



# *Descriptive Paragraphs*

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## DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPHS (Observations)

The purpose of an observation paragraph (descriptive paragraph) is to share with a reader your description of a person, an animal, an object, or a place. When you choose a subject for a descriptive paragraph, you must narrow your focus (topic), or you will not be able to complete your observation within the limits of one

paragraph. Think of yourself as a photographer. Use the zoom lens on your camera to focus on one person, one object, or one place.

**Following are some topics for description:**

∅ Description of a person: *(your best friend, one of your relatives, your teacher, the person you admire the most, your favourite singer, your favourite movie star, your favourite football player.)*

∅ Description of a place: *(a photograph of a scene, your house, your own room, your hometown, your high school, your university.)*

∅ Description of an object

### The Topic Sentence:

The topic sentence of a descriptive paragraph announces the aim of your description to the reader. An effective topic sentence also communicates to the reader your overall impression of your subject

*(the place, person or object you are going to describe)*. The topic sentence, then, should answer these questions:

Whom or what did you observe and describe? Be as specific as you can when you name the focus of your description. The use of a specific, rather than a general name, will help the reader form an immediate impression.

Why is this description memorable? Include in the topic sentence the dominant impression that this description made on you, the observer.

**Practice:** *Do the exercise on your own, then discuss with other members in your group.*

Read each of the following sentences. If you think that the sentence would make a good topic sentence for a descriptive paragraph, place a tick (✓) in the blank to the left. If you think that this sentence is too broad (too general) or too unfocused (vague and not effective), place an X in the blank.

- ..... 1-My two-year-old daughter, Frances, is beautiful when she sleeps.
- ..... 2-The students in Ms. Campbell's English class are all interesting.
- ..... 3-My favourite photograph is a picture of me taken when I was a carefree toddler.
- ..... 4- This photograph of twenty-five family members at last year's reunion is a personal favourite.
- ..... 5-The gold pocket watch lying on the table intrigues me.
- ..... 6-All the guests at my sister's wedding enjoyed themselves at the reception.
- ..... 7-The mountains look majestic in the distance.
- ..... 8-The students, waiting for class to begin, are gathering outside the classroom door.
- ..... 9- The waterfall is lovely in the early morning light.

### The Supporting Details:

*To make your description interesting, you should follow these techniques:*

**A-**Try to balance between objective observation and subjective observation:

Try taking a sheet of paper and dividing it into two columns, one headed "objective" and one "subjective". On the objective side note your factual observations: what you see, what you hear, what you touch-any physical description of the object, person or place. Also note any changes in the subject that occur during your observation. On the subjective side note your feelings or opinions about what you are observing. What are you thinking about as you make the description? Does this description remind you of any other similar observations? What is your attitude toward the subject of your description?

*Example:* A student made the following notes as she walked her weeks-old baby boy:

**Objective**

not really sleeping  
eyes open slowly  
eyes roll to back of head  
eyes closed tightly  
lullaby music playing  
busy kitchen  
door slamming  
jerking body  
swinging hands  
dinner time

**Subjective**

sleeping angel  
wants to make sure he is not missing anything  
  
imagines himself falling

**B-The order of the sentences and details in a descriptive paragraph is not chronological order, but is an order according to where the objects being described are located. Such an order is called spatial organization.**

The supporting details of description of places or objects are generally arranged in this spatial order. For instance, if you are describing a photograph, you can begin with the top of the photograph and then work your way to the centre of the picture and finally to the details in the bottom half. Or you can begin by discussing the details to the left followed by the details in the centre and the details on the right.

Descriptions of people include details that describe physical characteristics and/or personality traits (personalities). A description of a person, for example, often starts with a physical description of hair colour, facial features, and other prominent physical characteristics.

**C-Modification & Use of specific nouns:** Your descriptive paragraph will be better if you use the technique called modification ; that is adding some adjectives (or adjective equivalent ) to modify a noun. A shinning new car, for example, will be better than a new car, a clear summer day will be much better than a summer day. Specific nouns always give the reader great impression; for example, Yesterday I observed a beautiful sunset at Yosemite National Park is more effective than Yesterday I observed a beautiful sunset at the park. In the second sentence, the reader will not know which park you are referring to.

