appearance, dress, and attitude.



▲ Winston Churchill, 1895



▲ Winston Churchill, 1943

Finally, decide what is most important to describe from both lists to help readers “see” the man. List your choices, keeping in mind that you will want to describe his appearance so that a sense of his character emerges.

Now write a short paragraph of about six to ten complete sentences describing Winston Churchill based on the two photos. Be sure that you don’t stop with outward appearance, but rather help your reader to understand Churchill’s inner qualities. Make sure to do this at least in part through outward clues. In other words, try to show his qualities in addition to telling about them. (If you need more space for this or any other writing exercise, use a separate sheet of paper.)

4. **DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY:** Write an essay at least three or four paragraphs long that describes in detail somebody you know. In your description, the person should be performing an action that is typical for him or her. For example, you could describe your father as he drives the car or your friend as she plays soccer.

Your first paragraph should introduce the person and his relationship to you, and can include important general information such as his sex, age, and occupation. Your description will read more naturally if you don’t make a list out of this information. Instead, try to sprinkle it in throughout the essay. In other words, don’t start your essay off like this (please!):

Harold is my grandpa. He is eighty years old and a retired doctor. He enjoys playing golf and polishing his old Pontiac Streamliner.

That sort of beginning would put your readers to sleep before they got to the next paragraph. Instead, have some fun with this exercise. Start off in a way that brings your person to life! For example:



Grandpa Harold wakes up to the smell of fresh bacon and orange juice drifting up from downstairs.

The subsequent paragraphs can unfold more details about the person as you describe the action in sequential order. The description can come to an end when the action is completed. For example, if you are describing your father grilling spareribs, you can start your description when he lights the charcoal and end the description at a logical spot in the action sequence, such as when he serves up the barbequed ribs on a platter. Yum!

In a more detailed description like this, you should be sure to break your description into paragraphs because it makes your essay easier to read and helps the reader know when you are shifting to a new idea. Here are some paragraphing tips to consider for this composition:

- Create a new paragraph when you move from describing one major aspect of the person to another. For example, describe the person’s face and then, in a new paragraph, describe how the person talks or how she walks.
- Consider starting a new paragraph when the action you are describing shifts from one stage to another in sequence. For example, if you are writing about your grandmother tending the flowers in her garden, you might want to start a new paragraph when she moves from watering the sweet bellflowers to pulling the thorny weeds.
- Start a new paragraph if you shift the essay’s tone or mood, which lets the reader know how she should feel about the person or his actions. For example, you might start with a paragraph about your brother joyously shooting hoops in the driveway. You would then start a new paragraph when he attempts a slam dunk and crashes into the basketball pole, shifting the mood of your description from joy to surprise and frustration.

Use the following prompts to help you brainstorm. Then compose your full essay on a separate paper or on a computer. You don’t have to use complete sentences in your prewriting, but you should use complete sentences when you draft your essay.

The paragraphs you write after going through these prompts will be your first draft, or your first version of the essay. Assume that your first draft will need some rewriting to make it the best essay it can be.

Start your essay by introducing your character. Include a few basic descriptive details in the beginning and sprinkle the rest throughout your essay.

Person’s name: _____

Person’s relationship to you: _____

Person’s sex: _____

Person’s age: _____

Person’s occupation: _____



Continue your essay by describing the person performing an action that is typical for him or her.

Action: _____

As you tell about the action in sequential order, add descriptive details that help to show the person's outer and inner aspects. Be sure to use vivid words and sensory detail so that you are showing in addition to telling.

Outer Aspects

Physical features: What does this person look like? Think in terms of face, hair, height, weight, limbs, strength, grooming, etc. Feel free to use similes and metaphors.

Clothing: What is this person wearing?

Actions: What does this person do? Consider movements (unconscious) and actions (conscious).

Inner Aspects

Emotions: How does this person feel inside?



Character: What are the core qualities of this person?

Motives: What causes the person to act the way he or she does?

The completion of the action can serve as the conclusion to your descriptive essay.

Once you have completed your prewriting, go through these instructions again and write your paragraphs based on the prompts. Feel free to discard any information from your prewriting that is not pertinent to your description.

Speak It—Police Artist



This icon means that you can also use a recording device for this exercise.

This icon points to more tips on elocution at the back of the book.

1. Here is another opportunity to practice description. Often there aren't any cameras around to photograph a criminal when a crime is committed. In order to catch the bad guy, police must rely on descriptions given by witnesses or victims. A police artist is someone who sketches criminals from the descriptions they receive. This is your chance to play police artist.

Pairs of students should sit facing each other. One student will play the role of the witness while the other student will play the role of the police artist. The witness will describe the criminal based on one of the photographs in the collection of famous gangster mug shots. The police artist will sketch the gangster strictly from the description she receives. The police artist should not look at the mug shot until the sketch is complete.

The quality of your description will determine how well your partner can imagine the picture you are looking at. When you are done with your description, compare the artist's drawing with the photograph and see how well he did—but keep in mind that it's OK if your partner's drawing is not the most brilliant art ever. After all, real police artists are highly trained experts. The idea here is to practice your powers of description, not to produce the most exact portrait.

Here are some questions the witness can ask himself before describing the character to the police artist:

- Is the person male or female?
- What is the race of the person?
- About how old is the person?
- What is the shape of his or her face?
- Does the person have a heavy, medium, or light build?
- What do the person's hair, forehead, eyes, nose, and mouth look like?
- Does the person have any facial hair?
- Does the person have any scars or tattoos?

This gallery of gangsters all played a role in the "Public Enemy Era" of the 1920s and 1930s, when bootleg liquor was big and bank robbery was relatively easy.

Rubric for Describing a Person

Name: _____ Date of Assignment: _____

Length _____/10

Is the essay at least three or four paragraphs long? _____

Content _____/74

Is there a description of the person's physical features? (10 points) _____

Is there a description of the person's clothing? (10 points) _____

Is there a description of the person's actions and behaviors? (10 points) _____

Are there hints about the person's emotions? (10 points) _____

Are there hints about the person's character? (5 points) _____

Are there hints about the person's motives? (5 points) _____

Are the word choices vivid? (12 points) _____

Does the writing appeal to the senses? (12 points) _____

Form _____/16

Sentence variety _____

Many varied sentences: 4 points

Good sentence variety: 3 points

Some sentence variety: 2 points

Little or no sentence variety: 0 points

Grammar and usage _____

Few or no grammar errors: 4 points

Occasional grammar errors: 3 points

Some grammar errors: 2 points

Many grammar errors: 0 points

Number of spelling errors _____

2 or fewer per page: 3 points

3 per page: 2 points

4 per page: 1 point

5 or more per page: 0 points

Number of punctuation and capitalization errors _____

2 or fewer per page: 3 points

3 per page: 2 points

4 per page: 1 point

5 or more per page: 0 points

Is the handwriting neat and legible? Or, is the paper typed according to the teacher's requirements? _____

Yes: 2 points

No: 0 points

Total: _____/100



- 1. As we have said before, so we will say again: Never be satisfied with your first draft of anything! Almost always writing can be improved by rewriting. Even the best writers on the planet will tell you that revision is essential. Roald Dahl, the man who gave us *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*, said, “By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this.”

