

Successful College Writing

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PART 3 Patterns of Development

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CHAPTER 12

Description: Portraying People, Places, and Things

WRITING QUICK START

Suppose you are moving to a large city and need to sell your car because the apartment you just rented does not include parking. You post the following advertisement on the local Craigslist:

12-year-old VW bug. \$4,500 or best offer. Call 555-2298.

Two weeks after you post the ad, you have gotten only a few calls and no offers. Then a friend advises you to write a more appealing description of your unique vehicle that will make people want to contact you. Rewrite the advertisement, describing the car in a way that will convince prospective buyers to call you.

WRITING A DESCRIPTION

In rewriting the description of the car, did you describe how it looks—its funky paint job and its 1960s appeal? Perhaps you focused on its compact qualities—easy to park, high gas mileage, and uncomplicated mechanical maintenance? If you did either or both of these things, you have written a successful description. In this chapter, you will learn how to write descriptions and how to use description to support and develop your ideas.

What Is Description?

Description presents information in a way that appeals to one or more of the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—usually creating an overall impression or feeling. You use description every day, to describe a pair of shoes you bought, a flavor of ice cream you tasted, or a concert you recently attended.

Description is an important and useful communication skill. If you were an eyewitness to a car theft, for example, the detective investigating the crime would ask you to describe what you saw. You will also use description in many situations in college and on the job, as the examples in the accompanying box show.

Writers rely on description to present detailed information about people, places, and things and to grasp and sustain their readers' interest. When you write vivid descriptions, you not only make your writing more lively and interesting but also indicate your attitude toward the subject through your choice of words and details.

In the following lively description of a sensory experience of taste, you will feel as if you, too, are eating chilli peppers.

SCENES FROM COLLEGE AND THE WORKPLACE

- For a *chemistry* lab report, you are asked to describe the odor and appearance of a substance made by combining two chemicals.
- In an *art history* class, your instructor asks you to visit a local gallery, choose a particular painting, and describe in a two-page paper the artist's use of line or color.
- As a *nurse* at a local burn treatment center, one of your responsibilities is to record on each patient's chart the overall appearance of and change in second- and third-degree burns.

Eating Chilli Peppers

Jeremy MacClancy

Jeremy MacClancy is an anthropologist and tutor at Oxford Brookes University in England who has written several scholarly works in the field of anthropology. This essay is taken from his book *Consuming Culture: Why You Eat What You Eat* (1993). As you read the selection, underline or highlight the descriptive words and phrases that convey what it's like to eat chilli peppers.

How come over half of the world's population have made a powerful chemical irritant the center of their gastronomic lives? How can so many millions stomach chillies? 1

Biting into a tabasco pepper is like aiming a flame-thrower at your parted lips. There might be little reaction at first, but then the bum starts to grow. A few seconds later the chilli mush in your mouth reaches critical mass and your palate prepares for liftoff. The message spreads. The sweat glands open, your eyes stream, your nose runs, your stomach warms up, your heart accelerates, and your lungs breathe faster. All this is normal. But bite off more than your body can take, and you will be left coughing, sneezing, and spitting. Tears stripe your cheeks, and your mouth belches fire like a dragon celebrating its return to life. Eater beware!

As a general stimulant, chilli is similar to amphetamines—only quicker, cheaper, non-addictive, and beneficial to boot. Employees at the tabasco plant in Louisiana rarely complain of coughs, hay fever, or sinusitis. (Recent evidence, however, suggests that too many chillies can bring on stomach cancer.) Over the centuries, people have used hot peppers as a folk medicine to treat sore throats or inflamed gums, to relieve respiratory distress, and to ease gastritis induced by alcoholism. For aching muscles and tendons, a chilli plaster is more effective than one of mustard, with the added advantage that it does not blister the skin. But people do not eat tabasco, jalapeno, or cayenne peppers because of their pharmacological side-effects. They eat them for the taste—different varieties have different flavors—and for the fire they give off. In other words, they go for the burn. 3

Eating chillies makes for exciting times: the thrill of anticipation, the extremity of the flames, and then the slow descent back to normality. This is a benign form of masochism, like going to a horror movie, riding a roller coaster, or stepping into a cold bath after a sauna. The body flashes danger signals, but the brain knows the threat is not too great. Aficionados, self-absorbed in their burning passion, know exactly how to pace their whole chilli eating so that the flames are maintained at a steady maximum. Wrenched out of normal routines by the continuing assault on their mouths, they concentrate on the sensation and ignore almost everything else. They play with fire and just ride the burn, like experienced surfers cresting along a wave. For them, without hot peppers, food would lose its zest and their days would seem too dull. A cheap, legal thrill, chilli is the spice of their life. 4

In the rural areas of Mexico, men can turn their chilli habit into a contest of strength by seeing who can stomach the most hot peppers in a set time. This gastronomic test, however, is not used as a way to prove one's machismo, for women can play the game as well. In this context, chillies are a non-sexist form of acquired love for those with strong hearts and fiery passions—a steady source of hot sauce for their lives. 5

The enjoyable sensations of a running nose, crying eyes, and dragon-like mouth belching flames are clearly not for the timorous. 6

More tabasco, anyone? 7

READING

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Characteristics of Descriptive Writing

Successful descriptions offer readers more than just a list of sensory details or a catalog of characteristics. In a good description, the details work together to create a dominant effect or impression. Writers often use comparison to help readers experience what they are writing about.

Description Uses Sensory Details

Sensory details appeal to one or more of the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. For example, in the second paragraph of “Eating Chilli Peppers” (p. 269), MacClancy describes the physical sensations that chilli peppers create by using vivid language that appeals to the senses of sight and taste. By appealing to the senses in your writing, you too can help your readers experience the object, sensation, event, or person you aim to describe.

Sight. When you describe what something looks like, you help your reader create a mental picture of the subject. In the following excerpt, notice how Loren Eiseley uses visual detail to describe what he comes across in a field.

One day as I cut across the field which at that time extended on one side of our suburban shopping center, I found a giant slug feeding from a funnel of pink ice cream in an abandoned Dixie cup. I could see his eyes telescope and protrude in a kind of dim, uncertain ecstasy as his dark body bunched and elongated in the curve of the cup.

Loren Eiseley, “The Brown Wasps”

The description allows the reader to imagine the slug eating the ice cream in a way that a bare statement of the facts—“On my way to the mall, I saw a slug in a paper cup”—would not do.

Sound. Sound can also be a powerful descriptive tool. Can you “hear” the engines in the following description?

They were one-cylinder and two-cylinder engines, and some were make-and-break and some were jump-spark, but they all made a sleepy sound across the lake. The one-lungers throbbed and fluttered, and the twin-cylinder ones purred and purred, and that was a quiet sound too. But now the campers all had outboards. In the daytime, in the hot mornings, these motors made a petulant, irritable sound; at night, in the still evening when the afterglow lit the water, they whined about one’s ears like mosquitoes.

E. B. White, “Once More to the Lake”

Writers of description also use *onomatopoeia*, words that approximate the sounds they describe. The words *his*, *whine*, *spurt*, and *sizzle* are common examples.

Smell. Smells are sometimes difficult to describe, partly because we do not have as many adjectives for smells as we do for sights and sounds. Smell can be an effective descriptive device, however, as shown here.

Eiseley describes shape (“funnel”), action (“bunched and elongated”), color (“pink,” “dark”), and size (“giant”) and includes details (“suburban shopping center,” “Dixie cup”) to help readers visualize the scene.

White conveys the sounds of the engines by using active verbs (“throbbed and fluttered,” “purred and purred,” “whined”), descriptive adjectives (“sleepy,” “petulant,” “irritable”), and a comparison (“like mosquitoes”).

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Driving through farm country at summer sunset provides a cavalcade of smells: manure, cut grass, honeysuckle, spearmint, wheat chaff, scallions, chicory, tar from the macadam road.

Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*

Notice how Ackerman lists nouns that evoke distinct odors and leaves it to the reader to imagine how they smell.

Taste. Words that evoke the sense of taste can make descriptions lively, as in “Eating Chilli Peppers.” Consider also this restaurant critic’s description of Vietnamese cuisine.

In addition to balancing the primary flavors—the sweet, sour, bitter, salty and peppery tastes whose sensations are, in the ancient Chinese system, directly related to physical and spiritual health—medicinal herbs were used in most dishes. . . . For instance, the orange-red annatto seed is used for its “cooling” effect as well as for the mildly tangy flavor it lends and the orange color it imparts.