*Example:* Its head lay on the bank while its body rested in the water.  
Its head lay on the grassy bank while the remainder of its elongated, diamond-shaped body rested in the murky, turtle-infested water.

**Action! (Work in your group)**

Revise the following sentences by changing the general nouns (in bold print) to specific nouns. You may add adjectives or other descriptive words as well:

1-The sky was streaked with colour.

.....

2-The light wind gently blew the trees.

.....

3-The scent of flowers hovered in the air.

.....

4-People strolled hand-in-hand along the sidewalks

.....

5-I waited a long time as I sat quietly watching the sight.

.....

**D-In order to obtain coherence as well as to keep firmly to the spatial order of the topic's development, you should consider using the following spatial expressions (adverbs of place):**

On the second floor, on the right hand side, along the back of, straight ahead, under the (windows), against ( the wall), on your left, above the ( bookcase ), underneath ( the desk ), opposite the..., from these heights, to the right of, on the other side of, in the middle of, in front of, close to, and prepositions of place such as on, at, in, next to, etc.

**E-To make your paragraph more vivid, it is very important for you to use the following form of inversion: Adverb of Place + Verbs + Subject.**

*Example:* Under the desk is a basket.  
Against the wall on your left, pushed into a corner behind the head of the bed, is a large bookcase.

In a descriptive paragraph writing about a place, passive structures will certainly play an important part; the most popular form will be ..... is (was) located, situated.

*Example:* This famous structure is located on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan .  
The store is located on the corner of Main and Broad.

**F -In a descriptive paragraph writing about a person, the following adjectives will help you a lot in making your portrait more vivid :**

*Facial expressions :* scowl, frown, smirk, worried, pained, blank, vivacious, delicate, lively, peaceful, placid.

*Facial shapes:* round, broad, narrow, heart-shaped, moon-shaped, angular, oval.

*Eyes :* beady, smiling, snapping, flashing, empty, staring, hard, sad, bulging.

*Voice :* booming, rasping, squeak, harsh, growling, deep, melodious.

*Mouth :* full-lipped, thin-lipped, set, sensuous.

*Eyebrows :* thick, arched, neatly plucked, uneven.

Look up in your dictionary to make use of the following words in the word bank below

*Word Bank:*

average height(weight), bald, bangs, chubby, curly, freckles, frizzy, hazel, mole, moustache, plump, shoulder-length, skinny, slender, wavy.

ambitious, artistic, boring, brave, competitive, creative, dependable, energetic, enthusiastic, friendly, funny, generous, hard-working, helpful, honest, jealous, kind, lazy, messy, neat, optimistic, organized, patient, quiet, responsible, selfish, sensitive, serious, shy, social, studious, talkative, thrifty.

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### **Organizing a Descriptive Paragraph**

*Here's a common model for organizing a descriptive paragraph.*

Begin the paragraph with a topic sentence that identifies your prized belonging, and briefly explain its significance to you.

Next, describe the item in four or five sentences, using the details that you listed after probing your topic.

Finally, conclude the paragraph with a sentence that emphasizes the personal value of the item.

There are various ways to organize the details in a descriptive paragraph. You may move from the top of the item to the bottom, or from the bottom to the top. You may start at the left side of the item and move right, or go from right to left. You may start with the outside of the item and move in, or go from inside to out. Choose the one pattern that seems best suited to your topic, and then stick to that pattern throughout the paragraph.

### Model Descriptive Paragraph

The following paragraph, titled "My Tiny Diamond Ring," follows the basic pattern of topic sentence, supporting sentences, and conclusion:

On the third finger of my left hand is the pre-engagement ring given to me last year by my sister Doris. The 14-carat gold band, a bit tarnished by time and neglect, circles my finger and twists together at the top to encase a small white diamond. The four prongs that anchor the diamond are separated by pockets of dust. The diamond itself is tiny and dull, like a sliver of glass found on the kitchen floor after a dishwashing accident. Just below the diamond are small air holes, intended to let the diamond breathe, but now clogged with grime. The ring is neither very attractive nor valuable, but I treasure it as a gift from my older sister, a gift that I will pass along to my younger sister when I receive my own engagement ring this Christmas.

