

Writing a descriptive essay

Overview

A descriptive piece of writing describes a person, place or situation, creating an image with words so that the reader can picture it in their mind. It should be a multi-layered experience including physical, emotional and sensory impact for the reader. The description should involve a range of techniques to create a close link with the reader who should be able to experience what the author is experiencing. It is important to consider the structure of the piece before beginning to write.

Tips for writing a descriptive essay

Language – think about:

- **the audience for the essay** – try to put yourself in the place of the reader.
- **the impression you want to create** – you have a limited number of words for your description, so it is important to get your reader's attention straightaway and maintain it throughout.
- **the purpose of the essay** – you should try to describe in detail the subject in the title chosen, using a range of linguistic techniques and devices to make it come alive for the reader.
- **How you can make sure to impress the reader** – you should use a range of tenses, e.g. perfect, future, conditional and present which bring variety and depth to the essay. The content of this descriptive essay should be rich in experiences, ideas, images and sensory details and fully relevant to the question. For example, the response should describe sights, sounds, colours and smells and use a range of adjectives, adverbs and comparisons.

Structure:

- **Consider how you will organise your essay** – from the outset you will need to address the topic and get your reader's attention. So, your first paragraph is important. Paragraphs should be used to break up the description and should be linked with cohesive devices.
- **Make use of a framework** – think about how you will frame your essay e.g. will it be like a journey if you are describing a market scene? You might describe how you pass different stalls as you walk through the market. A brief introduction and conclusion will give structure to the essay.
- **Use a variety of structures** – the essay should contain a variety of linguistic structures and a wide range of topic-specific vocabulary. Similes and metaphors can help to pin down experiences. The reader's interest will be maintained through your use of rich and evocative language.
- **Make your description flow** – there should be a sense of fluidity and coherence about the description. Avoid stilted short sentences, let your imagination take over.

Example of a descriptive essay

	Comments
<p><i>Describe the beach of your dreams</i></p> <p><i>At last, here it is, the beach I have often dreamed of. The seagulls are pirouetting in the sky. A fierce wind makes my hair fly everywhere. I feel it kiss my face and get under my collar. I shiver. Some wouldn't like this wind, but I find it totally energising.</i></p> <p><i>You can hear the red and black pebbles vibrating as if responding to the waves which are crashing against the rocks then retreating with a whisper before rushing back again. The elements seem to be responding in unison. It sounds like a symphony created by a naughty sprite.</i></p> <p><i>In the distance, the ruins of a castle – grey and quite threatening despite the ravages of time. They seem to be made of the same stone as the cliff which the weather has significantly eroded day after day but not destroyed. These two bastions, the one natural, the other artificial, stick out over the foaming ocean.</i></p> <p><i>I walk on the smooth and rounded pebbles; I run across the shells which stick painfully into my feet. I stop, out of breath. Before me, the sea: the constant back and forth of the waves, the small stones rolling against each other, the froth like shaving foam.</i></p> <p><i>I dip my toes in the water and then bit by bit go in up to my knees. The smelly seaweed winds itself round my legs like ivy round a tree. The current is strong, and I can hardly stay upright. I immerse myself and the sea rocks me like a small ship without a captain. The salt water in my mouth reminds me of the oysters I ate the evening before. The gulls seem to be carried on the wind, screaming as they spread out their wings.</i></p> <p><i>After a few minutes, the waves become still more imposing and aggressive, so I swim to the big rock underneath the old, abandoned lighthouse. I scramble up the slippery rock then climb the steep staircase to the lighthouse, two steps at a time. Then, holding on to the thin rusty metal railing so as not to lose my balance, I turn back quickly and feel as ever a great sense of happiness.</i></p> <p><i>The beach extends for miles. There is no-one. I breathe the lovely salty sea air. Absolutely perfect!</i></p>	<p>The essay opens with a direct reference to the question.</p> <p>We are immediately on the beach and can feel the wind.</p> <p>The sensory description moves on to hearing with an effective simile.</p> <p>An Varied and interesting structures used.</p> <p>A sense of progress in the essay. This is followed by two sentences rich in images.</p> <p>A range of adjectives are used to give extra depth to the description.</p> <p>The ending brings a sense of peace after the noise and turmoil of the sea and beach description.</p>