• So here’s what you need to do:

- a. Get feedback. Read your descriptive essay to a student partner or read it to your teacher. Humbly listen to the comments you receive. Some comments will make sense to you, while other comments you’ll want to reject. You may even feel embarrassed or cross about the feedback on a piece that matters to you or which describes something you care about, but keep in mind that feedback is essential to improving your work.
- b. Wait a day or two before you rewrite your paper. The time away from it will help you to see its problems more clearly.
- c. Before you rewrite, read the paper aloud to yourself. This is often the best way to catch mistakes—grammar errors, as well as words that don’t work well—because you will be using two senses—seeing and hearing—instead of one. If something sounds wrong, it probably is.

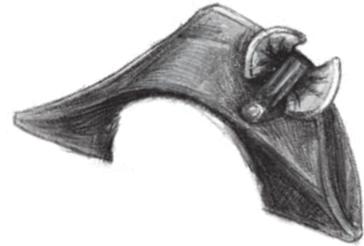
• Then use the following steps to aid with your revision:

- a. *Describe the person’s appearance.* Make sure that you describe the person’s physical features, clothing, and behaviors. These details can be blended with emotions, character, and motives.
- b. *Describe the person’s emotions.* Describe how the person is feeling inside. You can accomplish this through hints and brief insights that you give as you describe outward appearance. Be sure to show and not simply tell.
- c. *Describe the person’s character.* Use description of the person’s actions or physical appearance to give glimpses of his or her core qualities, whether positive or negative. Again, strive to show rather than only tell.
- d. *Describe the person’s motives.* Using the person’s outward appearance to give hints, show why the person might be acting the way he or she is.
- e. *Find and fix grammar mistakes.* Make sure all your nouns and verbs agree and that your writing is clear. Fix any fragments or run-ons. In other words, make sure you are writing complete sentences.

- f. *Strengthen phrasing.* Are your word choices specific instead of vague? Do you use strong nouns and verbs? Do you vary your sentences and occasionally begin them with a prepositional phrase or a participial phrase? Weed out passive voice and excess adjectives. Use compound sentences, appositives, adverb phrases, and questions to make your writing more interesting. Transition smoothly between ideas and paragraphs using transition words.
- g. *Proofread.* Look for any punctuation, spelling, or capitalization errors. Then fix them!
- h. *Retype* the draft with the corrections you have made.

2. **PROOFREADING PRACTICE:** The following paragraph contains a number of errors, including letters that should be capitalized (2), repeated words that should be deleted (2), words that are missing (2), a lack of proper punctuation (2), and misspellings (2). Use the following proofreader's marks to mark up the text:

- ≡ capitalize
- ∩ delete word
- ^ insert letter, word, or punctuation
- SP. misspelled word



There was once a little princess whose father was king over a great country full of mountains valleys. The princess was a a sweat little creature, and at the time my story begins was about eight years old, I think but she got older very fast. her face was fair and pretty, with eyes like like two bits night sky, each with a star dissolved in the blue Those eyes you would have thought must have known they came from there, so often were they turned up in that derection. the ceiling of her nursery was blue, with stars in it, as like the sky as they could make it.



Lesson 3

Description of Nature

The sight of waves leaping from a churning sea or of a rainbow spilling from a mighty waterfall causes feelings of awe and wonder to stir in nearly every eyewitness. Nature can be both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. A night sky blazing with stars can lift one's spirits or it can feel overwhelmingly vast. A storm in the distance can create feelings of comfort and security, but a crash of thunder up close can knock a person off his feet. The movement of the muscles beneath the spotted fur of a leopard is fascinating—thrilling—until the big cat wipes out an antelope and tears meat from its neck. No matter how people try to protect themselves from nature behind the walls and buildings and lights of cities, nature remains untamed and powerful.

Describing nature is one of the great pleasures of writing. The trick is to describe a natural setting so that your reader will experience it—the emotions and sensations it inspires—as if she is there herself. The earliest scrolls from ancient writers contain lovely descriptions of nature that do just that. Here is a description of the season of spring from Song of Solomon, a long love poem from the Hebrew scriptures:

See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.

Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me.

—Song of Solomon 2:11-13

As you were reading, did you hear the sound of birds and smell the scent of flowery vines? Notice also how spring is never specifically named in this passage, but the description—the mention of bird song and blossoming, for example—is so strong that you can immediately recognize the time of year. Writers succeed in immersing readers in a nature scene when they vividly describe the details they observe. All good nature writers rely on careful observation before they ever put pen to paper, and when they do start writing, they use vivid words that appeal to the senses.

The following is a description of a sunset over a hill from the *Ramayana of Valmiki*, an ancient Indian epic poem.

Look, darling, on this noble hill
Which sweet birds with their music fill. . . .
See, there a silvery sheen is spread,
And there like blood the rocks are red.
There shows a streak of emerald green,
And pink and yellow glow between. . . .
And others flash their light afar
Like mercury or some fair star. . . .
See, love, the trees that clothe [the hill's] side
All lovely in their summer pride,
In richest wealth of leaves arrayed,
With flower and fruit and light and shade.



Notice that the language is very specific and vivid. The sunset comes alive with splendid colors and flashing light. Notice also how the hill wears its trees and leaves the way a person wears clothing. Nature writers frequently use metaphors such as this to help them describe a scene or put into words the wonder they feel when smitten by nature.

A metaphor compares one thing to a second seemingly unlike thing to show how they are similar. It does not use the words “like” or “as.” You’ve already delved into metaphors in both *Encomium & Vituperation* and *Comparison* in this series. Because this device is so important to writers and speakers, we simply can’t let it drop.

In the beginning of this lesson I mentioned waves leaping from the sea. But waves don't really leap, do they? Not like gazelles or athletes. If you were to describe wave motion scientifically, you might say that a wave is a disturbance traveling through a medium such as water or air. And yet, the word "leaping" works to describe this disturbance because that's the way a rough sea looks; that's the way the observer experiences the action of waves. To say that a rainbow "spills" from a waterfall is also technically incorrect. A rainbow is not a liquid that can spill at all, but rather the spectrum of visible light refracted and dispersed by mist. The descriptive word "spill" gives the reader a sense of how the viewer encounters the rainbow—what the arch of colors seems to do in the moment of seeing it. Even though metaphors don't use scientific language, they can help a reader see or experience nature more keenly.

A simile is another rhetorical device that makes a comparison, and it employs the words "like" or "as." For example:



Love is like the wild rose-briar,
Friendship like the holly-tree.

—from "Love and Friendship" by Emily Brontë

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills.