#### *A Friendly Clown*

On one corner of my dresser sits a smiling toy clown on a tiny unicycle--a gift I received last Christmas from a close friend. The clown's short yellow hair, made of yarn, covers its ears but is parted above the eyes. The blue eyes are outlined in black with thin, dark lashes flowing from the brows. It has cherry-red cheeks, nose, and lips, and its broad grin disappears into the wide, white ruffle around its neck. The clown wears a fluffy, two-tone nylon costume. The left side of the outfit is light blue, and the right side is red. The two colors merge in a dark line that runs down the center of the small outfit. Surrounding its ankles and disguising its long black shoes are big pink bows. The white spokes on the wheels of the unicycle gather in the center and expand to the black tire so that the wheel somewhat resembles the inner half of a grapefruit. The clown and unicycle together stand about a foot high. As a cherished gift from my good friend Tran, this colorful figure greets me with a smile every time I enter my room.

#### *The Blond Guitar*

by Jeremy Burden

My most valuable possession is an old, slightly warped blond guitar--the first instrument I taught myself how to play. It's nothing fancy, just a Madeira folk guitar, all scuffed and scratched and finger-printed. At the top is a bramble of copper-wound strings, each one hooked through the eye of a silver tuning key. The strings are stretched down a long, slim neck, its frets tarnished, the wood worn by years of fingers pressing chords and picking notes. The body of the Madeira is shaped like an enormous yellow pear, one that was slightly damaged in shipping. The blond wood has been chipped and gouged to gray, particularly where the pick guard fell off years ago. No, it's not a beautiful instrument, but it still lets me make music, and for that I will always treasure it.

#### *Gregory*

by Barbara Carter

Gregory is my beautiful gray Persian cat. He walks with pride and grace, performing a dance of disdain as he slowly lifts and lowers each paw with the delicacy of a ballet dancer. His pride, however, does not extend to his appearance, for he spends most of his time indoors watching television and growing fat. He enjoys TV commercials, especially those for Meow Mix and 9 Lives. His familiarity with cat food commercials has led him to reject generic brands of cat food in favor of only the most expensive brands. Gregory is as finicky about visitors as he is about what he eats, befriending some and repelling others. He may snuggle up against your ankle, begging to be petted, or he may imitate a skunk and stain your favorite trousers. Gregory does not do this to establish his territory, as many cat experts think, but to humiliate me because he is jealous of my friends. After my guests have fled, I look at the old fleabag snoozing and smiling to himself in front of the television set, and I have to forgive him for his obnoxious, but endearing, habits.

#### *The Magic Metal Tube*

by Maxine Hong Kingston

Once in a long while, four times so far for me, my mother brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma. On the tube are gold circles crossed with seven red lines each--"joy" ideographs in abstract. There are also little flowers that look like gears for a gold machine. According to the scraps of labels with Chinese and American addresses, stamps, and postmarks, the family airmailed the can from Hong Kong in 1950. It got crushed in the middle, and whoever tried to peel the labels off stopped because the red and gold paint come off too, leaving silver scratches that rust. Somebody tried to pry the end off before discovering that the tube falls apart. When I open it, the smell of China flies out, a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain.

*An Angel Sleeping*

Even though my son is only three weeks old, he has a distinct personality all his own. Today he looks peaceful and content as he rests in his crib. He is not really asleep, though. His eyes slowly open to peek as if he wants to make sure he is not missing anything. I tiptoe a few steps back to sneak out of his view for fear he might see me and wake up all the way. He is fighting to stay awake. His eyes roll to the back of his head as his eyelids struggle to stay open. A few minutes later his eyes are closed tightly. Is it the lullaby music playing that makes him sleep? I know it cannot be the racket in the house. I can hear cabinets banging in the kitchen. Dishes clink together as dinner is being prepared for the rest of the family. Although the house is bustling with activity, the baby is sleeping like an angel. Someone slams door, and the baby reacts by jerking his body and swinging his hands. Perhaps he is imagining himself falling. Maybe he is dreaming about swinging in his swing on the deck by the water. Finally, the lullaby stops, and the family finishes eating dinner. The baby begins to cry loudly for his supper. Big, grayish-blue eyes stare at me. This waking-sleeping-waking goes on all day and through the night.