Molly O’Neill, “Vietnam’s Cuisine: Echoes of Empires”

Notice that O’Neill describes the variety of flavors (“sweet, sour, bitter, salty and peppery”) in Vietnamese cuisine as well as the distinctive flavor (“mildly tangy”) of annatto seeds.

Touch. Descriptions of texture, temperature, and weight allow a reader not only to visualize but almost to experience an object or a scene. In the excerpt that follows, Annie Dillard describes the experience of holding a Polyphemus moth cocoon.

We passed the cocoon around; it was heavy. As we held it in our hands, the creature within warmed and squirmed. We were delighted, and wrapped it tighter in our fists. The pupa began to jerk violently, in heart-stopping knocks. Who’s there? I can still feel those thumps, urgent through a muffling of spun silk and leaf, urgent through the swaddling of many years, against the curve of my palm. We kept passing it around. When it came to me again it was hot as a bun; it jumped half out of my hand. The teacher intervened. She put it, still heaving and banging, in the ubiquitous Mason jar.

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Dillard describes the texture of the cocoon (“a muffling of spun silk and leaf”), its temperature (“warmed,” “hot as a bun”), its weight (“heavy”), and its motion (“squirmed,” “jerk violently, in heart-stopping knocks,” “thumps,” “jumped,” “heaving and banging”) to give readers an accurate sense of what it felt like to hold it.

Description Uses Active Verbs and Varied Sentences

Sensory details are often best presented through active, vivid verbs and varied sentences. Look, for instance, at the active verbs in this sentence from paragraph 2 of MacClancy’s essay.

The sweat glands *open*, your eyes *stream*, your nose *runs*, your stomach *warms up*, your heart *accelerates*, and your lungs *breathe* faster.

In fact, active verbs are often more effective than adverbs in creating striking and lasting impressions, as the following example demonstrates.

ORIGINAL The team captain *proudly* accepted the award.

REVISED The team captain *marched* to the podium, *grasped* the trophy, and *gestured* toward his teammates.

Using varied sentences also contributes to the effective expression of sensory details. Be sure to use different types and patterns of sentences and to vary their lengths. Look again at the second paragraph in MacClancy’s essay. Note how he varies his sentences to make the description interesting.

For more on varying sentence patterns and using active verbs, see Chapter 10, pp. 206–12 and 213–14.

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Exercise 12.1

Using *sensory details, active verbs, and varied sentences*, describe one of the common objects in the following list or one of your own choosing. Do not name the object in your description. Exchange papers with a classmate. Your reader should be able to guess the item you are describing from the details you provide.

1. A piece of clothing
2. A food item
3. An appliance
4. A machine
5. A plant or animal

Description Creates a Dominant Impression

An effective description leaves the reader with a **dominant impression**—an overall attitude, mood, or feeling about the subject. The impression may be awe, inspiration, anger, or distaste, for example.

For more on thesis statements, see Chapter 6, pp. 125–28.

Let's suppose that you are writing about an old storage box you found in your parents' attic. The aspect of the box you want to emphasize (your slant) is *memories of childhood*. Given this slant, or angle, you might describe the box in several ways, each of which would convey a different dominant impression.

- "A box filled with treasures from my childhood brought back memories of long, sunny afternoons playing in our backyard."
- "Opening the box was like lifting the lid of a time machine, revealing toys and games from another era."
- "When I opened the box, I was eight years old again, fighting over my favorite doll with my twin sister, Erica."

Notice that each example provides a different impression of the contents of the storage box and would require a different type of support. That is, only selected objects from within the box would be relevant to each impression. Note, too, that in all of these examples, the dominant impression is stated directly rather than implied. Many times, however, writers rely on descriptive language to imply a dominant impression.

In "Eating Chilli Peppers," notice how all the details evoke the thrill of eating the peppers for those who love them. As MacClancy says, "they go for the burn." The first two sentences of the essay pose the questions that the remaining paragraphs answer. The answer is the dominant impression: Eating chilli peppers is thrilling. To write an effective description, you need to select details carefully, including only those that contribute to the dominant impression you are trying to create. Notice that MacClancy does not clutter his description by describing the size, shape, texture, or color of chilli peppers. Instead he focuses on their thrilling, fiery hotness and the side effects they cause.

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Exercise 12.2

Read the following paragraph and cross out details that do not contribute to the dominant impression.

All morning I had had some vague sense that something untoward was about to happen. I suspected bad news was on its way. As I stepped outside, the heat of the summer sun, unusually oppressive for ten o'clock, seemed to sear right through me. In fact, now that I think about it, everything seemed slightly out of kilter that morning. The car, which had been newly painted the week before, had stalled several times. The flowers in the garden, planted for me by my husband, purchased from a nursery down the road, were drooping. It was as though they were wilting before they even had a chance to grow. Even my two cats, who look like furry puffballs, moved listlessly across the room, ignoring my invitation to play. It was then that I received the phone call from the emergency room telling me about my son's accident.

Description Uses Connotative Language Effectively

As noted in Chapter 10, most words have two levels of meaning—denotative and connotative. The *denotation* of a word is its precise dictionary meaning. For instance, the denotation of the word *flag* is “a piece of cloth used as a national emblem.” Usually, however, feelings and attitudes are also associated with a word—emotional colorings or shades of meaning. These are the word's *connotations*. A common connotation of *flag* is patriotism—love and respect for one's country. As you write, be careful about the connotations of the words you choose. Select words that strengthen the dominant impression you are creating.

Description Uses Comparisons

When describing a person or an object, you can help your readers by comparing the person or object to something with which they are familiar. Several types of comparisons are used in descriptive writing—similes, metaphors, personification, and analogies. In a **simile** the comparison is direct and is introduced by *like* or *as*. MacClancy uses a number of telling similes in “Eating Chilli Peppers.”

For more on similes, metaphors, and personification, see Chapter 10, p. 219.

- “Biting into a tabasco pepper is like aiming a flame-thrower at your parted lips.”
- Eating chillies is “like going to a horror movie, riding a roller coaster, or stepping into a cold bath after a sauna.”

A **metaphor** is indirect, implying the comparison by describing one thing as if it were another. Instead of the similes listed above, MacClancy could have used metaphors to describe the experience of eating chillies.

- Eating chilli peppers is a descent into a fiery hell.
- To eat chilli peppers is to ride the crest of a wave, waiting for the thrill.

Personification is a figure of speech in which an object is given human qualities or characteristics. “The television screen stared back at me” is an example. An **analogy** is

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an extended comparison in which one subject, often a more familiar one, is used to explain another. Like similes and metaphors, analogies add interest to your writing while making your ideas more real and accessible.

Exercise 12.3

Write a paragraph describing a food you enjoy. Focus on one sense, as MacClancy does, or appeal to several senses. If possible, draw a comparison using a simile or a metaphor.

Description Follows a Method of Organization

Effective descriptions must follow a clear method of organization. Three common methods of organization used in descriptive writing are spatial order, chronological order, and most-to-least or least-to-most order.

For more on these methods of organization, see Chapter 7, pp. 143–48.

- When you use spatial order, you describe a subject in terms of the physical position of its parts—for example, from top to bottom, from left to right, or from near to far away. Or you may start from a central focal point and then describe the objects that surround it. For example, if you are describing a college campus, you might start by describing a building at the center of the campus—the library, perhaps. You would then describe the buildings that are near the library and conclude by describing anything on the outskirts of the campus.

In writing a description using spatial order, you can use either a fixed or a moving **vantage point**. With a *fixed vantage point*, you describe what you see from a particular position. With a *moving vantage point*, you describe your subject from different positions. A fixed vantage point is like a stationary camera trained on a subject from one direction. A moving vantage point is like a handheld camera that captures the subject from many directions.