—from "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth

As we have explained before, similes are easy to spot because they are announced with the trumpets of "like" and "as." Metaphors can sometimes be sneaky because they don't come announced by anything. For example, did you just catch the metaphor about trumpets? Stay on your toes, please. There are metaphors and similes everywhere, hiding in our language like eyes in the forest on a dark night. (Did you catch that one?)

While metaphors can make your descriptions stronger, be careful to avoid metaphors that have been used so often that they no longer rouse the reader's interest or emotions. These are called **dead metaphors** or **clichés**. How many times have you heard the metaphors "rolling hills," "babbling brook," or "Mother Earth"? Even when you say something is "as pure as the driven snow" or "as fresh as a daisy," you are using simile clichés that have lost their original power by being used so often. When used thoughtfully, however, metaphors and similes can add beauty, clarity, and a fresh feeling to your descriptions.

A Naturalist Observes Nature

There are all sorts of reasons you might write a description of nature. You might use description in a poem to capture the beauty of a redwood forest (*topographia*), or you might use it to set the scene for a short story. One of the most common types of nature writing describes a scene that the author has experienced firsthand. It is often told in the first person through the eyes of a careful observer known as a naturalist, an expert in the study of nature.

The naturalist frequently takes an active role in his own descriptive writing. As he discovers nature, he lets his readers in on his discoveries and adventures. Here's one example:

As I had placed my hand into the blue-tit's nest, I was bitten rather sharply by this little bird; I heard the snake-like hissing which the blue-tit utters when some rude hand invades its home.¹

And here's another example:

I was trudging along the shores of the Mohawk River, when night overtook me. Being little acquainted with that part of the country, I resolved to camp where I was; the evening was calm and beautiful, the sky sparkled with stars which were reflected by the smooth waters, and the deep shade of the rocks and trees of the opposite shore fell on the bosom of the stream, while gently from afar came on the ear the muttering sound of the cataract. My little fire was soon lighted under a rock, and, spreading out my scanty stock of provisions, I reclined on my grassy couch.²

In both of these selections you can see that the observers play an active role in their descriptions. When you write your own descriptions, you also can choose to write in the first person and describe your actions and reactions as you observe and interact with nature.



Finding Drama in Nature

In addition to using metaphor, simile, and first-person perspective, nature writers often make scenes from nature seem like a drama unfolding on a stage. They do this by writing their descriptions as if they are comedies or tragedies or **moral tales**. In other words, they tell their readers about something they observed that is funny or sad or teaches a lesson, and they tell it in the form of a story.

In his essay "The Pastoral Bees," naturalist John Burroughs manages to find all types of theater within a single beehive. Here's the comedy:

When a bee brings pollen into the hive he advances to the cell in which it is to be deposited and kicks it off, as one might his overalls or rubber boots, making one foot help the other; then he walks off without ever looking behind him; another bee, one of the indoor hands, comes along and rams it down with his head and packs it into the cell, as the dairymaid packs butter into a firkin³ with a ladle.

Burroughs later describes the plight of the drones, the male bees that are stingless and make no honey. The only purpose of a drone is to mate with the queen bee. Here's the tragedy:

Toward the close of the season, say in July or August, the command goes forth that the drones must die; there is no further use for them. Then the poor creatures,

1. adapted from *Country Walks of a Naturalist with His Children* by Rev. W. Houghton

2. adapted from *Ornithological Biography*, Volume I by John James Audubon

3. firkin: a small wooden container

how they are huddled and hustled about, trying to hide in corners and byways! There is no loud, defiant humming now, but abject fear seizes them. They cower like hunted criminals. I have seen a dozen or more of them wedge themselves into a small space between the glass and the comb, where the bees could not get hold of them, or where they seemed to be overlooked in the general slaughter. They will also crawl outside and hide under the edges of the hive. But sooner or later they are all killed or kicked out. The drone makes no resistance, except to pull back and try to get away; but (putting yourself in his place) with one bee ahold of your collar or the hair of your head, and another ahold of each arm or leg, and still another feeling for your waistbands with his sting, the odds are greatly against you.

And, finally, here's the moral tale:

The peculiar office and sacredness of the queen [bee] consists in the fact that she is the mother of the swarm, and the bees love and cherish her as a mother and not as a sovereign. She is the sole female bee in the hive, and the swarm clings to her because she is their life. Deprived of their queen, and of all brood from which to rear one, the swarm loses all heart and soon dies, though there be an abundance of honey in the hive.

► A fable is a short story with a moral, and it often employs talking animals. Even though Burroughs doesn't put words into the bee's mouth, what **moral lessons** do you think you could take away from this paragraph?

Naturalists have a twofold purpose: to impart the beauty of nature to others and to interpret any lessons it has to teach. When you include a moral tale in your description, you can share those lessons with your readers.

If you are inspired by these examples, you may want to include drama—comedies, tragedies, or moral tales—in your own nature description. Later in this lesson you will see additional pointers to help you with this kind of writing.

Living Deliberately

One of America's homegrown naturalists, Henry David Thoreau, spent two years living in a cabin for the very purpose of learning from nature. The cabin faced a pond that became famous in his book *Walden*. Thoreau says, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." You see, Thoreau believed that nature was an open book, and he wanted to study it to learn its lessons. He believed that it was important to live deliberately and to avoid wasting time on trivial things.

Writing about nature can help us to live more deliberately because it demands intentionality and attention. When we are outdoors observing nature, we must quiet ourselves and concentrate

so that we can reflect on the many things around us. Writing about nature also causes us to put thought into what we are seeing. Description of any kind requires that we slow down and carefully observe—or experience life thoughtfully and intentionally.

Now it's time for you to get started on your own description of nature. In this lesson you will be writing as a naturalist, or an observer of nature. I hope that you will take pleasure in helping your reader to experience what you experience through vivid language and with metaphor. You may also want to capture the comedy, tragedy, or moral tales of nature in your description. In any case, time spent observing nature is certainly one way to “live deliberately.”



▲ Henry David Thoreau in June 1856

Tell It Back—Narration

- 1. Oral Narration: Without looking at the text, retell the “tragedy” of the drones from “The Pastoral Bees” by John Burroughs using your own words. Try not to leave out any important details.
- *Here's the first sentence to help you get started:*
- Toward the close of the season, say in July or August, the command goes forth that the drones must die; there is no further use for them.
- 2. What is a metaphor, a simile, and a cliché? Provide an example of each.

Talk About It—

- 1. Describe a moment in your life when you were filled with wonder as you contemplated nature. The memory you share could be about something very large, such as the starry night sky, or something very small, such as a beetle.
- 2. In the last lesson you practiced describing what a person looks like as well as what she does, and you even touched on her inner qualities. You also can describe what nature looks like and what it does. Take a short walk outside; then describe your experience with as much detail and vivid wording as you can summon.
 - ● What did you see, hear, smell, and feel? Consider colors and motions, sounds and odors, as well as objects such as plants, animals, and clouds.
 - ● What did you wonder about? Start some of your sentences off by saying, “I wonder . . .”
 - ● What was the most interesting or beautiful part of your walk outside? Was there anything irritating or uncomfortable about it?
- If the weather outside is not cooperating, feel free to instead describe the painting by Albert Bierstadt. Ask, “What do I see?” and “What do I wonder about?” What elements that you would experience outdoors are missing from your experience of observing the painting?