*The Laundry Room*

The windows at either end of the laundry room were open, but no breeze washed through to carry off the stale odors of fabric softener, detergent, and bleach. In the small ponds of soapy water that stained the concrete floor were stray balls of multicolored lint and fuzz. Along the left wall of the room stood ten rasping dryers, their round windows offering glimpses of jumping socks, underwear, and fatigues. Down the center of the room were a dozen washing machines, set back to back in two rows. Some were chugging like steamboats; others were whining and whistling and dribbling suds. Two stood forlorn and empty, their lids flung open, with crudely drawn signs that said "Broke!" A long shelf partially covered in blue paper ran the length of the wall, interrupted only by a locked door. Alone, at the far end of the shelf, sat one empty laundry basket and an open box of Tide. Above the shelf at the other end was a small bulletin board decorated with yellowed business cards and torn slips of paper: scrawled requests for rides, reward offers for lost dogs, and phone numbers without names or explanations. On and on the machines hummed and wheezed, gurgled and gushed, washed, rinsed, and spun.

*Mabel's Lunch\**

by Wright Morris

Mabel's Lunch stood along one wall of a wide room, once a pool hall, with the empty cue racks along the back side. Beneath the racks were wire-back chairs, one of them piled with magazines, and between every third or fourth chair a brass spittoon. Near the center of the room, revolving slowly as if the idle air was water, a large propeller fan suspended from the pressed tin ceiling. It made a humming sound, like a telephone pole, or an idle, throbbing locomotive, and although the switch cord vibrated it was cluttered with flies. At the back of the room, on the lunch side, an oblong square was cut in the wall and a large woman with a soft, round face peered through at us. After wiping her hands, she placed her heavy arms, as if they tired her, on the shelf.

\* Adapted from a paragraph in *The World in the Attic*, by Wright Morris (Scribner's, 1949).

*Subway Station\**

by Gilbert Highet

Standing in the subway station, I began to appreciate the place--almost to enjoy it. First of all, I looked at the lighting: a row of meager light bulbs, unscreened, yellow, and coated with filth, stretched toward the black mouth of the tunnel, as though it were a bolt hole in an abandoned coal mine. Then I lingered, with zest, on the walls and ceilings: lavatory tiles which had been white about fifty years ago, and were now encrusted with soot, coated with the remains of a dirty liquid which might be either atmospheric humidity mingled with smog or the result of a perfunctory attempt to clean them with cold water; and, above them, gloomy vaulting from which dingy paint was peeling off like scabs from an old wound, sick black paint leaving a leprous white undersurface. Beneath my feet, the floor a nauseating dark brown with black stains upon it which might be stale oil or dry chewing gum or some worse defilement: it looked like the hallway of a condemned slum building. Then my eye traveled to the tracks, where two lines of glittering steel--the only positively clean objects in the whole place--ran out of darkness into darkness above an unspeakable mass of congealed oil, puddles of dubious liquid, and a mishmash of old cigarette packets, mutilated and filthy newspapers, and the debris that filtered down from the street above through a barred grating in the roof.

\* Adapted from a paragraph in *Talents and Geniuses*, by Gilbert Highet (Oxford UP, 1957).

**PRACTICE:**

**Task One:** *Make a detailed outline for each of the model descriptive paragraphs you've studied.*

**Task Two:** *supporting sentences a descriptive paragraph.*

**Instructions:**

*Here is an effective topic sentence for a descriptive paragraph:*

**My most valuable possession is an old, slightly warped, blond guitar--the first instrument that I ever taught myself how to play.**

This sentence not only identifies the prized belonging ("an old, slightly warped, blond guitar") but also suggests why the writer values it ("the first instrument that I ever taught myself how to play"). Some of the sentences below support this topic sentence with specific descriptive details. Others, however, offer information that would be inappropriate in a unified descriptive paragraph. Read the sentences carefully, and then pick out only those that support the topic sentence with precise descriptive details.

