

**GOOD WRITING IS  
SUPPOSED TO EVOKE  
SENSATION IN THE READER—  
NOT THE FACT THAT IT'S  
RAINING, BUT THE  
FEELING OF BEING  
RAINED UPON.  
—E. L. Doctorow**

## **Unit 3—Lesson 6**

### **Stephen Crane**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Born to Jonathan and Helen Crane in 1871, Stephen Crane was the last of fourteen children. By the time Crane was born, only eight of the children were still alive, the other five having died in childhood. His father was over fifty, his mother forty-five, and his eldest sibling twenty-one years old. He was very much the baby of a deeply religious household, headed by loving, genial, and intelligent parents. It was also a literate household: his father wrote daily and was a compelling preacher, his mother and one of his sisters sold some stories, and one brother was a reporter. Crane proved to be the most prodigious—he was trying to write by age three and was reading James Fenimore Cooper's novels by age four. His siblings read to him and encouraged his obvious talents.

Over the years Crane attended a public school, a boarding school, and finally a military school. He excelled in literature and history while squeaking by in math and science. In spite of this, his family wanted him to pursue an engineering career, but that resulted in only a brief college stint. His family then agreed to a switch to literature. He transferred to a different college, but seldom went to class, working instead as a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. It wasn't long before he left college entirely.

Crane wrote his first novel, *Maggie*, in 1892 and 1893. *Maggie* tells the story of a slum-dwelling girl whose misfortunes increase throughout the book. Its portrayal of a seedy reality probably kept it from selling well. Crane then became obsessed with writing a war novel, so he read voraciously about the Civil War. He continued to write and publish short stories, poems, and pieces of journalism while writing the novel, but remained largely unknown. *The Red Badge of Courage* changed that; it was popular with both critics and the public, here and in England. Civil War veterans often believed Crane must have been one of them, when in truth the Civil War had ended six years before he was born.

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## LESSON PREVIEW

**The  
lesson for  
*The Red  
Badge of  
Courage*  
is on  
descriptive  
writing.  
We'll  
explore  
both  
the how  
and  
the  
why of  
description.**

The success of *The Red Badge of Courage* was both a blessing and a curse. Crane welcomed the recognition, but publishers only wanted to see more war stories from him. He complied for awhile, then killed off Henry Fleming (the main character in *The Red Badge of Courage*) in a short story called “The Veteran,” wishing to move on to other topics. Nevertheless, he welcomed being sent to Cuba as a war correspondent. This did not mean he abandoned fiction though. In fact, the boat Crane was on from Florida to Cuba sank, and he wrote both a newspaper article and an excellent short story, “The Open Boat,” from the experience. Crane didn’t make it to Cuba that time, but he soon went to Greece to report on its war with Turkey. Later he would work in Cuba as a war correspondent during the Spanish-American War.

Just before leaving for Greece, Crane met Cora Taylor. They never married or had children, but they were companions for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, that would not be long. Crane had tuberculosis (he may have had a chronic case since childhood), and there was no cure for it in the nineteenth century. His difficult living conditions as a war correspondent aggravated his illness. Stephen Crane died in a tuberculosis sanatorium in Germany in 1900, at only twenty-eight years of age.

## SELECTION

*The Red Badge of Courage* is Stephen Crane’s most famous work. Veterans of many wars, not just those of the U. S. Civil War, have lauded it for its accurate psychological portrayal of the soldiers.

## WHILE YOU READ

While you read here are some questions to keep at the back of your mind while reading *The Red Badge of Courage*:

- How clearly can you picture in your mind the story that Crane tells?
- Are there sections of description that are particularly vivid? Can you say why?
- Are some descriptions surprising? If so, why?
- Which of the descriptions have an emotional impact on you?
- When does Crane’s description of the landscape change? Why do you think it changes?



## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

### CHAPTERS 1–6

1. What detail on the first page tells you whether this is the Union or Confederate army?
2. What is the youth's opinion of war at the opening of the story?
  - a. He is afraid of it.
  - b. He sees it as exciting and glorious.
  - c. He sees it as wasteful and degrading.
  - d. He has no opinion of it.
3. What is the youth's reaction to his mother's parting words?
4. What is the youth afraid of when he hears of a likely upcoming battle?
5. What two opposing views of his comrades does the youth waver between?
6. What do the men build when the regiment is halted near some skirmishing?
7. Why does the youth wish to go to battle at this point?
8. When the battle begins, what momentarily relieves the tension of some of the men?
9. About what does Crane write, "It seemed to be struggling to free itself from an agony" and "... suddenly sank down as if dying. Its motion as it fell was a gesture of despair"?
10. What surprises the youth at the end of his first skirmish?

### CHAPTERS 7–12

1. Why does the youth feel bitter and betrayed after the battle?
2. What does the youth do in the forest that helps reassure him that he made the right decision in running?
3. As the youth enters then continues through the woods to escape the battle, what is the progression of his emotions?
  - a. Fear to horror to despair
  - b. Relief to despair to horror
  - c. Fear to relief to horror
  - d. Horror to fear to relief
4. What question is the youth asked that sends him into a panic?
5. Which of the youth's friends does he first encounter, wounded, on his return?
6. Who does the youth leave wandering about, badly injured, and why?
7. What group of men does the youth feel inferior to?

[continued]

8. Why does the youth half-wish for his side to lose the battle?
9. At the beginning of chapter 12, Crane writes, “He knew at once that the steel fibers had been washed from their hearts.” What does this tell us about the men?
10. How does the youth receive a blow to the head?

**CHAPTERS 13–18**

1. What does the youth tell the men in his regiment about his head wound?
2. In which of his friends does the youth notice a great change?
3. When the youth begins marching the next day with his regiment, how does he think of himself?
  - a. He is ashamed that he ran away and lied about his wound.
  - b. He is proud of himself, and thinks he has encountered the worst and acted with dignity.
  - c. He is still filled with doubt and worries about running again.
  - d. He is eager to engage in battle again and prove himself.
4. Who does the youth blame for their losses?
5. What happens that makes the youth feel insignificant?

**CHAPTERS 19–24**

1. When the men stop advancing, the lieutenant tries to rouse them by yelling and cursing, but it does no good. What finally wakens the men and impels them to move forward again?
2. Who do the youth and his friend have to fight for possession of the flag?
3. What is the general’s reaction to the regiment’s recent foray?
4. What happens to make the youth feel elated and self-confident?
5. What does Crane say the men fought over “as gold thrones or pearl bedsteads”?
6. When the regiment charges, what is the reaction of the enemy?
7. What becomes the youth’s goal as he nears the enemy’s side?
8. Which of the youth’s past actions does he most regret?



## LITERARY LESSON: DESCRIPTION

Description is very important in all writing, because most writing describes something at some time. In fiction it's more obvious because settings, the physical description of characters, and actions must all be described for the reader to visualize the story. But essays, biographies, opinion papers, informational articles, etc., often have description as well. For example, a biography will need to describe the person's physical features and the places he or she lived and worked; a research report or essay on the Civil Rights Movement will benefit from descriptions of the demonstrations and protests; an instructional article on changing the oil in your car will need to describe the various steps.

*The Red Badge of Courage* contains description that can be examined in two ways. First, we'll look at how to best describe something. How does Crane make you feel that you're in the woods with the youth, or that you're in the middle of the fighting? Second, we'll look at how Crane uses description to underscore the theme of the book, to reveal the main character's emotion, and to provoke an emotional response in the reader.

### Specific Description

This is advice you'll read again and again in your English classes: be specific. Being specific is the surest way of painting a vivid picture in your reader's mind. If I tell you that there are trees in my front yard, you have only the haziest of images—and almost certainly your image will differ from that of the next person to read this. If I tell you there are five trees in my front yard, the disparity decreases. If I tell you I have a cherry tree, a mimosa, a sugar maple, and two Douglas firs in my front yard, the picture becomes even clearer. Telling you where each tree is located would make it even more distinct.