- 3. Thoreau said that it is important to live deliberately, which means that we should experience life thoughtfully and intentionally. Socrates put it this way: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Do you agree with these philosophers or not? How can writing about nature help us to live deliberately?
- 4. Drawing moral lessons from nature is a very ancient idea. You can see it in a proverb such as the following:

Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!
It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,
yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.

—Proverbs 6:6-8 in the Hebrew scriptures

There is a similar idea found in the fables of Aesop, with *The Ants and the Grasshopper*, in which the Ants work hard and the Grasshopper plays music all summer long. Fables are often such powerful little stories because the author has carefully observed nature and drawn morals from these observations. Think about the foolish animals who visit the sick lion in his lair (*The Old Lion and the Fox*) or the slow but determined tortoise racing the speedy hare (*The Tortoise and the Hare*). When we consider the behavior of animals, we tend to see analogies to human behavior that make us think about what is wise and what is foolish.

However, it is one thing to draw moral lessons from nature, and it is another thing to ascribe a moral character to nature, as if plants and animals are of the same worth and value as human beings. Henry David Thoreau sometimes treats nature as he would a person. In one of his journal entries, Thoreau writes that he will no longer throw stones at a chestnut tree in order to knock down its fruit. He writes:

I sympathize with the tree, yet I heaved a big stone against the trunks like a robber,—not too good to commit murder. I trust that I shall never do it again. These gifts should be accepted, not merely with gentleness, but with a certain humble gratitude. The tree whose fruit we would obtain should not be too rudely shaken even. It is not a time of distress, when a little haste and violence even might be pardoned. It is worse than boorish, it is criminal, to inflict an unnecessary injury on the tree that feeds or shadows us. Old trees are our parents, and our parents’ parents, perchance.⁴



▲ *Prong-Horned Antelope with the Grand Tetons Beyond*, c. 19th century, by Albert Bierstadt

4. from *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837–1861* by Henry David Thoreau

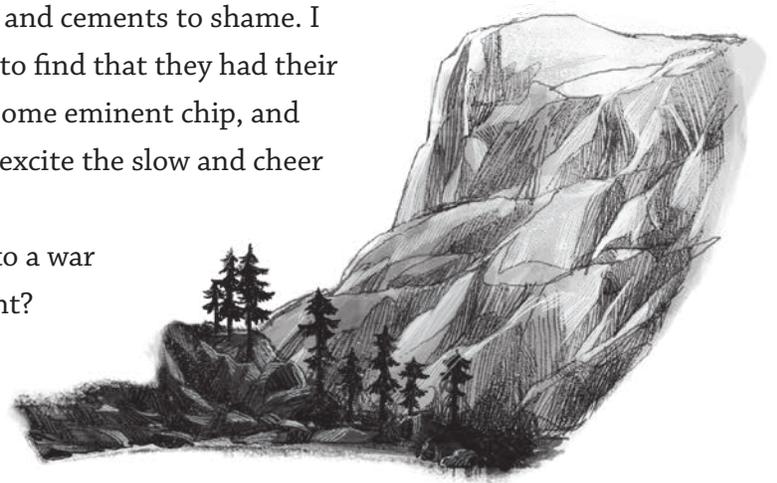
What do you think of Thoreau's concern in this paragraph? Does he go too far by comparing himself to a robber and a murderer, or is he correct to express his concern so dramatically? Explain your answer.

5. Read the following famous passage from Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden*. As he observes an ant war, Thoreau sees many parallels between the ants' battle and human warfare, and the passage becomes a long metaphor.⁵

One day when I went out to my wood-pile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, it was a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. . . . On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast locked in each other's embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at noonday prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out. The smaller red champion had fastened himself like a vice to his adversary's front, and through all the tumblings on that field never for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers near the root. . . . Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle-cry was "Conquer or die."

In the meanwhile there came along a single red ant on the hillside of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had dispatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs. . . . Watching his opportunity, he sprang upon the black warrior, and commenced his operations near the root of his right foreleg, leaving the foe to select among his own members;⁶ and so there were three united for life, as if a new kind of attraction had been invented which put all other locks and cements to shame. I should not have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants.

In what ways is a war between ants similar to a war between humans? In what ways is it different?



5. This is also known as an extended metaphor.

6. In other words, after the red ant attacked the black ant's leg, the black ant then sought a body part of the red ant to latch onto.

Memoria—

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more.

—Lord Byron

1. After reading this quotation by George Gordon, Lord Byron, from his long poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, define any words you may not know. Then discuss the meaning of the quotation.
2. How can you apply this quote to your descriptions of nature?
3. Memorize this quotation and be prepared to recite it during your next class.
4. Write this quotation in your commonplace book, along with any thoughts you have about it.

Writing Time—

1. **SENTENCE PLAY:** “The bees love and cherish the queen as a mother and not as a sovereign.” The two verbs in this sentence, “love” and “cherish,” are synonyms. That means they are words that mean the same thing or nearly the same thing. By using synonyms, Burroughs wants to emphasize the great attachment the bees have to their queen. Although the sentence becomes somewhat more wordy because of the addition of the synonym, the emphasis here works very well to deepen the impression of love.

As with any rhetorical device, it is important not to use this type of repetition too much. Rhetorical devices are best used in small doses or they become obvious and tiresome. In small doses, however, rhetorical devices are powerful attention grabbers.

Using Burroughs’s sentence as a model, write fresh new sentences in the space provided. Use the supplied subjects and objects and add new verbs that work with them.

Examples:

Subject: bear

Object: honey

Sample sentence: The bear swipes and steals honey as a thief and not as an honest creature.

Subject: robin

Object: eggs

Sample sentence: The robin sits and broods on her eggs as a sentinel and not as a sleeper.



A. _____ From the head of Odysseus flowed vines of curling locks.

B. _____ When the Cyclops stood, he was like the wooded peak of a mountain.

C. _____ In his hands the Cyclops held a ship's mast of a club.

D. _____ Like an eagle of the sea, Athena flew away.

E. _____ The souls of men swept around Odysseus as silent as shadows.

F. _____ An ox in a stall, Agamemnon was slain when he returned home. His men, a hapless herd of swine, were slaughtered beside him.

G. _____ Charybdis belched forth the sea water like a cauldron of great fire.

H. _____ No better than a bat, Odysseus clung to the fig tree high over the sucking mouth of Charybdis.

3. **TRANSFORMING CLICHÉS:** When they were first created, our most well-known English expressions were surprising and intriguing. Putting two ideas together that aren't usually connected helps us to think about them in a new way and arrests our imagination. However, when an expression has been used so often that it no longer rouses our interest or grabs our attention, it becomes a cliché. Although it may once have been fresh and appealing, a cliché is now dull and predictable. "Busy as a bee" is a simile cliché. "The green-eyed monster" (referring to jealousy) is a metaphorical cliché.