- 1-It is a Madeira folk guitar, all scuffed and scratched and finger-printed.
- 2-My grandparents gave it to me on my thirteenth birthday.
- 3-I think they bought it at the Music Lovers Shop in Rochester where they used to live.
- 4-At the top is a bramble of copper-wound strings, each one hooked through the eye of a silver tuning key.
- 5-Although copper strings are much harder on the fingers than nylon strings, they sound much better than the nylon ones.
- 6-The strings are stretched down a long slim neck.
- 7-The frets on the neck are tarnished, and the wood has been worn down by years of fingers pressing chords.
- 8-It was three months before I could even tune the guitar properly, and another few months before I could manage the basic chords.
- 9-You have to be very patient when first learning how to play the guitar.
- 10-You should set aside a certain time each day for practice.
- 11-The body of the Madeira is shaped like an enormous yellow pear, one that has been slightly damaged in shipping.
- 12-A guitar can be awkward to hold, particularly if it seems bigger than you are, but you need to learn how to hold it properly if you're ever going to play it right.
- 13-I usually play sitting down because it's more comfortable that way.
- 14-The blond wood has been chipped and gouged to gray, particularly where the pick guard fell off years ago.
- 15-I have a Gibson now and hardly ever play the Madeira any more.

**Task Three:** *organizing a descriptive paragraph.*

*Here's the topic sentence of a descriptive paragraph titled "The Candle":*

***I treasure my candle not for its beauty, its sentimental value, or even its usefulness, but for its simple, stark ugliness.***

*The rest of the paragraph appears below. However, the sentences have been rearranged so that the descriptions appear in no logical order. Reorder the sentences to create a clear, well-organized paragraph.*

- 1-Rising crookedly out of the cup and collar is the candle, a pitifully short, stubby object.
- 2-Abandoned by a previous occupant of my room, the candle squats on the window sill, anchored by cobwebs and surrounded by dead flies.
- 3-This ugly little memorial consists of three parts: the base, the reflector, and the candle itself.
- 4-This aluminum flower is actually a wrinkled old Christmas light collar.
- 5-The base is a white, coffee-stained Styrofoam cup, its wide mouth pressed to the sill.
- 6-And by lighting the wick, any time I choose, I can melt this ugly candle away.
- 7-From the bottom of the cup (which is the top of the base) sprouts a space-age daisy: red, green, and silver petals intended to collect wax and reflect candle light.
- 8-The candle is about the same size and color as a man's thumb, beaded with little warts of wax down the sides and topped by a tiny bent wick.

**Task Four:** Sentence combining skills.

*This sentence-combining exercise has been adapted from "The Kitchen," an excerpt from Alfred Kazin's memoir A Walker in the City (Harvest Books, 1969). In "The Kitchen," Kazin recalls his childhood in Brownsville, a Brooklyn neighborhood which in the 1920s had a largely Jewish population. His focus is on the room in which his mother spent much of her time working on the sewing she took in to make extra money. To get a feel for Kazin's descriptive style, begin by reading the opening paragraph of the selection, reprinted below.*

*Next, reconstruct paragraph two by combining the sentences in each of the 13 sets that follow. Several of the sets--though not all--require coordination of words, phrases, and clauses.*

*As with any sentence-combining exercise, feel free at any point to combine sets (to create a longer sentence) or to make two or more sentences out of one set (to create shorter sentences). You may rearrange the sentences in any fashion that strikes you as appropriate and effective. Note that there are two unusually long sets in this exercise, #8 and #10. In the original paragraph, both sentences are structured as lists. If you favor shorter sentences, you may choose to separate the items in either (or both) of these lists.*