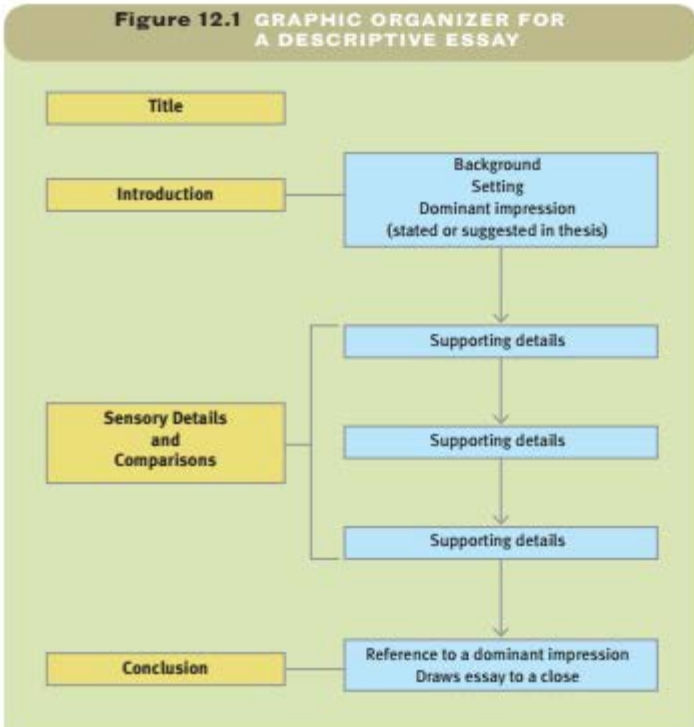
- Chronological order works well when you need to describe events or changes that occur in objects or places over a period of time. You might use chronological order to describe the changes in a puppy's behavior as it grows or to relate changing patterns of light and shadow as the sun sets.
- You might use most-to-least or least-to-most order to describe the smells in a flower garden or the sounds of an orchestra tuning up for a concert.

Visualizing a Description: A Graphic Organizer

The graphic organizer shown in Figure 12.1 will help you visualize the elements of a description. When you write an essay in which your primary purpose is to describe something, you'll need to follow the standard essay format—title, introduction, body, and conclusion—with slight adaptations and adjustments. In a descriptive essay, the

For more on graphic organizers, see Chapter 3, pp. 59–67.

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introduction provides a context for the description and presents the thesis statement, which states or suggests the dominant impression. The body of the essay presents sensory details that support the dominant impression. The conclusion draws the description to a close and makes a final reference to the dominant impression. It may offer a final detail or make a closing statement.

When you incorporate a description into an essay in which you also use other patterns of development, you will probably need to condense or eliminate one or more of the elements of a description essay.

The following essay, "Out of the Woods," is a good example of description. Read the essay and then study the graphic organizer for it in Figure 12.2 (p. 278).

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READING

Out of the Woods

Susan Orlean

Susan Orlean is a popular author and staff writer for *The New Yorker*, in which this essay was originally published. The author of numerous articles and essays, she has also written a number of books, including *My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who's Been Everywhere* (2005), *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup: My Encounters with Extraordinary People* (2002), and *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession* (2000). As you read, highlight the details that help you visualize her vacation rental home.

It was an awful house. A broker would have called it a charming Swiss chalet; what it should have been called, really, was a dingy A-frame, mud-brown, damp, afflicted with an air of unrelieved gloom. An ad might have claimed that it was nestled in the Oregon mountains—in fact, an ad did claim that it was nestled in the Oregon mountains—but would fail to mention that it was nestled in what was possibly the only cramped, cluttered, suburban subdivision in the Oregon mountains. It was probably when we saw a gang of children furiously pedaling their bright-orange-red Big Wheels up and down the sidewalk—Big Wheels? A sidewalk? In the mountains?—that we realized that this vacation house, which we had rented for a four-day getaway, might not be quite as dreamy as it had sounded.

This was the first actual vacation that my boyfriend and I had ever taken together—the first official, grownup type of vacation, rather than our more usual short-term residences on friends' sofas. We weren't very old, and neither was our relationship, and the visit to the mountains was a watershed moment to see what it felt like to have a place of our own. The chalet had sounded ideal. It was also inexpensive, and since we had only a couple of nickels to rub together, we thought it was quite a find.

The inside of the house did seem tolerable. Granted, it was a worn-out, weary place with lots of aches and pains—floorboards that complained, mattresses that wheezed, windows that shrieked when you pushed them open—but it was decent shelter. We walked around, opening cupboards and checking behind doors, taking inventory. Bedroom, fine. Bleak little kitchen, fine. Living room, fine. Bathroom, we must have missed it. We walked through the house again, opening every door a second time, then a third. There appeared to be no bathroom. Had either of us inquired when we arranged to rent the house whether it had a bathroom? Of course we hadn't—who would? It would have been like asking if the place had, say, a roof. We glanced out the kitchen window. In a mangy patch of yard, there appeared to be a heap of two-by-fours, which revealed themselves, upon investigation, to be the remains of an outhouse that must have been blown down in a storm. There was no righting it; the structure hadn't just toppled—it had exploded. So the house had once been equipped with a bathroom-type facility, although the fact that it was an outhouse seemed like something a broker might have wanted to mention.

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I had been a pretty good Brownie in my day, and my boyfriend had been an avid camper, so the idea of peeling in the woods was not new or discomfiting to either of us. However, we were not in the woods. We were in a kind of Levittown, relocated to the lovely Oregon mountains. There was no leafy glade nearby; there was no private little thicket. Instead, there was a family just a few yards away in the house next door, with a whale of an R.V. parked in the driveway and a swing set that gave the kiddies a good view of our comings and goings. Furthermore, the weather was turning grim, the sky dropping lower, the clouds starting to spit a chilly rain, all of which made our moldy mud-brown dream-vacation home seem moldier and browner and more bathroomless by the minute.

Town was a couple of miles away. There was a Gas-N-Eat or a Stop-N-Fuel, or whatever it was called, at the end of the main drag. It had bathrooms, but it was one of those joints where you had to go in to the cashier and ask for a key and then go back outside to the bathroom, a cold, dimly lit concrete-block cubicle that a truck-stop prostitute might have found homey and familiar. We were, of course, not in a position to fuss. We made use of the Petrol-N-Go, had dinner in town, and then stopped in again, just to be safe. In the morning, we threw jackets on over our pajamas and made a bee-line for the gas station. The rain, intermittent the day before, had turned apocalyptic. We holed up in the house for the afternoon, limiting our liquids. We had counted on the changing shifts of cashiers to keep our very frequent visits from being totted up, but the cashiers, evidently, chatted among themselves. By the third day, racing in at seven for our morning constitutional, wet coats akimbo over our nightclothes, we felt—how to put this exactly?—not welcome. Even the house had turned against us, beading up with wetness on nearly every surface, little rivulets of rain threading their way across windowpanes and walls: so much water, and none of it running. But we were. With one more day coming to us, we finally gave in. We packed our damp belongings, stopped in for a last visit at the gas station, and headed home.

Exercise 12.4

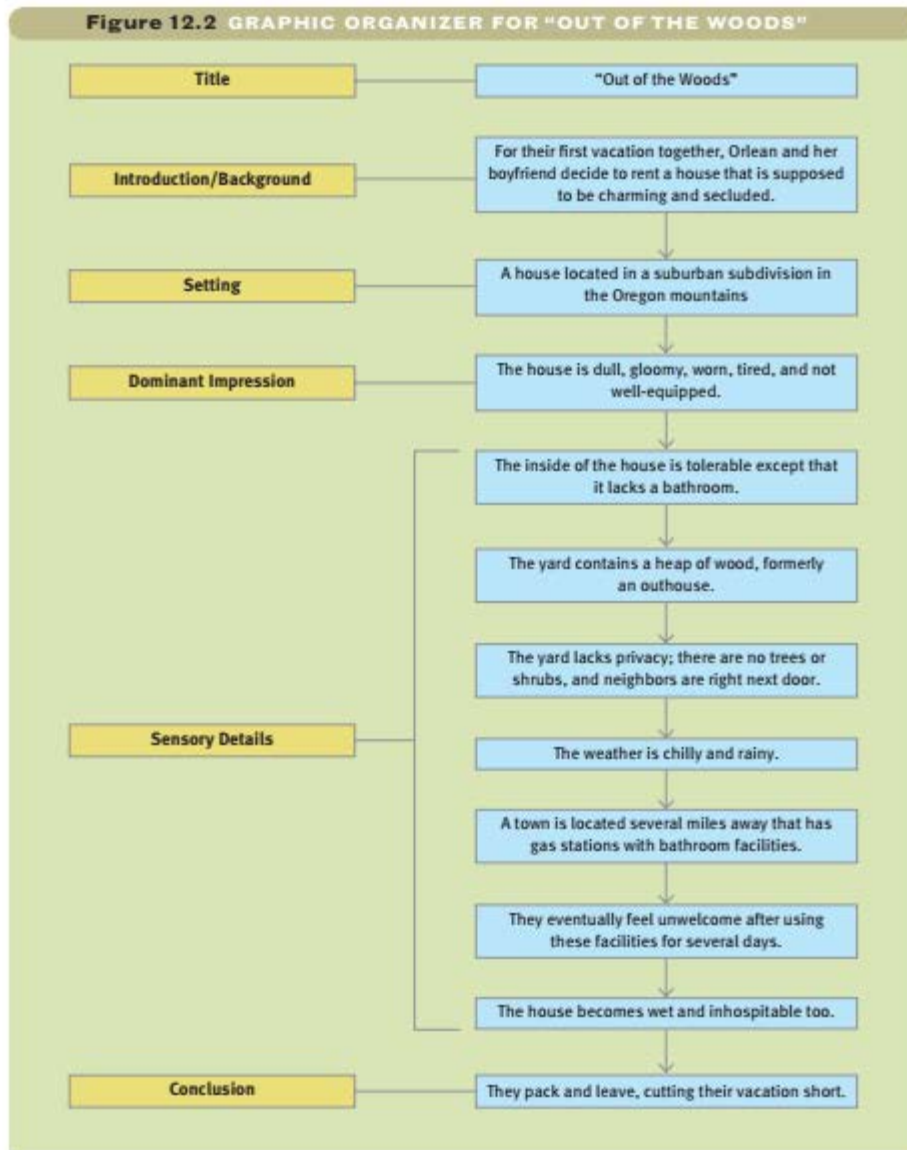
After examining each part of MacClancy's "Eating Chilli Peppers" (p. 269), draw a graphic organizer that shows how this essay is constructed.