Many expressions coined by Shakespeare have become clichés through overuse. Once they were outstanding examples of creativity, but they were so outstanding that people used them over and over again. Change the following underlined Shakespearean expressions into fresh comparisons by using new metaphors or similes. Write your new sentences in the space provided.

Example:

Thou art mine own flesh and blood. —from *The Merchant of Venice*

(Meaning: You are a family member, or someone who is like family to me.)

Change to: Thou art mine own heart and rib.

A. I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last. —from *The Tempest*

(Meaning: I have been in a difficult place since I saw you last.)

B. These our actors have melted into thin air. —adapted from *The Tempest*

(Meaning: These actors have vanished without a trace.)

C. I have not slept one wink. —from *Cymbeline*

(Meaning: I have not slept at all.)



Lesson 3: Description of Nature



D. If I do not leave you all as dead as a doornail, I pray God I may never eat grass more. —
from *Henry VI, Part Two*
(Meaning: If I do not leave you all totally dead, I pray God I may never eat grass again.)

E. I will wear my heart upon my sleeve. —from *Othello*
(Meaning: I will show my emotions openly.)

F. He hath eaten me out of house and home. —from *Henry IV, Part 2*
(Meaning: He has eaten all my food.)

G. Fight fire with fire. —adapted from *King John*
(Meaning: Attack in the same way that you are being attacked.)

H. Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow? —from *Hamlet*
(Meaning: Can I clean it enough to make it as pure as snow?)

4. **SIMILAR OR DIFFERENT:** Remember, a metaphor compares one thing to a second seemingly unlike thing to show how they are similar. It does not use the words “like” or “as.” Writers use metaphors because they see something similar between the two things compared. It is important to note, however, that there are limits to metaphors. The things compared are also different from each other.

Shakespeare fills Romeo’s mouth with metaphors. For example:

Romeo: But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. —from *Romeo and Juliet*

How is a girl similar to the sun? To a young man, a girl’s beauty may seem blindingly bright, like the sun’s light. Her face is rounded, like the sun, and her skin may glow with happiness, just as the sun glows.

How is a girl different than the sun? A girl is not covered with flames, as the sun is, and she does not reside in the sky, like the sun does. As you can see, the metaphor of the sun works well to describe how Romeo feels about Juliet, but it can only be taken so far.

Try to find the similarities and differences between the subjects of each of the following underlined metaphors. Write your answers in complete sentences in the space provided.

- A. She’s got a heart of stone.

How is a heart similar to a stone? (Hint: In this case, the word “heart” doesn’t refer to the person’s literal beating heart, but to her feelings.)

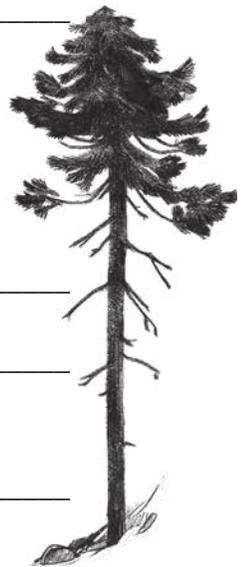
How is a heart different than a stone?

- B. “Hope” is the thing with feathers—
that perches in the soul.

—Emily Dickinson

How is hope similar to a bird?

How is hope different than a bird?



C. If you want a love message to be heard, it has got to be sent out. To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it. —Mother Teresa

How is a message of love similar to a lamp?

How is a message of love different than a lamp?

D. If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast. —Ernest Hemingway

How is a big city similar to a feast?

How is a big city different than a feast?

E. The fog comes on little cat feet. —Carl Sandburg

How is fog similar to a cat?

How is fog different than a cat?

5. **DESCRIPTION OF A RIVER:** How would you describe a river metaphorically? In other words, what comparisons could you make to help your reader share your experience of a river? In *The River War*, a book about the conquest of the Sudan in Africa, Winston Churchill describes the Nile River in scientific terms. Notice how he uses a simile in the two sentences before the Latin phrase to show how crucial the Nile was to the people of the Sudan.

The north-eastern quarter of the continent of Africa is drained and watered by the Nile. Among and about the headstreams and tributaries of this mighty river lie the wide and fertile provinces of the Egyptian Sudan. Situated in the very center of the land, these remote regions are on every side divided from the seas by five hundred miles of mountain, swamp, or desert. The great river is their only means of growth, their only channel of progress. It is by the Nile alone that their commerce can reach the outer markets. . . . The Sudan is joined to Egypt by the Nile, as a diver is connected with the surface by his air-pipe. Without it there is only suffocation. *Aut Nilus, aut nihil!*⁷

As he continues his description of the Nile, Churchill grows more poetic. Underline the similes and metaphors that you see in his description of the river and its banks.

Rainless storms dance tirelessly over the hot, crisp surface of the ground. The fine sand, driven by the wind, gathers into deep drifts, and silts among the dark rocks of the hills, exactly as snow hangs about an Alpine summit; only it is a fiery snow, such as might fall in hell. The earth burns with the quenchless thirst of ages, and in the steel-blue sky scarcely a cloud obstructs the unrelenting triumph of the sun.

Through the desert flows the river—a thread of blue silk drawn across an enormous brown drugget;⁸ and even this thread is brown for half the year. Where the water laps the sand and soaks into the banks there grows an avenue of vegetation which seems very beautiful and luxuriant by contrast with what lies beyond. The Nile, through all the three thousand miles of its course vital to everything that lives beside it, is never so precious as here. The traveler clings to the strong river as to an old friend, staunch in the hour of need. All the world blazes, but here is shade. The deserts are hot, but the Nile is cool. The land is parched, but here is abundant water. The picture painted in burnt sienna is relieved by a grateful flash of green.

Churchill's description of the Nile makes the river seem almost burdened by a huge weight of responsibility. Its job is to keep the traveler and civilization alive in an inhospitable climate.

Now consider, in contrast, this blithe, carefree description of a river from Kenneth Grahame's animal story, *The Wind in the Willows*. What comparisons does Grahame make? Again, underline all the metaphors and similes you find.

He thought his happiness was complete when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river. Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All was a-shake and a-shiver—glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. The Mole was

7. "Either the Nile or nothing."

8. drugget: a heavy felt fabric made of wool

bewitched, entranced, fascinated. By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spell-bound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea.

Now it's your turn to describe a river. The best way to begin is to go to a river (a creek or stream will do as well) and take notes about it. You may observe your river on a single day or return to it on different days. Use your senses to take it in. Make note of the following:

- What color is your river?
- How fast does your river move?
- Is your river high or low in its banks?
- What sort of vegetation grows up around your river?
- How does your river smell?
- Is your river clean or dirty?
- What sounds does your river make?
- What kind of boat traffic do you see along your river?
- Do you see any animals in or along your river?