**The Kitchen**

In Brownsville tenements the kitchen is always the largest room and the center of the household. As a child I felt that we lived in a kitchen to which four other rooms were annexed. My mother, a "home" dressmaker, had her workshop in the kitchen. She told me once that she had begun dressmaking in Poland at thirteen; as far back as I can remember, she was always making dresses for the local women. She had an innate sense of design, a quick eye for all the subtleties in the latest fashions, even when she despised them, and great boldness. For three or four dollars she would study the fashion magazines with a customer, go with the customer to the remnants store on Belmont Avenue to pick out the material, argue the owner down--all remnants stores, for some reason, were supposed to be shady, as if the owners dealt in stolen goods--and then for days would patiently fit and baste and sew and fit again. Our apartment was always full of women in their housedresses sitting around the kitchen table waiting for a fitting. My little bedroom next to the kitchen was the fitting room. The sewing machine, an old nut-brown Singer with golden scrolls painted along the black arm and engraved along the two tiers of little drawers massed with needles and thread on each side of the treadle, stood next to the window and the great coal-black stove which up to my last year in college was our main source of heat. By December the two outer bed-rooms were closed off, and used to chill bottles of milk and cream, cold borscht, and jellied calves' feet.

**Paragraph Two:**

1-The kitchen held our lives together.

2-My mother worked in it. She worked all day long. We ate almost all meals in it. We did not have the Passover seder in there. I did my homework at the kitchen table. I did my first writing there. I often had a bed made up for me in winter. The bed was on three kitchen chairs. The chairs were near the stove.

3-A mirror hung on the wall. The mirror hung just over the table. The mirror was long. The mirror was horizontal. The mirror sloped to a ship's prow at each end. The mirror was lined in cherry wood.

4-It took the whole wall. It drew every object in the kitchen to itself.

5-The walls were a whitewash. The whitewash was fiercely stippled. My father often rewhitened it. He did this in slack seasons. He did this so often that the paint looked as if it had been squeezed and cracked into the walls.

6-There was an electric bulb. It was large. It hung down at the end of a chain. The chain had been hooked into the ceiling. The old gas ring and key still jutted out of the wall like antlers.

7-The sink was in the corner. The sink was next to the toilet. We washed at the sink. The tub was also in the corner. My mother did our clothes in the tub.

8-There were many things above the tub. These things were tacked to a shelf. Sugar and spice jars were ranged on the shelf. The jars were white. The jars were square. The jars had blue borders. The jars were ranged pleasantly. Calendars hung there. They were from the Public National Bank on Pitkin Avenue. They were from the Minsker Branch of the Workman's Circle. Receipts were there. The receipts were for the payment of insurance premiums. Household bills were there. The bills were on a spindle. Two little boxes were there. The boxes were engraved with Hebrew letters.

9-One of the boxes was for the poor. The other was to buy back the Land of Israel.

10-A little man would appear. The man had a beard. He appeared every spring. He appeared in our kitchen. He would salute with a Hebrew blessing. The blessing was hurried. He would empty the boxes. Sometimes he would do this with a sideways look of disdain. He would do this if the boxes were not full. He would bless us again hurriedly. He would bless us for remembering our Jewish brothers and sisters. Our brothers and sisters were less fortunate. He would take his departure until the next spring. He would try to persuade my mother to take still another box. He tried in vain.

11-We dropped coins in the boxes. Occasionally we remembered to do this. Usually we did this on the morning of "mid-terms" and final examinations. My mother thought it would bring me luck.

12-She was extremely superstitious. She was embarrassed about it. She counseled me to leave the house on my right foot. She did this on the morning of an examination. She always laughed at herself whenever she did this.

13-"I know it's silly, but what harm can it do? It may calm God down." Her smile seemed to say this.

**Revision Checklist: Descriptive Paragraph**

*Does your paragraph begin with a topic sentence--one that identifies the item you are about to describe and suggests its significance?*

*Are your descriptions consistently clear and specific?*

*Have you put your descriptions into complete sentences?*

*Is your paragraph unified--that is, do all of the supporting sentences relate directly to the topic introduced in the first sentence?*

*Have you followed a logical pattern in organizing the sentences in your paragraph?*

*Have you concluded the paragraph with a sentence reminding the reader of the item's special significance?*

*Have you proofread your paper carefully?*