How to Write a Descriptive Essay

by WriteExpress Staff Writers

More than many other types of essays, descriptive essays strive to create a deeply involved and vivid experience for the reader. Great descriptive essays achieve this effect not through facts and statistics but by using detailed observations and descriptions.

What do you want to describe?

As you get started on your descriptive essay, it's important for you to identify exactly what you want to describe. Often, a descriptive essay will focus on portraying one of the following:

- a person
- a place
- a memory
- an experience
- an object

Ultimately, whatever you can perceive or experience can be the focus of your descriptive writing.

Why are you writing your descriptive essay?

It's a great creative exercise to sit down and simply describe what you observe. However, when writing a descriptive essay, you often have a particular reason for writing your description. Getting in touch with this reason can help you focus your description and imbue your language with a particular perspective or emotion.
Example: Imagine that you want to write a descriptive essay about your grandfather. You've chosen to write about your grandfather's physical appearance and the way that he interacts with people. However, rather than providing a general description of these aspects, you want to convey your admiration for his strength and kindness. This is your reason for writing the descriptive essay. To achieve this, you might focus one of your paragraphs on describing the roughness of his hands, roughness resulting from the labor of his work throughout his life, but you might also describe how he would hold your hands so gently with his rough hands when having a conversation with you or when taking a walk.

How should you write your description?

If there's one thing you should remember as you write your descriptive essay, it's the famous saying: show don't tell. But what's the difference between showing and telling?

Consider these two simple examples:

- I grew tired after dinner.
- As I leaned back and rested my head against the top of the chair, my eyelids began to feel heavy, and the edges of the empty plate in front of me blurred with the white tablecloth.

The first sentence tells readers that you grew tired after dinner. The second sentence shows readers that you grew tired. The most effective descriptive essays are loaded with such showing because they enable readers to imagine or experience something for themselves.

As you write your descriptive essay, the best way to create a vivid experience for your readers is to focus on the five senses.

- sight
- sound
- smell
- touch
- taste

When you focus your descriptions on the senses, you provide vivid and specific details that show your readers rather than tell your readers what you are describing.

Quick Tips for Writing Your Descriptive Essay

Writing a descriptive essay can be a rich and rewarding experience, but it can also feel a bit complicated. It's helpful, therefore, to keep a quick checklist of the essential questions to keep in mind as you plan, draft, and revise your essay.

Planning your descriptive essay:

- What or who do you want to describe?
• What is your reason for writing your description?
• What are the particular qualities that you want to focus on?

**Drafting your descriptive essay:**

• What sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures are important for developing your description?
• Which details can you include to ensure that your readers gain a vivid impression imbued with your emotion or perspective?

**Revising your descriptive essay:**

• Have you provided enough details and descriptions to enable your readers to gain a complete and vivid perception?
• Have you left out any minor but important details?
• Have you used words that convey your emotion or perspective?
• Are there any unnecessary details in your description?
• Does each paragraph of your essay focus on one aspect of your description?
• Are your paragraphs ordered in the most effective way?

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• Writing a Conclusion for an Essay

**Narrative Essay**

**Learn how to write a narrative essay with these easy-to-follow tips**

by WriteExpress Staff Writers

There's nothing like *reading* a great narrative. Whether in novel or essay form, a narrative piece of writing transports readers into the time and space of the world portrayed by the writing.

There's also nothing like *writing* a great narrative. Through reflecting upon an event, and through recreating the experience for other readers, writing a narrative essay can enable you to develop new, subtle, and rewarding perspectives.

**Basic qualities of a narrative essay:**
A narrative essay is a piece of writing that recreates an experience through time. A narrative essay can be based on one of your own experiences, either past or present, or it can be based on the experiences of someone else. In addition to telling a story, a narrative essay also communicates a main idea or a lesson learned.

**First steps for writing a narrative essay:**

- Identify the experience that you want to write about.
- Think about why the experience is significant.
- Spend a good deal of time drafting your recollections about the details of the experience.
- Create an outline of the basic parts of your narrative.