After you have observed a river in action, think about the comparisons you could make to describe your river. Does it slither like a snake or an eel? Does it sing like a tight wire in the wind? Does it growl or snap like an angry dog? Does it charge like a bull or amble along like a cow chewing its cud? Think of the river as a person, an animal, a plant, or even as a machine. What does it resemble?

Write an ample description of a river, at least two paragraphs long, using metaphors and similes. Try to stretch at least one metaphor to several sentences and make it an extended metaphor.

6. **DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY:** Write a four-paragraph descriptive essay in first- or third-person perspective based on some aspect of nature that you observe carefully. You can employ metaphor, simile, personification, and drama freely to enhance your description.

You may want your paragraphs to follow one of these patterns:

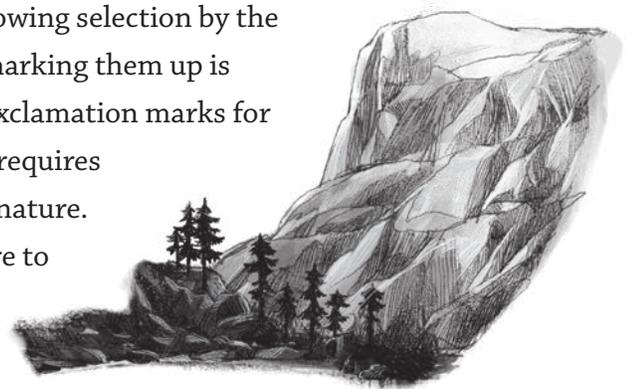
- **The Naturalist Moving through Nature:** Tell about your experience walking, hiking, running, or biking through nature in narrative form with a beginning, middle, and end. Start your story in one place and end your story at the culmination of your journey.
- **The Naturalist Observing Nature:** Watch and record an animal or a floating cottonwood seed or another natural object as it moves through its natural surroundings. Your paragraphs should be ordered in a chronological fashion with a beginning, middle, and end.
- **The Naturalist as a Painter:** Describe a natural scene the way a painter’s brush might roam across a canvas. Record each different aspect of the scene as your eye moves in sequence from top to bottom, bottom to top, left to right, or right to left. Each paragraph will capture a different part of the scene you are describing.

If you decide to include drama in your essay, it might be easiest to write the entire description as a comedy, tragedy, or moral tale. If instead you choose to include the drama as a smaller part of the whole essay, you will want to be careful to blend it in so that it flows well with the rest of your writing. In either case, your drama should have the elements of a narrative, including a beginning, middle, and end, and every paragraph should support the topic sentence. (See the previous excerpts from “The Pastoral Bees,” for example.)

For comedy, tell the story of a situation you observed that evokes amusement, such as an ant trying to haul a large beetle or a squirrel trying to raid a swinging bird feeder. For tragedy, tell the story of something you observed that makes you feel sad, such as a mother raccoon lying dead in the road and her baby raccoons standing alive and forlorn in a nearby ditch. For a moral tale, tell the story of something you observed that triggers a new understanding about life—for example, something that teaches us to treat people with greater love and kindness. What lesson do we learn when a baby bird flies away too early from its nest? What lesson do we learn when a storm topples a tree in the woods?

Before you go outdoors, reread the selections from “The Pastoral Bees” and *Walden* in this lesson. You should also read the following selection by the famous naturalist John Muir. Annotate these texts if marking them up is helpful to you. Underline inspiring passages, and add exclamation marks for surprising parts and question marks for anything that requires clarification. Notice how carefully the authors observe nature.

Let these great nature writers inspire you as you prepare to carefully observe and interpret your surroundings.



A Thunderstorm in the Mountains

Thunderstorms over the Sierras are all so beautiful it is not easy to choose any one for particular description. [A cumulous cloud rises] above the dark woods, swelling with a visible motion straight up into the calm, sunny sky to a height of 12,000 to 14,000 feet above the sea, its white, pearly bosses relieved by gray and pale purple shadows in the hollows, and showing outlines as keenly defined as those of the glacier-polished domes. In less than an hour it attains full development and stands poised in the blazing sunshine like some colossal mountain, as beautiful in form and finish as if it were to become a permanent addition to the landscape.

Presently a thunderbolt crashes through the crisp air, ringing like steel on steel, sharp and clear, its startling detonation breaking into a spray of echoes against the cliffs and canyon walls. Then down comes a cataract of rain. The big drops sift through the pine-needles, splash and patter on the granite pavements, and pour down the sides of ridges and domes in a network of gray, bubbling rills.

Zigzag lances of lightning follow each other in quick succession, and the thunder is so gloriously loud and massive it seems as if surely an entire mountain is being shattered at every stroke. Only the trees are touched, however, so far as I can see,—a few firs 200 feet high, perhaps, and five to six feet in diameter, are split into long rails and slivers from top to bottom and scattered to all points of the compass. The rain creates a hearty flood, covering the ground and making it shine with a continuous sheet of water that, like a transparent film or skin, is fitted closely down over all the rugged anatomy of the landscape.

In a few minutes the cloud withers to a mesh of dim filaments and disappears, leaving the sky perfectly clear and bright, every dust-particle wiped and washed out of it. Everything is refreshed and invigorated, a steam of fragrance rises, and the storm is finished—one cloud, one lightning-stroke, and one dash of rain.⁹

Use the provided prompts to help you brainstorm. Then compose your full essay on a separate paper or on a computer. You don't have to use complete sentences in your prewriting, but you should use complete sentences when you draft your essay.

The paragraphs you write after going through these prompts will be your first draft, or your first version of the essay. Assume that your first draft will need some rewriting to make it the best essay it can be.

Brainstorm: Take a stroll through a natural setting and look for anything that captures your imagination. You may want to keep your observation narrowly focused on a small part of the scene—one or more specific things that you see. Too broad a focus may overwhelm your essay. However, if you feel confident, go ahead and write broadly about a big scene—nighttime in a forest, for example, or the experience of the stroll itself.

9. adapted from *The Mountains of California* by John Muir

Some things you could write about are:

- a butterfly flitting among the flowers
- nightfall on a country road
- flies swarming the carcass of a dead animal
- autumn leaves spinning in a fall breeze
- pigeons in a city park
- trees crowned with spring blossoms
- a winter's day along a snowy brook
- squirrels chasing each other from tree to tree
- crayfish foraging for food among the rocks of a creek
- clouds drifting across a blue sky
- a storm over a lake
- mushrooms growing from a dying tree
- geese flying south in a V formation
- individual snowflakes
- prey (such as earthworms) and predators (such as centipedes) under a rock
- weeds sprouting from a crack in the sidewalk



I'd like to write about:

Making Notes: While outdoors, take notes that will aid your description later.

Record the sensations you experience (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches). These sensory details will make your experience in nature something your reader can experience as well.