You'll want enough detail in your descriptions to impress the image on the mind of the reader, but not so much that you slow down your pace. I know this may seem like a vague guide, but as you read and write more, it will become more instinctive. When you aren't sure, err on the side of a bit too much detail. When you review a rough draft, it's often easier to see things that should be removed than things that should be added.

Another important point is to remember that humans have five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. Beginning writers almost always confine themselves to describing what they can see. Your descriptions will be stronger if you can bring in at least one other sense. Let's examine all these points in this paragraph from *The Red Badge of Courage*:

After a time the sound of musketry grew faint and the cannon boomed in the distance. The sun, suddenly apparent, blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his impudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on lighthearted wing.

Crane is specific here, in places, and less specific in others. *Musketry*, *cannon* and *woodpecker* are all specific. The first two are specific because they're uppermost in the youth's mind—they're what he is running from. His mind is not as focused on the forest, and Crane reflects that inattention by being less specific about it. The forest is populated by

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"insects" and "trees" rather than grasshoppers and oaks, for example. Why the woodpecker then? Because the youth's focus is starting to change in this paragraph. He's becoming less concerned about the regiment (in the previous paragraph there is not a single specific animal or plant—just "trees" and "vines"), and something as striking as a woodpecker is now able to catch his attention.

Also notice that this paragraph is filled with sound, not just sight. Again, this choice of a second sense has a reason. The youth has been listening for signs of pursuit as he runs through the forest, so he is more attuned to sound. Depending on what you're trying to do with your

description, you may focus more on touch, smell, or taste in addition to sight. Or you may include multiple senses.

## Surprising Description

Crane often uses surprising words, particularly adjectives, in his descriptions. Here is one example from chapter 3: "The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself." "Invulnerable" is a startling description for a dead man, but precisely accurate here. The word *invulnerable* is usually used to describe the living or those things which still function: "The fort was invulnerable to attack." The dead soldier, clearly so vulnerable in life, is now ironically invulnerable.

The beginning of chapter 8 contains this sentence: "A crimson roar came from the distance." *Crimson* is a deep red, and it's (obviously) unusual to describe a sound with a color. Because Crane is writing about battle, however, it makes perfect sense here. In a similar vein in chapter 18, Crane writes, "One window, glowing a deep murder red, shone squarely through the leaves." Again, an unusual but perfect choice.

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You certainly don't need to accomplish this feat in every paragraph, but these kinds of descriptors help spice up a paper, and it's very gratifying when you find just the right word.

## Description and Theme

As you read in the section on naturalism on page 96, Crane was a naturalistic writer. He was interested in communicating his idea that people are simply a part of nature, neither above nor separate from it. With that in mind, here is the first paragraph of *The Red Badge of Courage*:

The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads, which were growing from long troughs of liquid mud to proper thoroughfares. A river, amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, purred at the army's feet; and at night, when the stream had become of a sorrowful blackness, one could see across it the red, eyelike gleam of hostile camp fires set in the low brows of distant hills.

Notice the equality here in the descriptions of nature and people. Crane personifies nature, saying the cold “passed reluctantly,” the fogs retired, the roads “were growing,” and the stream is a “sorrowful blackness.” Personification is not unusual in literature (though this much in a short paragraph is notable), but what makes this passage stand out is Crane’s treatment of the people in addition to this personification. The army awakens and trembles in the same way the cold and fog retire. If you did not know what an army was, you might think it some part of the landscape, like a forest. At the beginning of the third sentence, Crane refers back to the army as *it* rather than referring to the men as *they*, further robbing them of distinction.

In chapter 2, Crane describes the marching regiment through the youth’s eyes. In three brief paragraphs we find the following descriptions of the regiment: “It was now like one of those moving monsters wending with many feet, There was an occasional flash and glimmer of steel from the backs of all those huge crawling reptiles, and . . . the youth saw that the landscape was streaked with two long, thin, black columns which disappeared on the brow of a hill in front and rearward vanished in a wood. They were like two serpents crawling from the cavern of the night.”