**Writing about the experience:**

- Using your outline, describe each part of your narrative.
- Rather than telling your readers what happened, use vivid details and descriptions to actually recreate the experience for your readers.
- Think like your readers. Try to remember that the information you present is the only information your readers have about the experiences.
- Always keep in mind that all of the small and seemingly unimportant details known to you are not necessarily known to your readers.

**Communicating the significance of the experience:**

- It's often effective to begin your narrative with a paragraph that introduces the experience and communicates the significance. This technique guarantees that your readers will understand the significance of the experience as they progress through the narrative.
- Another effective technique is to begin the essay by jumping directly into the narrative and then ending the essay with a paragraph communicating the significance of the experience. This approach allows your readers to develop their own understanding of the experience through the body of the essay and then more deeply connect to your expression of the significance at the end.
- You might also consider introducing the experience in the first paragraph but delaying your expression of the significance of the experience until the end of the essay. This approach heightens your readers' sensitivity to the significance of the narrative.

**Revising your narrative essay:**

- After spending time away from the draft of your narrative essay, read through the essay and think about whether the writing effectively recreates the experience for your readers.
- Ask other people to read through the essay and offer their impressions.
- Identify where more details and descriptions are needed.
• Identify and consider removing any information that seems to distract from the focus and
main narrative of the essay.
• Think about whether you’ve presented information in the most effective order.

Potential prompts for your narrative essay:

If you’re having trouble choosing an experience to write about, take a quick glance through these
prompts. They might help you remember or identify a particularly interesting or significant
experience to focus on.

• **A childhood event.** Think of an experience when you learned something for the first
time, or when you realized how important someone was for you.
• **Achieving a goal.** Think about a particularly meaningful achievement in your life. This
could be something as seemingly minor as achieving a good grade on a difficult
assignment, or this could be something with more long-lasting effects, like getting the job
you desired or getting into the best school to which you applied.
• **A failure.** Think about a time when you did not perform as well as you had wanted.
  Focusing on an experience like this can result in rewarding reflections about the positive
  emerging from the negative.
• **A good or bad deed.** Think about a time when you did or did not stand up for yourself or
  someone else in the face of adversity or challenge.
• **A change in your life.** Think about a time when something significant changed in your
  life. This could be anything from a move across town to a major change in a relationship
to the birth or death of a loved one.
• **A realization.** Think about a time when you experienced a realization. This could be
  anything from understanding a complicated math equation to gaining a deeper
  understanding of a philosophical issue or life situation.

Persuasive Essay

by WriteExpress Staff Writers

When writing a persuasive essay, your purpose is to convince your audience to embrace your
idea or point of view. Keeping this purpose in mind is the key to writing an effective persuasion.

Essential steps for writing a persuasive essay:

1. **Identify your main idea or point of view.** Your purpose will be to persuade your audience to
   accept this idea or point of view.
2. **Identify your audience.** To write an effective persuasive essay, try to understand your audience.
   For example, are your readers undecided about your issue? Or are your readers hostile to your
   point of view?
3. Considering your audience, **identify the strongest supporting points** for your persuasion.
4. **Identify the most significant opposing view.** Explaining and then refuting the opposing view
   strengthens the credibility and scope of your essay.
How to organize your persuasive essay:

**Introduction**

- Your introduction should hook your reader's attention and provide background information on your topic or controversy.
- The paragraph should end with a clear statement of your main idea or point of view.

**Body paragraphs**

- Your body paragraphs should present the points in support of your main idea.
- Each body paragraph should focus on one point.
- Be sure to provide evidence or examples for each point.

**Opposing view**

- After presenting your supporting points, develop one paragraph to accurately explain and then refute the most significant opposing view.

**Conclusion**

- Creatively restate your main idea and supporting points.
- Try to leave your audience even more interested in your topic and persuaded by your main idea or perspective.