To draw detailed graphic organizers using a computer, visit www.bedfordstmartins.com/successfulcollege.

Integrating Description into an Essay

Sometimes description alone fulfills the purpose of an essay. In most cases, however, you will use description in other types of essays. For instance, in a narrative essay, description helps readers experience events, reconstruct scenes, and visualize action. Similarly, description can explain the causes or effects of a phenomenon, to compare or contrast animal species, and to provide examples of defensive behavior in children (illustration). Writers use description to keep their readers interested in the material. Description, then, is essential to many types of academic and business writing.

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Use the following guidelines to build effective description into the essays you write:

1. **Include only relevant details.** Whether you describe an event, a person, or a scene, the sensory details you choose should enhance the reader's understanding of your subject.
2. **Keep the description focused.** Select enough details to make your essential points and dominant impression clear. Readers may become impatient if you include too many details.
3. **Make sure the description fits the essay's tone and point of view.** A personal description, for example, is not appropriate in an essay explaining a technical process.

In "Bloggers without Borders . . ." on pages 298–300, the author incorporates description into a narrative essay.

A GUIDED WRITING ASSIGNMENT

The following guide will lead you through the process of writing an essay that uses description. You may choose to write a descriptive essay or to employ description within an essay that relies on another pattern of development. Depending on your learning style, you may choose to work through this Guided Writing Assignment in various ways. If you are an abstract learner, for example, you might begin by brainstorming about the general subject. If you are a concrete learner, you might prefer to begin by freewriting specific details. If you are a pragmatic learner, you might start by thinking about how to organize your description.

Learning Style Options

The Assignment

Write a descriptive essay using one of the following topics or one that you think of on your own:

1. An adult toy, such as a camera, a DVD player, a computer, golf clubs, or a cooking gadget
2. A hobby or sport that you enjoy doing or watching others do on campus, in your neighborhood, or on television
3. An annoying or obnoxious person or a pleasant, courteous one

Your classmates are your audience.

As you develop your description, consider using other patterns of development. For example, you might compare and contrast an unfamiliar activity to one you engage in regularly, or you might narrate an incident that reveals a person's positive or negative qualities.

For more on comparison and contrast, see Chapter 15. For more on narration, see Chapter 11.

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Generating Ideas and Details

Use the following steps to help you choose a topic and generate ideas.

Choosing a Topic

To write an effective description, you must be familiar with the subject or have the opportunity to observe the subject directly. Never try to describe the campus computer lab without visiting it or the pizza served in the snack bar without tasting it.

Use the following suggestions to choose an appropriate topic:

1. Use freewriting, mapping, group brainstorming, or another prewriting technique to generate a list of objects, activities, or people that fit the assignment.
2. Look over your list of possible topics. Identify the one or two subjects that you find most interesting and that you can describe in detail.
3. Make sure your subject is one you are familiar with or one you can readily observe. You may need to observe the object, activity, or person several times as you work through your essay.

Essay in Progress 1

Using the preceding suggestions, choose a topic to write about for the assignment option you selected on page 279.

Considering Your Purpose, Audience, and Point of View

A descriptive essay may be objective, subjective, or both, depending on the writer's purpose. In an *objective* essay, the writer's purpose is to inform—to present information or communicate ideas without obvious bias or emotion. All writers convey their feelings to some extent, but in an objective essay the writer strives to focus on giving information. For example, a geologist's description of a rock formation written for a scientific journal would be largely objective; its purpose would be to inform readers of the height of the formation, the type of rock it contains, and other characteristics of the subject. Objective essays are generally written in the third person.

In a *subjective* essay, which is often written in the first person, the writer's purpose is to create an emotional response. Whereas an objective essay describes only what the writer observes or experiences, a subjective essay describes both the observation or experience *and* the writer's feelings about it. Therefore, a rock climber's description of a rock formation would focus on the writer's impressions of and reactions to the experience of climbing it, such as the feeling of the smooth rock on a hot day and the exhilaration of reaching the top. But the rock climber's description might also include objective details about the height and composition of the rock formation to help readers see and feel what it's like to climb one.

Once you've chosen a subject and considered your purpose and point of view, think about your audience. For this assignment, your audience is your classmates. How familiar are your classmates with your subject? If they are unfamiliar with the subject, you will need to provide a more thorough introduction and a greater amount of detail than if your audience has some knowledge of it.

For more on conducting observations, see Chapter 22, pp. 517–18.

For more on prewriting strategies, see Chapter 5.

For more on purpose, audience, and point of view, see Chapter 5, pp. 106–9.

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Choosing an Aspect of Your Subject to Emphasize

Almost any subject you choose will be made up of many more details than you could possibly include in an essay. Start by selecting several possible slants, or angles on your subject that you would like to emphasize. If your subject is a person, you might focus on a particular character trait, such as compulsiveness or sense of humor, and then generate a list of descriptive details that illustrate the trait. To describe an object, you might emphasize its usefulness, value, or beauty. Choose the one slant that seems most promising and for which you generated plenty of sensory details.

For more on narrowing a topic, see Chapter 5, pp. 104–6.

Essay in Progress 2

Using one or more prewriting techniques, come up with several possible slants on your subject and details to support them. Then choose the slant about which you can write the most effective description.

Collecting Details That Describe Your Subject

Once you've decided on a slant to emphasize, you're ready for the next step—collecting and recording additional sensory details. The following suggestions will help you generate details:

1. Brainstorm about your subject. Record any sensory details that support the slant you have chosen.
2. Try describing your subject to a friend, concentrating on the slant you have chosen. You may discover that details come quickly during conversation. Make notes on what you said and on your friend's response.
3. Draw a quick sketch of your subject and label the parts. You may find yourself recalling additional details as you draw.
4. Divide a piece of paper or a computer file into five sections. Label the sections *sight*, *sound*, *taste*, *touch*, and *smell*. Consider the following characteristics in developing sensory details.

Learning Style Options

For more on generating details, see Chapter 5, pp. 112–13.

For more on prewriting strategies, see Chapter 5.

TABLE 12.1 Characteristics to Consider in Developing Sensory Details

Sight	Sound	Smell	Taste	Touch
Color	Volume	Agreeable/ disagreeable	Pleasant/ unpleasant	Texture
Pattern	Pitch	Strength	Salty, sweet, sour, bitter	Weight
Shape	Quality			Temperature
Size				

Finding Comparisons and Choosing a Vantage Point

Try to think of appropriate comparisons—similes, metaphors, or analogies—for as many details in your list as possible. Jot down your comparisons in the margin next to the relevant details in your list. Don't expect to find a comparison for each detail. Your goal is to discover one or two strong comparisons that you can use in your essay.

Next consider whether to use a fixed or moving vantage point. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What vantage point(s) will provide the most useful information?
2. From which vantage point(s) can I provide the most revealing or striking details?

Essay in Progress 3

Use one or more of the preceding suggestions to develop details that support the aspect of your subject that you are emphasizing. Then find comparisons and decide on a vantage point.

Evaluating Your Details

Evaluate the details you have collected to determine which ones you can use in your essay. Begin by rereading all of your notes with a critical eye. Highlight vivid, concrete details that will create pictures in your reader's mind. Eliminate vague details as well as those that do not support your slant on the subject. If you are working on a computer, highlight usable ideas by making them bold or moving them to a separate page or document for easy access when drafting.

Trying Out Your Ideas on Others

Working in a group of two or three students, discuss your ideas and details for this chapter's assignment. Each writer should explain his or her slant on the subject and provide a list of the details collected for the subject. Then, as a group, evaluate the writer's details and suggest improvements.