Once again, Crane depersonalizes the men, sometimes comparing them directly to animals. He chooses animals—reptiles and serpents—that people think of as mindless, acting only on instinct and environmental pressures. Here, Crane is able to subtly underline his view that people are influenced and motivated not by rational, “higher” concerns, but by the same environmental and biological pressures as any animal.

While Crane is depersonalizing the individual soldiers, he personifies the regiments as a whole. In the last sentence of the opening paragraph, the hostile campfires are given a human characteristic with an “eyelike gleam.” The campfires represent the enemy contingent as a whole. Later, Crane writes, “It [a procession of wounded men] was a flow of blood from the torn body of the brigade” (p. 36) and “The sore joints of the regiment creaked as it painfully floundered into position to repulse” (p. 38). These descriptions picture the regiment as one

body, a theme important to the book, because Crane is interested in communicating the idea that the youth's (and all the soldiers') actions are directed more by the influence of the regiment than by their own desires. At times Crane states this more directly, but these descriptions help underline the idea.

## Description and Emotion

Writers often use description to provoke emotion in their readers and to express the emotional state of a character. Anything can be described in many different ways, but those different ways will set different emotional tones. Here are two paragraphs from chapter 3:

Once the line encountered the body of a dead soldier. He lay upon his back staring at the sky. He was dressed in an awkward suit of yellowish brown. The youth could see that the soles of his shoes had been worn to the thinness of writing paper, and from a great rent in one the dead foot projected piteously. And it was as if fate had betrayed the soldier. In death it exposed to his enemies that poverty which in life he had perhaps concealed from his friends.

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse. The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself. The youth looked keenly at the ashen face. The wind raised the tawny beard. It moved as if a hand were stroking it. He vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question.

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At this point in the story the youth is growing more fearful of battle, and death is large in his mind. Crane could have described the corpse in a more objective fashion while still providing sufficient detail, but that would not develop character or continue the tone of the narrative. Instead, Crane does some interesting things with this description.

The second sentence, "He lay upon his back staring at the sky" is startling, even a bit creepy. It gives physical information about the position of the corpse and the fact that its eyes are open, but so would this: "He was on his back with his eyes open." By using the verbs *lay* and *staring* Crane gives a sense of aliveness, even intention, to the corpse. A young man seeing his first corpse on the battlefield might know it to be dead, yet find it impossible to believe. Crane communicates that feeling. He also underscores this by using two sentences: In the first, we see a dead body, while in the second we see someone staring at the sky. These two sentences reveal the two views here, two parts of the mind at work, two conflicting emotions to resolve. The most efficient, neutral (and far less effective) description would be: Once the line encountered a dead soldier on his back with his eyes open.



In the discourse about the soldier's shoes, Crane provides background information about this dead, unknown man. He is no longer completely anonymous. His shoes are worn through, indicating poverty, and the youth reasonably concludes that he probably tried to hide that fact when he was alive. Death has robbed him of that dignity. Because it's human nature to want to present a good image to people, this indication of it in the dead soldier draws us, and the youth, closer to him. But that closeness is uncomfortable both because he is dead and because he is an enemy soldier.

The second sentence of the second paragraph is similar to the second sentence of the first: "The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself." This time though, the ideas of death and life are combined in one sentence with *dead man* and *forced*. The opposing emotions in different parts of the mind are drawing closer together. More startling is Crane's phrase "The invulnerable dead man," as discussed above. Neither his invulnerability nor his ability to move the regiment aside compensate for his great loss.

"The wind raised the tawny beard. It moved as if a hand were stroking it." The first of these two sentences is enough for the visual image; it's the second that brings the emotion. The second adds an anonymous hand (thus making it both the youth's and the reader's hand) and the sensation of touch. Crane is subtly forcing the youth (and the reader) to touch death.

This is a brief passage, but it's an emotionally crucial point in the story, because this is the youth's first encounter with a corpse on the battlefield. In the last sentence, Crane makes the youth's reaction clear, but the emotional response has built throughout this passage. Crane is able to develop the youth's character and have an emotional effect on the reader.