**Related Essay-Writing Articles**

**Writing a Conclusion for an Essay**

by WriteExpress Staff Writers

The conclusion is the last paragraph of an essay. Although often brief in comparison with the other paragraphs, the conclusion performs a number of very significant functions.

When writing a conclusion for your essay, it's helpful to keep these basic considerations in mind:

- Your conclusion is the last paragraph that your reader will encounter.
- Your conclusion should remind your reader about the most important aspects of your essay.
- In most essays, therefore, your conclusion should creatively restate the main idea of the essay.
- Your conclusion should also leave your reader even more interested in your topic and idea.
For some essays, especially for persuasive or argumentative essays, it's particularly effective to end your conclusion by directly addressing your reader with a question or call for action.

Be sure to spend a good deal of time planning and writing your conclusion. A strong conclusion can resolve and fulfill your essay as a whole and make a real impact on your reader.

**Related Essay-Writing Articles**

- Descriptive Essays
- How to Write the College Admissions Essay
- Narrative Essays
- Persuasive Essays

**Organizing an Exploratory Essay**

**Summary:**

This resource will help you with exploratory/inquiry essay assignments.

**Contributors:** Allen Brizee
**Last Edited:** 2010-04-17 05:44:38

Exploratory essays are very different from argumentative essays. In fact, an exploratory essay is likely different from any other essay you’ve written. Instead of writing to convince an audience of the validity of a thesis, you will be writing to find out about a problem and perhaps to form some preliminary conclusions about how it might be solved.

But there is another aspect the exploratory genre that is equally important. An exploratory essay is, in essence, a retrospective of your writing and thinking process as you work through a problem. It describes when, how, and why you completed certain types of research. This kind of writing is about how you work through problems that require writing and research. You will have to be introspective and think about your thinking process in order for your essay to turn out well.

Very roughly, then, your exploratory essay may follow this sort of structure:

**Introduction**

The introduction should outline the problem you explored and why it’s important. In addition, you should briefly discuss 1) some of the problem’s possible causes; 2) the institutions and people involved with the problem; 3) some of the possible solutions to the problem. A brief overview of the types of sources your researched during your inquiry.
**Body Paragraphs**

Body paragraphs should discuss the inquiry process you followed to research your problem. These paragraphs should include the following:

1. Introduction of source (title, author, type of media, publisher, publication date, etc.) and why you chose to use it in your exploration
2. Important information you found in the source regarding your problem
3. Why the information is important and dependable in relation to the problem
4. Some personal introspection on how the source helped you, allowed you to think differently about the problem, or even fell short of your expectations and led you in a new direction in your research, which forms a transition into your next source.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion should restate the problem you explored, outline some of its possible causes, review the institutions and people involved, and highlight some possible solutions. If you still have any questions about the problem (and it’s ok to have some), you will discuss them here. Talk about why you think you still have questions regarding the problem you explored, where you might look to answer these questions, and what other forms of research you would have to do.

**Writing Essays for Exams**

**Summary:**

While most OWL resources recommend a longer writing process (start early, revise often, conduct thorough research, etc.), sometimes you just have to write quickly in test situations. However, these exam essays can be no less important pieces of writing than research papers because they can influence final grades for courses, and/or they can mean the difference between getting into an academic program (GED, SAT, GRE). To that end, this resource will help you prepare and write essays for exams.

**Contributors:** Kate Bouwens, Allen Brizee  
**Last Edited:** 2010-04-17 05:46:24

*What is a well written answer to an essay question?*

**It is...**

**Well Focused**

Be sure to answer the question completely, that is, answer all parts of the question. Avoid "padding." A lot of rambling and ranting is a sure sign that the writer doesn't really know what the right answer is and hopes that somehow, something in that overgrown jungle of words was the correct answer.
Well Organized

Don't write in a haphazard "think-as-you-go" manner. Do some planning and be sure that what you write has a clearly marked introduction which both states the point(s) you are going to make and also, if possible, how you are going to proceed. In addition, the essay should have a clearly indicated conclusion which summarizes the material covered and emphasizes your thesis or main point.