Essay in Progress 4

Use your notes and the comments of your classmates to evaluate the details you have collected so far. Omit irrelevant and vague details, and add more vivid and concrete details if they are needed.

Creating a Dominant Impression

As noted earlier, think of the dominant impression as a thesis that conveys your main point and holds the rest of your essay together. The dominant impression also creates a mood or feeling about the subject, which all other details in your essay explain or support. The dominant impression you decide on should be the one about which you feel most knowledgeable and confident. It should also appeal to your audience, offer an unusual perspective, and provide new insights on your subject.

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Essay in Progress 5

Using the preceding guidelines, select the dominant impression you want to convey about your subject, and do additional prewriting, if necessary, to gather enough details to support it.

Organizing and Drafting

When you are satisfied with your dominant impression and your support for it, you are ready to organize your ideas and draft your essay.

For more on drafting an essay, see Chapter 7.

Choosing a Method of Organization

Select the method of organization that will best support your dominant impression. For example, if you have chosen to focus on a person's slovenly appearance, then a spatial (top to bottom, left to right) organization may be effective. If you are describing a scary visit to a wildlife preserve, then chronological order would be a useful method of organization. A most-to-least or least-to-most arrangement might work best for a description of the symptoms of pneumonia. Also consider organizing your details by the five senses. For instance, to describe a chocolate-chip cookie, you could give details about how it looks, how it smells, how it tastes, and how it feels in your mouth.

If you are working on a computer, cut and paste to try different methods of organization.

Regardless of which method you choose for organizing your details, be sure to connect your ideas and guide your reader with transitional words and phrases.

For a list of transitions, see Chapter 8, pp. 175–76.

Drafting the Description

As you draft your essay, remember that all of your details must support your dominant impression. Other details, no matter how interesting or important they may seem, should not be included. For example, if you are describing the way apes in a zoo imitate one another and humans, only details about how the apes mimic other apes and people should be included. Other details, such as the condition of the apes' environment and the types of animals nearby, do not belong in the essay. Be careful as well about the *number* of details you include. Too many details will tire your readers, but an insufficient number will leave your readers unconvinced of your main point. Select striking sensory details that make your point effectively; leave out details that tell the reader little or nothing.

For more on writing effective paragraphs, including introductions and conclusions, see Chapter 7.

Try also to include one or two telling metaphors or similes. If you cannot think of any, however, don't stretch to construct them. Effective comparisons usually come to mind as you examine your subject. Contrived comparisons will only lessen the impact of your essay.

As you write your description, remember that the sensory language you use should enable your readers to re-create the person, object, or scene in their minds. Keep the following three guidelines in mind as you write:

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1. **Create images that appeal to the five senses.** As noted earlier, your descriptions should appeal to one or more of the senses. See pages 270–71 for examples of ways to engage each of the five senses.

2. **Avoid vague, general descriptions.** Use specific, not vague, language to describe your subject. Notice the differences between the following descriptions.

VAGUE	The pizza was cheaply prepared.
CONCRETE	The supposedly “large” pizza was miniature, with a nearly imperceptible layer of sauce, a light dusting of cheese, a few paper-thin slices of pepperoni, and one or two stray mushroom slices.

Vivid descriptions hold your readers’ interest and give them a more complete picture of your subject. For example, notice how the list below becomes increasingly more concrete.

Animal → dog → golden retriever → male golden retriever → six-month-old male golden retriever puppy → Ivan, my six-month-old male golden retriever puppy

You can create a similar progression of descriptive words for any person, object, or place that you want to describe.

3. **Use figures of speech and analogies effectively.** Figures of speech (similes, metaphors) and analogies create memorable images that enliven your writing and capture your readers’ attention. Here are some tips for using figurative language in your writing:

- Choose fresh, surprising images. Avoid overused clichés such as *cold as ice* and *it’s a hop, skip, and a jump away*.
- Make sure the similarity between the two items being compared is apparent. If you write “Peter looked like an unpeeled tangerine,” your reader will not be able to guess what characteristics Peter shares with the tangerine. “Peter’s skin was as dimpled as a tangerine peel” gives the reader a clearer idea of what Peter looks like.
- Don’t mix or combine figures of speech. Such expressions, called **mixed metaphors**, are confusing and often unintentionally humorous. For example, the following sentence mixes images of a hawk and a wolf.

The fighter jet was a hawk soaring into the clouds, growling as it sought its prey.

Essay in Progress 6

Draft your essay. Use the preceding suggestions to organize your details and support your dominant impression. Even if your essay is primarily descriptive, consider incorporating a narrative, an illustration, or a comparison (or another pattern of development) to strengthen the dominant impression.

Analyzing and Revising

If possible, set your draft aside for a day or two before rereading and revising it. As you reread, focus on overall effectiveness, not on grammar and mechanics. To analyze your draft, use one or more of the following strategies:

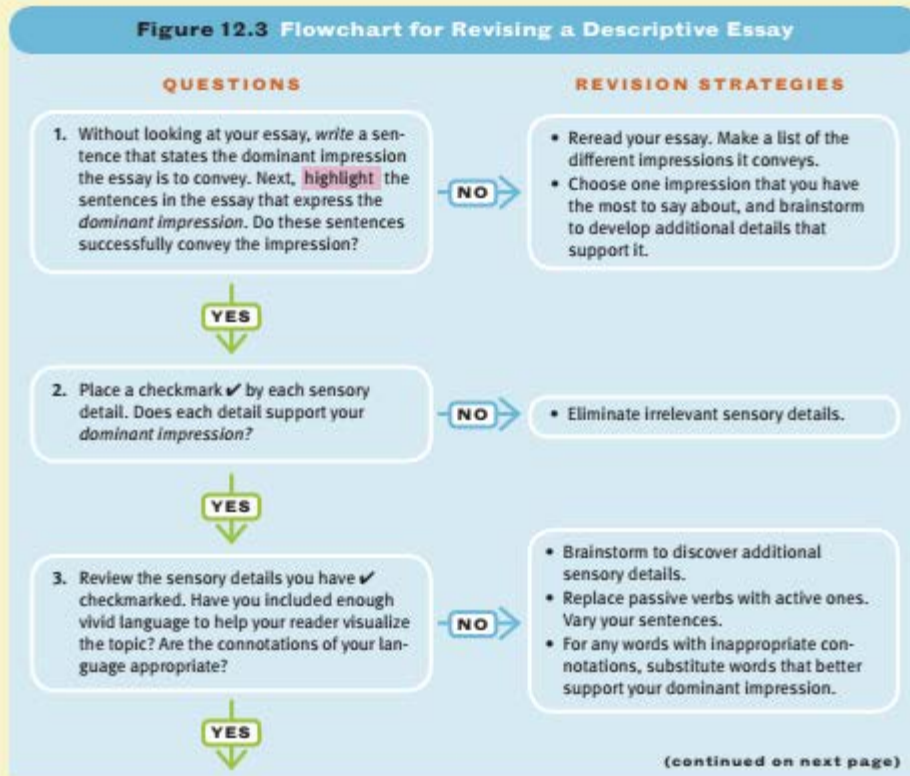
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1. Reread your paper aloud, or ask a friend to do so as you listen. You may “hear” parts that seem contrived, skimpy, or do not work.
2. Ask a classmate to read your draft and describe the dominant impression, comparing his or her version to the one you intended. Note ideas that your reader overlooked or misinterpreted.
3. Write an outline or draw a graphic organizer (using the format shown on p. 275), or update the outline or graphic organizer you prepared earlier. Look for ideas that do not seem to fit or that lack supporting details and for places where your organization needs tightening.

Learning Style Options

Use Figure 12.3 to help you discover the strengths and weaknesses of your descriptive essay. You might also ask a classmate to review your essay using the questions in the flowchart. For each answer that refers you to the right column of the chart, ask your reviewer to explain why he or she answered in that way.

For more on the benefits of peer review, see Chapter 9, pp. 188–91.



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Essay in Progress 7

Using Figure 12.3 as a guide, as well as suggestions made by your classmate, revise your essay.

Editing and Proofreading

The last step is to check your revised essay for errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. Be sure to look for the types of errors you tend to make. (Refer to your error log.)

For more on keeping an error log, see Chapter 10, pp. 227–22.

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For descriptive writing, pay particular attention to the punctuation of adjectives. Keep the following rules in mind:

1. Use a comma between coordinate adjectives that are not joined by *and*.

- Singh was a *confident, skilled* pianist.