Crane continues to develop the youth's response in the next few paragraphs. These contain such sentences and phrases as, "It [the landscape] threatened him, A house . . . had to him an ominous look, The shadows of the woods were formidable, . . ." Crane is describing the landscape through the youth's eyes, but this is the same landscape that a little earlier Crane described this way: "The odor of the peaceful pines was in the men's nostrils. The sound of monotonous axe blows rang through the forest, and the insects, nodding upon their perches, crooned like old women." There could not be a more unthreatening setting than that. Yet it is not the surroundings that have changed, it is the youth's perception of them. Crane explores this change of perception through his descriptions to reveal the youth's emotional state.

### **Considerations When Writing Description**

Knowing what elements are most important will help you know where to be more specific in your descriptions. Knowing what function the passage has (including emotion, tone, and its relation to the whole paper) will help you choose which words to use. For example, suppose you write an essay about your first car. A thorough description of a car could go on for pages and pages. Here's a neutral but brief description of a car:

For my first car, my parents gave me an old V.W. Beetle. It was yellow with a black interior, and about thirty years old. It had a standard transmission, which was what I'd learned to drive on. It had been owned since it was new by my uncle, who had been very proud of it. Pretty much everything that could be original in it, was.

Imagine that when you first received the car you didn't like it at all. Here's a similar paragraph that reflects that:

For my first car, my parents gave me an ancient V.W. Beetle. It was a sickly yellow, except for the rust spots. And I was stuck with a standard transmission, my old nemesis from driver's ed classes. It only had one owner before me—my crazy uncle, which meant nothing had been updated since he first got it, probably not even the tires.

Notice the differences. Some are differences of word choice (*old* becomes *ancient*; *yellow* has *sickly* added to it). Some are added or omitted details (no mention of the black interior, but rust spots are included in the second description). The focus in the second one is on the car's age and decrepit state (at least as perceived by the writer).

When writing description ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I trying to highlight?
- Why is this passage important?
- Are there elements in this description that are more important than others?
- Are there elements in this description which can give more information than others?
- How does the passage relate to my theme?
- How does the passage relate to other elements (character, plot, etc.)?
- Am I trying to communicate a particular emotion?
- What tone am I trying to set?



## WRITING EXERCISES

1. Write a description of something or someone (one to two paragraphs) that shows it or them in a positive light. Write a second description of the same subject showing them in a negative light. Choose something or someone that you can actually look at while you write. Don't lie about the subject in either passage. (For example, if you're writing about a cat, don't say the cat is friendly in one passage and vicious in the next. Rather, concentrate on different aspects of the subject in the different passages, or think of negative and positive ways to describe the same aspect.)
2. Write an analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" focusing on description.
3. Read any short story by Stephen Crane and analyze it for description or for how it communicates a naturalistic theme.
4. *The Red Badge of Courage* is based on accounts of fighting at Chancellorsville in May of 1863. Write a research paper on the historical battle.
5. Write a descriptive paper of a setting (for example, a room in your house, your back yard, etc.) that includes every sense except sight. In other words, imagine you're a blind person describing the place, so you must focus on sound, touch, taste, and smell.
6. Imagine that the youth returns home to his mother, shortly after the end of the book. Write the scene where they first meet, including dialogue. Don't retell the entire plot of the book, but imagine how the youth would have told his mother about his experiences (What would he have included? What would he have changed? What would he leave out, either from shame or not wishing to worry his mother?); include the youth telling his story and his mother's reactions as part of your dialogue.



## COPYING

You may be thinking this is going to be a fairly standard discourse on the evils of plagiarizing, how and why to avoid it, etc. But it's not. On the contrary, this is a lesson on the joys and benefits of copying. Copying great writers is one way of improving your own writing, but to really receive benefit from it you need to do it carefully and thoughtfully.

