

Let's Write!

Writing Description

In fiction, we describe settings and characters. Descriptive writing is especially important for speculative fiction writers and poets. If you've created a fantasy world, then you'll need to deftly describe it to readers; Lewis Carroll not only described Wonderland he also described the fantastical creatures that inhabited it.

Because of photos and videos, we've become increasingly visual, which means it's getting harder to use words to describe something, especially if it only exists in our imaginations.

What is Descriptive Writing?

Descriptive writing is the art of painting a picture with words. But descriptive writing goes beyond visuals. Descriptive writing hits all the senses, describing how things look, sound, smell, taste, and feel (their tactile quality).

Depending on what you write, you've probably experimented with one of more of these types of descriptive writing, maybe all of them.

How Much Description is Too Much?

Classic literature was dense with description whereas modern literature usually keeps description to a minimum.

Compare the elaborate descriptions in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy with the descriptions in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Both series relied on description to help readers visualize an imagined, fantastical world, but Rowling did not use her precious writing space to describe standard settings whereas Tolkien frequently paused all action and spent pages describing a single landscape.

If you compare most literature from the beginning of the 20th century and earlier to today's written works, you'll see that we just don't dedicate much time and space to description anymore.

This can be directly tied to the wide availability of film, television, and photography. Let's say you were living in the 19th century, writing a story about a tropical island for an audience of northern, urban readers. You would be fairly certain that most of your readers had never seen such an island and had no idea what it looked like. To give your audience a full sense of your story's setting, you'd need pages of detail describing the lush jungle, sandy beaches, and warm waters.

Nowadays, we all know what a tropical island looks like. Even if you've never been to such an island, you've seen one on TV.

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For contemporary writers, the trick is to make the description as precise and detailed as possible while keeping it to a minimum. Most readers want characters and action with just enough description so that they can imagine the story as it's unfolding.

If you've ever encountered a story that paused to provide head-to-toe descriptions along with detailed backstories of every character upon their introduction into the narrative, you know just how grating description can be when executed poorly.

However, it's worth noting that a skilled writer can roll out descriptions that are riveting to read. Sometimes they're riveting because they're integrated seamlessly with the action and dialogue; other times, the description is deftly crafted and engaging on its own. In fact, an expert descriptive writer can keep readers glued through multiple pages of description.

Descriptive Writing Tips

Description doesn't work if it's unclear, verbose, or bland. Most readers prefer action and dialogue to lengthy descriptions, so while a paragraph here and there can certainly help readers better visualize what's happening, pages and pages of description can increase the risk that they'll set your work aside and never pick it up again.

There are exceptions to every rule, so the real trick is to know when lengthy descriptions are warranted and when they're just boring.

Here are some general tips for descriptive writing:

- Use distinct descriptions that stand out and are memorable. For example, don't write that a character is five foot two with brown hair and blue eyes. Give the reader something to remember. Say the character is short with mousy hair and sky-blue eyes.
- Make description active: Consider the following description of a room: *There was a bookshelf in the corner. A desk sat under the window. The walls were beige, and the floor was tiled.* That's boring. Try something like this: *A huge oak desk sat below a large picture window and beside it, a shelf overflowing with books. Hardcover, paperbacks, and binders were piled on the dingy tiled floor in messy stacks.* In the second example, words like *overflowing* and *piled* are active.
- Weave description through the narrative: Sometimes a character enters a room and looks around, so the narrative needs to pause to describe what the character sees. Other times, description can be threaded through the narrative. For example, instead of pausing to describe a character, engage that character in dialogue with another character. Use the characters' thoughts and the dialogue tags to reveal description: *He stared at her flowing, auburn curls, which reminded him of his mother's hair. "Where*

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were you?" he asked, shifting his green eyes across the restaurant to where a customer was hassling one of the servers.

Simple descriptions are surprisingly easy to execute. All you have to do is look at something (or imagine it) and write what you see. But well-crafted descriptions require writers to pay diligence to word choice, to describe only those elements that are most important, and to use engaging language to paint a picture in the reader's mind.

How to Practice Writing Description

Here are some descriptive writing activities that will inspire you while providing opportunities to practice writing description. If you don't have much experience with descriptive writing, you may find that your first few attempts are flat and boring. If you can't keep readers engaged, they'll wander off. Work at crafting descriptions that are compelling and mesmerizing.

1. Go to one of your favourite spots and write a description of the setting: it could be your bedroom, a favourite coffee shop, or a local park. Leave people, dialogue, and action out of it. Just focus on explaining what the space looks like.
2. Who is your favourite character from a film? Describe the character from head to toe. Show the reader not only what the character looks like, but also how the character acts. Do this without including action or dialogue.
3. Sometimes in a narrative, a little description provides respite from all the action and dialogue. Make a list of things from a story you're working on (gadgets, characters, settings, etc.), and for each one, write a short description of no more than a hundred words.
4. As mentioned, Tolkien often spent pages describing a single landscape. Choose one of your favourite pieces of classic literature, find a long passage of description, and rewrite it. Try to cut the descriptive word count in half.
5. When you read a book, use a highlighter to mark sentences and paragraphs that contain description. Don't highlight every adjective and adverb. Look for longer passages that are dedicated to description.
6. Write a one-page description of yourself.

Source: www.writingforward.com/creative-writing/what-is-descriptive-writing