Coordinate adjectives are a series of adjectives whose order can be changed (*skilled, confident pianist* or *confident, skilled pianist*).

2. Do not use commas between cumulative adjectives, whose order cannot be changed.

- *Two frightened brown eyes* peered at us from under the sofa.

You would not write *frightened two brown eyes*.

3. Use a hyphen to connect two words that work together as an adjective before a noun unless the first word is an adverb ending in *-ly*.

- *well-used* book
- *foil-wrapped* pizza
- *perfectly thrown* pass

Essay in Progress 8

Edit and proofread your essay, paying particular attention to the use and punctuation of adjectives and to the errors listed in your error log.

Students Write

Ted Sawchuck, a journalism student at the University of Maryland at College Park, wrote this essay in response to an assignment in one of his classes. He was asked to describe a workplace situation that he had experienced. As you read, study the annotations and pay particular attention to Sawchuck's use of sensory language that helps you see and feel what he has experienced.

Heatstroke with a Side of Burn Cream

Ted Sawchuck

I sprinkle the last layer of cheese on top of my nachos--no time to watch the cheddar melt--and turn sideways, nearly falling face-first on grimy, spongy rubber mats. Catching my fall and the plate, I whip a towel from my belt with my free hand, open the scalding-hot oven door, and slide in the chips to toast before slapping a palm on top of the now-light-brown quesadilla on the rack below and pulling it out onto a clean part of the towel for a 180 degree turn to the counter behind. A pizza cutter makes three smooth cuts; the quesadilla is plated with three small cups

READING

1 Introduction: Sawchuck builds toward his dominant impression by describing a hectic evening in a restaurant kitchen.

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(guac, salsa, sour cream) and handed to the window. I slap the bell, bellow “Jamie! Nachos!”, and spin back to my station too fast to see a gorgeous grad student scoop up the plate and scoot it out to her table.

Sawchuck identifies the topic of his description. Vivid, active verbs help readers visualize the setting.

Welcome to a restaurant kitchen during lunch or dinner rush, the time when the restaurant is packed with hungry people and the kitchen is maniacally cranking away at their orders. I’m thrashing appetizers, trying to keep up with college students’ demands for fried goodies, nachos, and quesadillas. My friend A is working the grill, cooking fifteen burgers and a couple chicken breasts for sandwiches, and M, a mutual friend, is buzzing around prepping plates, flirting with waitresses, and handling salads and desserts, both of which require time away from the main preparation line.

In this paragraph and the next three, the topic sentences introduce different kinds of sensory details that help readers imagine the kitchen. Here, a comparison adds humor and realism to visual details.

The kitchen space I spend eight hours a day in is about the size of my one-room apartment, which is slightly larger than your average prison cell. Three people, and more on horribly busy days, work in that space, crammed in with four fryers, a massive grill, a griddle, an oven, a microwave, two refrigeration units with prep counters, bins of tortilla chips, a burning-hot steam table bigger than the grill, and vast tubs of bacon. If I put both arms out and rotated, I’d severely injure at least two people.

Sensory details describe the heat in the kitchen and Sawchuck’s efforts to deal with it.

The most common problem for nonchefs is dealing with the heat. On one side of my work station are four fryers full of 350-degree oil. On the other, there is the steam table, so named because it boils water to keep things warm—especially deadly for forearms. Burns aren’t the worst of it. You’ll lose some skin, but you won’t die. Overheating or dehydration can kill. When it’s over 110 degrees in your workplace, fluid consumption is essential. I start gushing sweat the second I clock in and don’t stop until about half an hour after clocking out. Even though we have huge buzzing exhaust fans to suck the greasy smoke away from our lungs and a warehouse-sized room fan to keep it at a low triple digits, I drink enough water to fill the steam table twice during busy times. My bandana frequently restrains ice cubes as well as rapidly tangling hair.

Sensory details describe the sounds in the kitchen.

The fans add to the noise, as do the chattering servers, the head chef yelling out orders, other cooks yelling out updates, and the music. Some kitchens run on music, others don’t. I like to blare NPR when it is just me and A working, but on nights with a full staff, the rap music that gives rap music a bad name is trotted out—you know the kind I mean—the mainstream, with pre-choreographed dances, predictable couplets about the joys of ‘caine and loose women, and frequently more bleeped words than heard. The volume at which such music is played means I have to scream everything and never hear orders. It’s like playing tennis with a ball that randomly disappears.

Sensory details describe the physical dangers of the job. Notice how the sentences in this paragraph vary in length and structure.

There are uncountable ways to damage yourself in a restaurant kitchen. If you didn’t touch anything—just stood there—you’d still be at risk for smoke inhalation, steam burns, knife cuts from other people, spills, splatters, and being bowled over—because no one stands still in a professional

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kitchen. Even walking in a kitchen is dangerous. The only time the kitchen floor at the to-remain-nameless restaurant at which I cook is clean is immediately after washing, a process that results in innumerable gallons of grody gray water and the inadvertent freeing of at least one mouse from his glue trap. Moving in that kitchen is a constant struggle. Because the floor is slippery red tile, we put down thick rubber mats, which make standing for eight hours much easier on the knees. Unfortunately, these mats are coated, nay permeated, with everything we've ever spilled on them. Moving is like trying to skate across a frying pan with butter strapped to your feet. Sometimes you'll need to use a skating-like sliding motion to get through without falling face-first in the awfulness. Falling is worse, because if you grab to catch something your options are a fryer (bad), the grill (worse), or your head chef (worst of all).

Working in a restaurant during rush makes journalism on deadline look like elementary basket-weaving. While reporters are expected to get everything right in every story, they're only writing at most three stories a day. At one point during the worst dinner rush I can remember, I was cooking five nachos, eight quesadillas, four sampler plates, and three orders of wings at the same time. I had to get every component of those dishes right, from the plate they were served on to the garnish, serving size, cooking temperature, and appearance--and I needed to have done it fifteen minutes ago because the customers have been waiting. They don't care that we're so stacked up there's no more room in the oven for the nachos and quesadillas that are stacking up. Did I mention sampler plates have four items each, all with different cooking times and prep methods?

Working in a restaurant kitchen is like speaking a foreign language. Once you stop thinking about it and just do it, you can keep up, sometimes. Other times, the pressure builds up. Maybe half the restaurant fills up in five minutes, or it's game night in a college town. Maybe the servers screwed up and gave you all their tables' orders at once instead of as they came in. Either way, you've got to shift into the next gear. Sometimes it means throwing on ten orders of wings in fryers only meant to hold eight, then garnishing a stack of plates for the main course guys so they can focus on getting twenty burgers of different doneness levels cooked properly. For the appetizer guy, it usually means never being allowed to make a mistake, because any delay in appetizer **futzes** the flow of the meal. The main course is being cooked at the same time, so if my stuff comes in late, then the properly cooked main course will either be overdone or arrive cold because no one wants the main course five minutes after receiving an appetizer.

When you're late in the restaurant world, it's called being in the weeds. The origin of the name is unclear, but friends of mine note that you hide bodies where weeds grow because it's a sign of low foot traffic. Being in the weeds is not as bad as rendition to Egypt, but everyone, servers and management included, can see you're behind. In addition to getting chewed out by the head chef (who would rather yell at you than help you), you lose any chance you had with

7 In the **topic sentences** of this paragraph and the next one, Sawchuck uses comparisons to try to convey the essence of restaurant kitchen work. Notice his organization for the essay: after several paragraphs presenting the concrete physical details of the job, he shifts to the more abstract issues of the mental complexity and time pressure involved.

8 Notice how the connotations of **futzes** support the dominant impression better than a more formal word such as *disrupts* would. Sawchuck explains a term used in restaurant work that most readers will not know. Conclusion: Sawchuck offers a final comment on restaurant kitchen work and makes a direct appeal to readers.

9

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that subtle, kittenish server. Not holding your own on the line means much less fun after work. When you're in the weeds (or "weeded"), you can ask for help or suck it up. Asking for help is frowned upon; your only route is taking a breath and pulling yourself out. I spend a lot of time in the weeds, unsurprising for a kid whose only chef-like experience was making breakfast on Sundays at home and the occasional grilled cheese sandwich.

Like print journalism and the armed forces, professional cooking requires a very specific skill set. If you've got it, get a good knife and get to practicing. If not, be a little nicer next time the entree doesn't come exactly when you expect it.