Sensory details:





Make note of any detail that especially catches your attention.

My attention was captured by:

If you're writing from a first-person perspective, describe the actions and reactions of the author.



Author's actions and reactions (optional):

If you want to include drama in your essay, ask yourself what drama the scene offers. Is it funny, sad, or thought provoking? Can you draw any moral lessons from your observations?



Notes about drama (optional):

Prewriting: As you draft your essay, be sure to set the scene in your first paragraph by communicating the scene's habitat and its time of year—but seek to show rather than tell. For example, use descriptive details (e.g., frost on the pumpkin, orange leaves) to let your reader know the season or the weather. You may explicitly state the time of day: daybreak, dawn, morning, noon, afternoon, sunset, dusk, evening, night. Even if you are describing a small part of the larger picture, you still can set the scene by giving your reader clues. For example, if you are writing about the flowers on a lilac bush, your readers will know that your scene takes place in the spring, since that is when lilacs bloom. Or a mention of dew on a flower petal, for example, can help set the scene by signifying early morning.



Habitat:

Time of year:

Time of day:

Make sure to use a topic sentence to state your main idea in the first paragraph of your essay. The main idea is the most important thought of your descriptive essay or, in other words, what it's all about. If your essay is about your observation of a rainbow, your topic sentence might read, "Nothing in nature compares to the magic of a rainbow that can suddenly light up a leaden, rain-weary sky." If your essay is about your experience of a snowstorm, your topic sentence might read, "When snow pours from the sky, my first impulse is to dive into the thick of it and stay outdoors for hours."

Topic sentence:

Use the notes you took to help you describe your scene in vivid detail. If you wish, write in the first person and/or include drama in your description. Add at least two metaphors and two similes to your nature writing so that it is colorful and captivating.

Metaphors:

Similes:

Finish your essay only when you have accomplished your purpose. Your last paragraph should remind your reader about your topic sentence.

Keep in mind that you are not restating your topic sentence as you would a thesis in a persuasive essay. Rather, you should give your readers another glimpse at the main idea of your descriptive essay. Based on the previous examples of topic sentences, here are some examples of final-paragraph reminders:





Topic sentence: Nothing in nature compares to the magic of a rainbow that can suddenly light up a leaden, rain-weary sky.



Last-paragraph reminder: As the sun brightened the hills, the shimmering blue of the sky seemed to be the one color left behind by the vanished rainbow.

While the ideas in these sentences are not exactly the same, there are important connecting points between them. The last-paragraph reminder gives a sense of the lingering magic of the rainbow.

Topic sentence: When snow pours from the sky, my first impulse is to dive into the thick of it and stay outdoors for hours.



Last-paragraph reminder: As I stood in the doorway, shedding snow like the branches of the fir tree in the yard, I waved good night to the snowman standing at attention in the midst of the storm.

This last-paragraph reminder connects the author to the snowman standing in the storm. Both the author and the snowman have “dived into the thick” of the snow pouring from the sky.

Last-paragraph reminder:

Once you have completed your prewriting, go through these instructions again and write your paragraphs based on the prompts.





1. Choose one of the following seven nature poems and present it to your class as a dramatic reading or recitation.

Lines to a Nasturtium —by Anne Spencer

Anne Spencer (1882–1975) was a poet of the Harlem Renaissance, which was a dynamic period of artistic and intellectual achievement by African Americans from the end of World War I to the 1930s. A nasturtium is a type of flower that is bright and showy.

A lover muses

Flame-flower, Day-torch, Mauna Loa,
 I saw a daring bee, today, pause, and soar,
 Into your flaming heart;
 Then did I hear crisp crinkled laughter
 As the furies after tore him apart?
 A bird, next, small and humming,
 Looked into your startled depths and fled . . .
 Surely, some dread sight, and dafter
 Than human eyes as mine can see,
 Set the stricken air waves drumming
 In his flight.

Day-torch, Flame-flower, cool-hot Beauty,
 I cannot see, I cannot hear your fluty
 Voice lure your loving swain,
 But I know one other to whom you are in beauty
 Born in vain;
 Hair like the setting sun,
 Her eyes a rising star,
 Motions gracious as reeds by Babylon, bar
 All your competing;
 Hands like, how like, brown lilies sweet,
 Cloth of gold were fair enough to touch her feet . . .
 Ah, how the senses flood at my repeating,
 As once in her fire-lit heart I felt the furies
 Beating, beating.



Trees —by Joyce Kilmer

Joyce Kilmer (1886–1918) was an American poet and journalist. He was killed by a sniper's bullet during World War I.

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud —by William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is one of the great poets of the English language. He is most famous for his nature poetry set in the mountainous Lakes District of England.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line

Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

On the Grasshopper and Cricket —by John Keats

John Keats (1795–1821) was an English poet who died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five. In his short lifetime, he wrote deeply moving poems about love and suffering.

The poetry of earth is never dead:
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
In summer luxury,—he has never done
With his delights; for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
On a lone winter evening, when the frost
Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

Twilight Calm —by Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) is considered one of the finest poets of the Victorian era in England. She was a keen observer of nature.

One by one the flowers close,
Lily and dewy rose
Shutting their tender petals from the moon:
The grasshoppers are still; but not so soon
Are still the noisy crows. . . .

From far the lowings come
Of cattle driven home:
From farther still the wind brings fitfully
The vast continual murmur of the sea,
Now loud, now almost dumb. . . .

In separate herds the deer
Lie; here the bucks, and here
The does, and by its mother sleeps the fawn:
Through all the hours of night until the dawn
They sleep, forgetting fear.

The hare sleeps where it lies,
With wary half-closed eyes;
The cock has ceased to crow, the hen to cluck:
Only the fox is out, some heedless duck
Or chicken to surprise.

Remote, each single star
Comes out, till there they are
All shining brightly: how the dews fall damp!
While close at hand the glow-worm lights her lamp,
Or twinkles from afar.



The Land God Forgot —by Robert W. Service

Robert W. Service (1874–1958) was an English poet who wrote of his travels in Canada during the Yukon Gold Rush. This poem describes the same wilderness that Jack London describes in the short story *To Build a Fire*, which is found in the next lesson.

The lonely sunsets flare forlorn
Down valleys dreadly desolate;
The lordly mountains soar in scorn
As still as death, as stern as fate.

The lonely sunsets flame and die;
The giant valleys gulp the night;
The monster mountains scrape the sky,
Where eager stars are diamond-bright.

So gaunt against the gibbous moon,
Piercing the silence velvet-piled,
A lone wolf howls his ancient rune—
The fell arch-spirit of the Wild.

O outcast land! O leper land!
Let the lone wolf-cry all express
The hate insensate of thy hand,
Thy heart's abysmal loneliness.



A September Night —by George Marion McClellan

George Marion McClellan (1860–1934) was an important African American poet and a Congregational church minister. His poems describe life in the South and often contain deep spiritual insight.