Well Supported

Do not just assert something is true, prove it. What facts, figures, examples, tests, etc. prove your point? In many cases, the difference between an A and a B as a grade is due to the effective use of supporting evidence.

Well Packaged

People who do not use conventions of language are thought of by their readers as less competent and less educated. If you need help with these or other writing skills, come to the Writing Lab!

How do you write an effective essay exam?

1. Read through all the questions carefully.
2. Budget your time and decide which question(s) you will answer first.
3. Underline the key word(s) which tell you what to do for each question.
4. Choose an organizational pattern appropriate for each key word and plan your answers on scratch paper or in the margins.
5. Write your answers as quickly and as legibly as you can; do not take the time to recopy.
6. Begin each answer with one or two sentence thesis which summarizes your answer. If possible, phrase the statement so that it rephrases the question’s essential terms into a statement (which therefore directly answers the essay question).
7. Support your thesis with specific references to the material you have studied.
8. Proofread your answer and correct errors in spelling and mechanics.

Specific organizational patterns and "key words"

Most essay questions will have one or more "key words" that indicate which organizational pattern you should use in your answer. The six most common organizational patterns for essay exams are definition, analysis, cause and effect, comparison/contrast, process analysis, and thesis-support.

Definition

Typical questions

- "Define X."
- "What is an X?"
- "Choose N terms from the following list and define them."
Example

Q: "What is a fanzine?"

A: A fanzine is a magazine written, mimeographed, and distributed by and for science fiction or comic strip enthusiasts.

Avoid constructions such as "An encounter group is where ..." and "General semantics is when ... ."

Process

• State the term to be defined.
• State the class of objects or concepts to which the term belongs.
• Differentiate the term from other members of the class by listing the term's distinguishing characteristics.

Tools you can use

• Details which describe the term
• Examples and incidents
• Comparisons to familiar terms
• Negation to state what the term is not
• Classification (i.e., break it down into parts)
• Examination of origins or causes
• Examination of results, effects, or uses

Analysis

Typical questions

Analysis involves breaking something down into its components and discovering the parts that make up the whole.

• "Analyze X."
• "What are the components of X?"
• "What are the five different kinds of X?"
• "Discuss the different types of X."

Example:

Q: "Discuss the different services a junior college offers a community."

A: Thesis: A junior college offers the community at least three main types of educational services: vocational education for young people, continuing education for older people, and personal development for all individuals.
Process

Outline for supporting details and examples. For example, if you were answering the example question, an outline might include:

- Vocational education
- Continuing education
- Personal development

Write the essay, describing each part or component and making transitions between each of your descriptions. Some useful transition words include:

- first, second, third, etc.
- next
- another
- in addition
- moreover

Conclude the essay by emphasizing how each part you have described makes up the whole you have been asked to analyze.

Cause and Effect

Cause and effect involves tracing probable or known effects of a certain cause or examining one or more effects and discussing the reasonable or known cause(s).

Typical questions:

- "What are the causes of X?"
- "What led to X?"
- "Why did X occur?"
- "Why does X happen?"
- "What would be the effects of X?"

Example

Q: "Define recession and discuss the probable effects a recession would have on today's society."

A: Thesis: A recession, which is a nationwide lull in business activity, would be detrimental to society in the following ways: it would .......A.......; it would .......B.......; and it would .......C....... .

The rest of the answer would explain, in some detail, the three effects: A, B, and C.

Useful transition words:

- because
• consequently
• therefore
• for this reason
• as a result

Comparison-Contrast

Typical questions:

• "How does X differ from Y?"
• "Compare X and Y."
• "What are the advantages and disadvantages of X and Y?"

Example:

Q: "Which would you rather own—a compact car or a full-sized car?"

A: Thesis: I would own a compact car rather than a full-sized car for the following reasons: .......A......., .......B......., .......C......., and .......D....... .