Analyzing the Writer's Technique

1. Describe Sawchuck's dominant impression about working in a restaurant kitchen. Is it stated explicitly or implied?
2. Which examples of sensory language did you find particularly strong and engaging? What makes them effective? Which, if any, are weak, and how can they be improved?
3. The annotations point out some of the numerous comparisons Sawchuck uses to explain his topic. Identify several others. Which ones are particularly effective? Do any seem ineffective? If so, why?
4. In addition to description, what other patterns of development does the writer use? How do these patterns make the description more effective?

Thinking Critically about Description

1. Sawchuck leaves out the name of the restaurant. What other information is omitted that might have given you a fuller understanding of Sawchuck or his job?
2. What is Sawchuck's tone? How does it affect your attitude toward the information that is contained in the essay?
3. One of the annotations (para. 8) points out the connotations of a particular word Sawchuck uses. In paragraph 4, how are the connotations of "gushing sweat" different from those of other language he could have chosen, such as "sweating profusely" or "gushing perspiration"? Do you think he made the best choice, given the dominant impression he is trying to create? Why or why not?
4. The phrase "in the weeds" (9) offers a visual metaphor. What connotations does this phrase have for you?

Reacting to the Essay

1. Sawchuck notes that falling behind on the job results in less fun after work. Have you found that job performance can affect off-the-job relationships with coworkers? If so, how?
2. Do you think Sawchuck is satisfied with his job despite the adverse working conditions? Discuss to what degree working conditions affect job performance and satisfaction.

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MAKING CONNECTIONS**Working Low-Paying Jobs**

Both "Selling in Minnesota" (pp. 254–56) and "Heatstroke with a Side of Burn Cream" (pp. 287–90) describe the writer's work experiences. Ehrenreich works in Wal-Mart as a stock clerk, and Sawchuck works in a restaurant kitchen.

Analyzing the Readings

1. Compare how the two authors feel about their work experiences. How does each author reveal his or her attitudes? How were they the same, and how did they differ?
2. As a well-known writer who is researching low-paying jobs, Ehrenreich works "undercover," but Sawchuck is an actual worker. How do you think these differences affect the essays and the authors' reported experiences?

Essay Idea

Write an essay describing your work experiences. Choose one job you have held, describe it to create a dominant impression, and explain whether your experiences were more similar to Ehrenreich's or Sawchuck's—or why they did not resemble those of either.

3. Is it possible to be "in the weeds" academically? Write a journal entry exploring either reasons for being in the weeds or ways to get yourself out of the weeds.
4. Sawchuck describes the time pressures he experiences. Write an essay describing the time pressures you experience in either an academic or a workplace setting.

READING A DESCRIPTION

The following section provides advice for reading descriptive essays. Two model essays illustrate the characteristics of description covered in this chapter and provide opportunities to examine, analyze, and react to the writer's ideas. The second essay uses a description as part of a narrative essay.

Working with Text: Reading Descriptive Essays

When you read descriptive essays, you are more concerned with impressions and images than you are with the logical progression of ideas. To get the full benefit of descriptive writing, you need to connect what you are reading to your own senses of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. Below are some guidelines for reading descriptive essays.

For more on reading strategies, see Chapter 3.

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What to Look For, Highlight, and Annotate

1. Plan on reading the essay more than once. Read it the first time to get a general sense of what's going on in the essay. Then reread it, this time paying attention to sensory details and highlighting particularly striking ones.
2. Be alert for the dominant impression as you read. If it is not directly stated, ask yourself this question: How does the author want me to feel about the subject?
3. Identify the author's method of organization.
4. Analyze each paragraph and decide how it contributes to the dominant impression. In a marginal annotation, summarize your analysis.
5. Observe how the author uses language to achieve his or her effect; notice especially the use of comparisons, sentence structure, and active verbs.
6. Study the introduction and conclusion. How does the introduction engage readers? How does the conclusion bring the essay to a satisfying close?
7. Evaluate the title. What meaning does it contribute to the essay?
8. Use marginal annotations or your journal to record the thoughts and feelings the essay evokes in you. Try to answer these questions: What did I feel as I read? How did I respond? What feelings was I left with after reading the essay?

How to Find Ideas to Write About

For more on discovering ideas for a response paper, see Chapter 4.

Because you may be asked to write a response to a descriptive essay, look for ideas to write about as you read. Try to think of situations that evoked similar images and feelings in you. For example, if you are reading an essay describing the peace and serenity the author experienced at a remote lake in a forest, try to think of situations in which you felt peace and serenity or of how you felt when you visited a national park or wilderness area. Perhaps instead of pleasant feelings in this situation you had negative ones, such as anxiety about being in a remote spot. Such negative feelings may be worth exploring as well.

Thinking Critically about Description

The words a writer chooses to describe a subject can largely determine how readers view and respond to that subject. For example, suppose you want to describe a person's physical appearance. You can make the person seem attractive and appealing or ugly and repellent, depending on the details you choose and the words you select.

APPEALING	The stranger had an impish, childlike grin, a smooth complexion with high cheekbones, and strong yet gentle hands.
REPELLENT	The stranger had limp blond hair, cold vacant eyes, and teeth stained by tobacco.

Writers use details and word connotations to shape their essays and affect their readers' response. Use the following questions to think critically about the descriptions you read.

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What Details Does the Writer Omit?

As you read an essay, ask yourself: What hasn't the writer told me? or What else would I like to know about the subject? As you have seen, writers often omit details because they are not relevant; they may also omit details that contradict the dominant impression they intend to convey.

To be sure you are getting a complete picture of a subject, consult more than one source of information. You have probably noticed that television news programs usually have slightly different slants on a news event, each offering different details or film footage. Once you view several versions of the same event, you eventually form your own impression of it by combining and synthesizing the various reports. Often, you must do the same thing when reading descriptions. Pull together information from several sources and form your own impression.

What Is the Writer's Attitude toward the Subject?

The sensory details writers choose often reveal their feelings and attitudes toward the subject. If a writer describes a car as "fast and sleek," the wording suggests approval, whereas if the writer describes it as "bold and glitzy," the wording suggests a less favorable attitude. As you read, pay attention to connotations; they are often used intentionally to create a particular emotional response. Get in the habit of highlighting words with strong connotations or annotating them in the margin.

Paying attention to connotations is one way to judge whether a writer is presenting a neutral, objective description or was influenced by positive or negative feelings when he or she wrote the description. For example, in thinking critically about Ted Sawchuk's "Heatstroke with a Side of Burn Cream," you might wonder how Sawchuk's friends and coworkers M and A might describe the scenes in the restaurant and the related physical and mental stresses differently than Sawchuk did.

DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY

As you read the following essay by Annie Dillard, consider how she uses the characteristics of description discussed in this chapter.

The Deer at Providencia

Annie Dillard

Annie Dillard is a poet, essayist, fiction writer, and literary critic who is known for her writings about nature and humans' relation to it. Her works include *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1975), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize; *The Writing Life* (1989); *The Living* (1992); *The Maytrees* (2007); and *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982), from which this essay was taken. As you read this descriptive essay, highlight the descriptive words and phrases that affect you most strongly.

There were four of us North Americans in the jungle, in the Ecuadorian jungle on the banks of the Napo River in the Amazon watershed. The other three North Americans were

READING

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metropolitan men. We stayed in tents in one riverside village, and visited others. At the village called Providencia we saw a sight which moved us, and which shocked the men.

The first thing we saw when we climbed the riverbank to the village of Providencia was the deer. It was roped to a tree on the grass clearing near the thatch shelter where we would eat lunch.

The deer was small, about the size of a whitetail fawn, but apparently full-grown. It had a rope around its neck and three feet caught in the rope. Someone said that the dogs had caught it that morning and the villagers were going to cook and eat it that night.

This clearing lay at the edge of the little thatched hut village. We could see the villagers going about their business, scattering feed corn for hens about their houses, and wandering down paths to the river to bathe. The village headman was our host; he stood beside us as we watched the deer struggle. Several village boys were interested in the deer; they formed part of the circle we made around it in the clearing. So also did four businessmen from Quito who were attempting to guide us around the jungle. Few of the very different people standing in this circle had a common language. We watched the deer, and no one said much.

The deer lay on its side at the rope's very end, so the rope lacked slack to let it rest its head in the dust. It was "pretty," delicate of bone like all deer, and thin-skinned for the tropics. Its skin looked virtually hairless, in fact, and almost translucent, like a membrane. Its neck was no thicker than my wrist; it was rubbed open on the rope, and gashed. Trying to paw itself free of the rope, the deer had scratched its own neck with its hooves. The raw underside of its neck showed red stripes and some bruises bleeding inside the muscles. Now three of its feet were hooked in the rope under its jaw. It could not stand, of course, on one leg, so it could not move to slacken the rope and ease the pull on its throat and enable it to rest its head.