The full September moon sheds floods of light,
And all the bayou's face is gemmed with stars,
Save where are dropped fantastic shadows down
From sycamores and moss-hung cypress trees.
With slumberous sound the waters half asleep
Creep on and on their way, 'twixt rankish reeds,

Through marsh and lowlands stretching to the gulf.
Begirt with cotton fields, Anguilla¹⁰ sits
Half bird-like, dreaming on her summer nest
Amid her spreading figs and roses, still
In bloom with all their spring and summer hues.
Pomegranates hang with dapple cheeks full ripe,
And over all the town a dreamy haze
Drops down. The great plantations stretching far
Away are plains of cotton, downy white.
O, glorious is this night of joyous sounds
Too full for sleep. Aromas wild and sweet,
From muscadine, late blooming jessamine,
And roses, all the heavy air suffuse.
Faint bellows from the alligators come
From swamps afar, where sluggish lagoons give
To them a peaceful home. The katydids
Make ceaseless cries. Ten thousand insects' wings
Stir in the moonlight haze and joyous shouts
Of Negro song and mirth awake hard by
The cabin dance. O, glorious is the night!
The summer sweetness fills my heart with songs
I cannot sing, with loves I cannot speak.



▲ *Bayou Teche* by Joseph
Rusling Meeker, 1874

2. **PARTNER FEEDBACK:** With a student partner (or your teacher), take turns reading the rough drafts of your descriptive essays. You and your partner should give each other comments about what is more or less effective about your writing. Use the following rubric to help you get ideas for your comments. (Don't worry about awarding points to your classmate. Scoring an essay is your teacher's job.) Try to say two positive things about your partner's essay, and then come up with at least two suggestions for editing the essay.

10. Anguilla: a small town in Mississippi

Rubric for Describing Nature

Name: _____ Date of Assignment: _____

Length _____/12

Is the essay four paragraphs long?

Content _____/72

Does the description include the habitat of the scene? (10 points)

Does the description hint at the time of year? (5 points)

Does the description include the time of day? (5 points)

Does the topic sentence appear in the first paragraph and state the main idea? (10 points)

Are the word choices vivid? (10 points)

Does the writing appeal to the senses? (10 points)

Does the description include at least two metaphors? (6 points)

Does the description include at least two similes? (6 points)

Does the description include the author's actions and reactions if the essay uses first-person perspective? (optional, adjust points accordingly)

Does the description show the drama of nature, something funny, sad, or thought-provoking? (optional, adjust points accordingly)

Does the last paragraph contain a reminder of the topic sentence? (10 points)

Form _____/16

Sentence variety

Many varied sentences: 4 points

Some sentence variety: 2 points

Good sentence variety: 3 points

Little or no sentence variety: 0 points

Grammar and usage

Few or no grammar errors: 4 points

Some grammar errors: 2 points

Occasional grammar errors: 3 points

Many grammar errors: 0 points

Number of spelling errors

2 or fewer per page: 3 points

4 per page: 1 point

3 per page: 2 points

5 or more per page: 0 points

Number of punctuation and capitalization errors

2 or fewer per page: 3 points

4 per page: 1 point

3 per page: 2 points

5 or more per page: 0 points

Is the handwriting neat and legible? Or, is the paper typed according to the teacher's requirements?

Yes: 2 points

No: 0 points

Total: _____/100

Revise It—



1. Here is what you must do to effectively revise your work:
 - a. Get feedback. Read your descriptive essay to a student partner or read it to your teacher. Humbly listen to the comments you receive. Some comments will make sense to you, while other comments you'll want to reject. You may even feel embarrassed or cross about the feedback on a piece that matters to you or which describes something you care about, but keep in mind that feedback is essential to improving your work.
 - b. Wait a day or two before you rewrite your paper. The time away from it will help you to see its problems more clearly.
 - c. Before you rewrite, read the paper aloud to yourself. This is often the best way to catch mistakes—grammar errors, as well as words that don't work well—because you will be using two senses—seeing and hearing—instead of one. If something sounds wrong, it probably is.

Then use the following steps to aid with your revision:

- a. *Describe your natural surroundings in detail.* Make sure that you describe the habitat, time of year, and time of day. Your details can be blended with metaphors, similes, and even a moral lesson if you choose. Be conscious of where your comparisons are strong and helpful to the idea you are developing and where they break down.
- b. *Use sensory details to make your experience in nature something your reader can experience as well.* Be sure to use imagery that appeals to the senses.
- c. *Optional: Describe the action of the author.* If the essay is written in first-person perspective, describe what the author is doing and how the author reacts to her surroundings.
- d. *Optional: Include dramatic elements to give your description a sense of comedy or tragedy, or to draw a moral lesson.* You will need to select details that capture either a sense of amusement or sorrow, or think of a way that your nature subject teaches goodness or correct behavior.
- e. *Include a topic sentence in your first paragraph and a reminder of the topic sentence in your last paragraph.* The topic sentence states the main idea and guides the rest of the essay. The reminder in the last paragraph creates a sense of balance and unity—a feeling of symmetry—that will make your essay seem elegant and carefully crafted.
- f. *Find and fix grammar mistakes.* Make sure all your nouns and verbs agree and that your writing is clear. Fix any fragments or run-ons. In other words, make sure you are writing complete sentences.
- g. *Strengthen phrasing.* Are your word choices specific instead of vague? Do you use strong nouns and verbs? Do you vary your sentences and occasionally begin them with a prepositional phrase or a participial phrase? Weed out passive voice and excess adjectives.

tives. Use compound sentences, appositives, adverb phrases, and questions to make your writing more interesting. Transition smoothly between ideas and paragraphs using transition words.

h. *Proofread.* Look for any punctuation, spelling, or capitalization errors. Then fix them!

i. *Retype* the draft with the corrections you have made.

2. **PROOFREADING PRACTICE:** The following paragraph contains a number of errors, including letters that should be capitalized (2), repeated words that should be deleted (2), words that are missing (2), a lack of proper punctuation (2), and misspellings (2). Use the following proofreader's marks to mark up the text:

≡ capitalize

∩ delete word

^ insert letter, word, or punctuation

SP. misspelled word



pat loved every field on the farm. To her they were not just fields, they were persons The big hill field that was in wheat this spring and was now like a huge green carpet; the field of the Pool which had in its very center a dimple of water, as if some giantess when earth was young had pressed tip of her finger down into the soft ground: it it was framed all summer in daisies. The swampy Buttercup field where all the buttercups in the world bloomed; the field of Farewell Summers which in september would be dotted all over with clumps of purple asters; the Secret Feild away at the back, which you couldn't see at all and would never suspect was there until you had gone through the woods, completely surrounded by maple and and fir woods, basking in a pool of sunshine, scented by the breath of the spice ferns that grew in golden clumps around it Its feathery bent grasses were starred with the red of wild strawberry leaves; and there were some piles large stones here and there, with clusters of long-stemmed strawberrys all around their bases.