Two patterns of development:

Pattern 1

Full-sized car

• Advantages
• Disadvantages

Compact car

• Advantages
• Disadvantages

Pattern 2

Advantages

• Full-sized car
• Compact car

Disadvantages

• Full-sized car
• Compact car

Useful transition words
on the other hand
similarly
yet
unlike A, B ...
in the same way
but
while both A and B are ..., only B ..
nevertheless
on the contrary
though
despite
however
conversely
while A is ..., B is ...

Process

Typical questions

- "Describe how X is accomplished."
- "List the steps involved in X."
- "Explain what happened in X."
- "What is the procedure involved in X?"

Process (sometimes called process analysis)

This involves giving directions or telling the reader how to do something. It may involve discussing some complex procedure as a series of discrete steps. The organization is almost always chronological.

Example

Q: "According to Richard Bolles' What Color Is Your Parachute?, what is the best procedure for finding a job?"


The remainder of the answer should discuss each of these seven steps in some detail.

Useful transition words

- first, second, third, etc.
- next
- then
- following this
- finally
• after, afterwards, after this
• subsequently
• simultaneously, concurrently

Thesis and Support

Typical questions:

• "Discuss X."
• "A noted authority has said X. Do you agree or disagree?"
• "Defend or refute X."
• "Do you think that X is valid? Defend your position."

Thesis and support involves stating a clearly worded opinion or interpretation and then defending it with all the data, examples, facts, and so on that you can draw from the material you have studied.

Example:

Q: "Despite criticism, television is useful because it aids in the socializing process of our children."

A: Television hinders rather than helps in the socializing process of our children because .......A......., .......B......., and .......C....... .

The rest of the answer is devoted to developing arguments A, B, and C.

Useful transition words:

• therefore
• for this reason
• it follows that
• as a result
• because
• however
• consequently

Exercises

A. Which of the following two answers is the better one? Why?

Question: Discuss the contribution of William Morris to book design, using as an example his edition of the works of Chaucer.

a. William Morris's Chaucer was his masterpiece. It shows his interest in the Middle Ages. The type is based on medieval manuscript writing, and the decoration around the edges of the pages is like that used in medieval books. The large initial letters are typical of medieval design. Those
letters were printed from woodcuts, which was the medieval way of printing. The illustrations were by Burn-Jones, one of the best artists in England at the time. Morris was able to get the most competent people to help him because he was so famous as a poet and a designer (the Morris chair) and wallpaper and other decorative items for the home. He designed the furnishings for his own home, which was widely admired among the sort of people he associated with. In this way he started the arts and crafts movement.

b. Morris's contribution to book design was to approach the problem as an artist or fine craftsman, rather than a mere printer who reproduced texts. He wanted to raise the standards of printing, which had fallen to a low point, by showing that truly beautiful books could be produced. His Chaucer was designed as a unified work of art or high craft. Since Chaucer lived in the Middle Ages, Morris decided to design a new type based on medieval script and to imitate the format of a medieval manuscript. This involved elaborate letters and large initials at the beginnings of verses, as well as wide borders of intertwined vines with leaves, fruit, and flowers in strong colors. The effect was so unusual that the book caused great excitement and inspired other printers to design beautiful rather than purely utilitarian books.


B. How would you plan the structure of the answers to these essay exam questions?

1. Was the X Act a continuation of earlier government policies or did it represent a departure from prior philosophies?

2. What seems to be the source of aggression in human beings? What can be done to lower the level of aggression in our society?

3. Choose one character from Novel X and, with specific references to the work, show how he or she functions as an "existential hero."

4. Define briefly the systems approach to business management. Illustrate how this differs from the traditional approach.

5. What is the cosmological argument? Does it prove that God exists?

6. Civil War historian Andy Bellum once wrote, "Blahblahblah blahed a blahblah, but of course if blahblah blahblahblahed the blah, then blahblahs are not blah but blahblah. To what extent and in what ways is the statement true? How is it false?

For more information on writing exam essays for the GED, please visit our Engagement area and go to the Community Writing and Education Station (CWEST) resources.

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