Choose a writer you admire, then find a sentence from that writer that particularly strikes you. (Choose a sentence that is striking when it stands on its own—not just because of its context.) Copy the sentence. Study it. What makes that sentence work? Is it a simple, compound, or complex sentence? Is it declarative or something else? How long is it? Label each word with its part of speech (noun, verb, definite article, adjective, etc.) Can you spot any alliteration, assonance, or onomatopoeia? Are there any similes or metaphors? Any personification? What is the punctuation? Scan the sentence just as you would a line of poetry. Where do the stresses fall? What are the most important words to the sentence and where do they fall?

Once you've dug as much out of the sentence as you can, try to write your own sentence modeled on this sentence as closely as possible about a different topic. If the sentence truly has a lot going for it, this may not be as easy as you think. (Because of this, I suggest you choose a medium-length sentence the first several times you do this exercise. A sentence too short won't offer much to work with, but one too long is bound to frustrate.) But this detailed kind of work can teach you a lot about writing well.

I'm now going to test your patience with a long example taken from Stephen Crane, a writer I greatly admire. But these same methods can be used with nonfiction and poetry.

He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.

Now, part of what makes this sentence work is its content, what it says. I won't be recreating that, so an important component is lost. This will almost certainly be true of any sentence you choose, but that doesn't matter. What this sentence says is wonderful, but Crane didn't settle for saying it just any old way. He said it in the best way possible. Consider other ways he might have expressed the same idea:

He was still a man because he had performed his mistakes in the dark.

Having performed his mistakes in the dark, he was still a man.

He had performed his mistakes in the dark, and he was still a man.

He had performed his mistakes in the dark. He was still a man.

None of these or the many other possibilities I could offer will sing like the original does. What makes the original work?

The sentence is declarative, medium in length, and complex. The last is most important—being complex instead of two simple sentences separated by a period or a compound sentence (as my penultimate example is), it most closely links the two thoughts. But my first example is also complex, so why isn't it as good? Mostly because it switches the clauses. That he is

still a man is the most important idea of the sentence, so Crane puts that last. (Putting your most important phrase or word last in a sentence or most important sentence last in a paragraph is often a good idea.)



Now that we've dealt with the sentence structure, let's go back to the original sentence: "He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man." Here is how it looks broken down into parts of speech:

Personal pronoun/past perfect verb/possessive pronoun/plural  
noun/preposition/definite article/noun/subordinate conjunction/personal  
pronoun/past tense linking verb/adverb/indefinite article/noun.

Really, there's not much to learn from this part. But it's a good exercise, and it will come in to play later when you go to copy the example. Moving on.

There is no figurative speech here, but Crane plays with sound (albeit subtly). He links *his mistakes* through the *is* sound. The short-*i* sound continues in *in*. That short-*i* then comes back one more time in the second clause with *still*.

And sometimes what writers don't do is as instructive as what they do. Consider why Crane uses the longer *performed* instead of the shorter *made*. No doubt you say that you "*made* a mistake" as does everyone else you know. That is the first reason—Crane is getting our attention by using a slightly different but not exotic verb. But sound is part of the reason as well. *Made* and *mistake* are linked by alliteration and assonance as well as the fact that they're commonly found together. By pushing them apart a little bit Crane distances the man from the actions (just as performing the mistakes in the dark distances him from the actions—at least in the character's mind).

There are no similes or metaphors, no personification. The punctuation is unremarkable. So let's finish by a look at the stresses:

HE had perFORMED his misTAKES in the DARK, so HE was STILL a MAN.

As with nearly all scansion, there can be some variation (for example, you may not stress the first *he*, but it should be close to this). Note the number of iambs, especially in that important last phrase.

Here's a close (not exact) copy of the elements of this sentence: He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.

She had embraced her offenses against life, till she was just a shell.

What we've just done is a close reading of one sentence, pulling from it what we can. Don't be fooled into thinking you can write a sentence modeling one, two, or even all the things that Crane did with this sentence and necessarily (or even probably) end up with one as good. (I didn't.) That's not how it works. However, if you do this sort of thing on a regular basis (maybe once or twice a week to begin with), you will start to learn a lot about writing great sentences.