Repeatedly the deer paused, motionless, its eyes veiled, with only its rib cage in motion, and its breaths the only sound. Then, after I would think, "It has given up; now it will die," it would heave. The rope twanged; the tree leaves clattered; the deer's free foot beat the ground. We stepped back and held our breaths. It thrashed, kicking, but only one leg moved; the other three legs tightened inside the rope's loop. Its hip jerked; its spine shook. Its eyes rolled; its tongue, thick with spittle, pushed in and out. Then it would rest again. We watched this for fifteen minutes.

Once three young native boys charged in, released its trapped legs, and jumped back to the circle of people. But instantly the deer scratched up its neck with its hooves and snared its forelegs in the rope again. It was easy to imagine a third and then a fourth leg soon stuck, like Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby.

We watched the deer from the circle, and then we drifted on to lunch. Our palm-roofed shelter stood on a grassy promontory from which we could see the deer tied to the tree, pigs and hens walking under village houses, and black-and-white cattle standing in the river. There was even a breeze.

Lunch, which was the second and better lunch we had that day, was hot and fried. There was a big fish called *doncella*, a kind of catfish, dipped whole in corn flour and beaten egg, then deep fried. With our fingers we pulled soft fragments of it from its sides to our plates, and ate; it was delicate fish-flesh, fresh and mild. Someone found the roe, and I ate of that too—it was fat and stronger, like egg yolk, naturally enough, and warm.

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There was also a stew of meat in shreds with rice and pale brown gravy. I had asked 10
 what kind of deer it was tied to the tree; Pepe had answered in Spanish, "Gama." Now
 they told us this was *gama* too, stewed. I suspect the word means merely game or veni-
 son. At any rate, I heard that the village dogs had comered another deer just yesterday,
 and it was this deer which we were now eating in full sight of the whole article. It was
 good. I was surprised at its tenderness. But it is a fact that high levels of lactic acid,
 which builds up in muscle tissues during exertion, tenderizes.

After the fish and meat we ate bananas fried in chunks and served on a tray; they 11
 were sweet and full of flavor. I felt terrific. My shirt was wet and cool from swimming;
 I had had a night's sleep, two decent walks, three meals, and a swim—everything
 tasted good. From time to time each one of us, separately, would look beyond our
 shaded roof to the sunny spot where the deer was still convulsing in the dust. Our meal
 completed, we walked around the deer and back to the boats.

That night I learned that while we were watching the deer, the others were watching 12
 me.

We four North Americans grew close in the jungle in a way that was not the usual 13
 artificial intimacy of travelers. We liked each other. We stayed up all that night talking,
 murmuring, as though we rocked on hammocks slung above time. The others were
 from big cities: New York, Washington, Boston. They all said that I had no expression
 on my face when I was watching the deer—or at any rate, not the expression they
 expected.

They had looked to see how I, the only woman, and the youngest, was taking the 14
 sight of the deer's struggles. I looked detached, apparently, or hard, or calm, or fo-
 cused, still. I don't know. I was thinking. I remember feeling very old and energetic. I
 could say like Thoreau that I have traveled widely in Roanoke, Virginia. I have thought
 a great deal about carnivorousness; I eat meat. These things are not issues; they are
 mysteries.

Gentlemen of the city, what surprises you? That there is suffering here, or that I know it? 15

We lay in the tent and talked. "If it had been my wife," one man said with special 16
 vigor, amazed, "she wouldn't have cared *what* was going on; she would have dropped
everything right at that moment and gone in the village from here to there to there, she
 would not have *stopped* until that animal was out of its suffering one way or another.
 She couldn't *bear* to see a creature in agony like that."

I nodded. 17

Now I am home. When I wake I comb my hair before the mirror above my dresser. Every 18
 morning for the past two years I have seen in that mirror, beside my sleep-softened
 face, the blackened face of a burnt man. It is a wire-service photograph clipped from
 a newspaper and taped to my mirror. The caption reads: "Alan McDonald in Miami
 hospital bed." All you can see in the photograph is a smudged triangle of face from
 his eyelids to his lower lip; the rest is bandages. You cannot see the expression in his
 eyes; the bandages shade them.

The story, headed MAN BURNED FOR SECOND TIME, begins: 19

"Why does God hate me?" Alan McDonald asked from his hospital bed.
 "When the gunpowder went off, I couldn't believe it," he said. "I just couldn't
 believe it. I said, 'No, God couldn't do this to me again.'"

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He was in a burn ward in Miami, in serious condition. I do not even know if he lived. I wrote him a letter at the time, cringing.

He had been burned before, thirteen years previously, by flaming gasoline. For years he had been having his body restored and his face remade in dozens of operations. He had been a boy, and then a burnt boy. He had already been stunned by what could happen, by how life could veer. 20

Once I read that people who survive bad burns tend to go crazy; they have a very high suicide rate. Medicine cannot ease their pain; drugs just leak away, soaking the sheets, because there is no skin to hold them in. The people just lie there and weep. Later they kill themselves. They had not known, before they were burned, that the world included such suffering, that life could permit them personally such pain. 21

This time a bowl of gunpowder has exploded on McDonald. 22

"I didn't realize what had happened at first," he recounted. "And then I heard that sound from 13 years ago. I was burning. I rolled to put the fire out and I thought, 'Oh God, not again.'

"If my friend hadn't been there, I would have jumped into a canal with a rock around my neck."

His wife concludes the piece, "Man, it just isn't fair."

I read the whole clipping again every morning. This is the Big Time here, every minute of it. Will someone please explain to Alan McDonald in his dignity, to the deer at Providencia in his dignity, what is going on? And mail me the carbon. 23

When we walked by the deer at Providencia for the last time, I said to Pepe, with a pitying glance at the deer, "Pobrecito" — "poor little thing." But I was trying out Spanish. I knew at the time it was a ridiculous thing to say. 24



This photograph of a college student who was badly burned in a dormitory fire was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

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Examining the Reading

1. What was the author's outward reaction to the deer in distress?
2. What reaction did Dillard's fellow travelers expect her to have?
3. What is the author's attitude about eating meat?
4. Why does Alan McDonald think God is punishing him?
5. Explain the meaning of each of the following words as it is used in the reading: *thatch* (para. 2), *translucent* (5), *slacken* (5), *promontory* (8), and *carnivorousness* (14).

Analyzing the Writer's Technique

1. Express the essay's dominant impression in your own words.
2. Explain the comparison between the deer and McDonald.
3. Discuss the contrast between the author's lunch and the animal she sees. How are they different? How are they the same?
4. Evaluate the essay's conclusion. If the essay had ended with paragraph 23 instead of paragraph 24, would the conclusion have been more effective or less so? Why?

Thinking Critically about Description

1. What details are omitted from this essay that might have been included?
2. Why does the writer put the word "pretty" (para. 5) in quotations?
3. The author uses the words "tenderness" and "tenderizes" (10), which are related to each other, but have very different connotations. Discuss them and the contrast they create in the essay.
4. Discuss possible reasons that Dillard has a photograph of McDonald pasted to her mirror.

Interpreting a Photograph

What does the photograph on page 296 contribute to the reading? What aspects of it seem especially relevant to the written text? Is this photograph a better illustration for the essay than a photograph of a deer in distress would be? Why, or why not?

Reacting to the Reading

1. How would you have reacted if you were in the village on that day? Why?
2. Do you eat meat? Why or why not? Explain your reasoning and feelings about this issue in a journal entry.
3. The author chose to compare the suffering of a deer and a burn victim. What else could she have chosen to compare the deer with?
4. How do you explain suffering in the world? Write an essay exploring your feelings about this question.

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DESCRIPTION COMBINED WITH OTHER PATTERNS

As you read the following essay, notice how the author uses description within an essay that traces a narrative.

READING

Bloggers without Borders . . .

Riverbend

This selection is the final post from the blog “Baghdad Burning,” written after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq by a woman calling herself Riverbend. She identified herself in her first post by writing, “I’m female, Iraqi and 24. I survived the war. That’s all you need to know. It’s all that matters these days anyway.” Between August 2003 and October 2007, she posted about her personal experiences as well as commentary on the political situation in Iraq. The blog entries, written in English, were published in book form in the United States and were translated and published in many other languages and countries as well. “Baghdad Burning” was also dramatized as a serial on BBC Radio in 2006. As you read, notice how Riverbend creates and reinforces the dominant impression of the piece.

Syria is a beautiful country—at least I think it is. I say “I think” because while I perceive it to be beautiful, I sometimes wonder if I mistake safety, security, and normalcy for ‘beauty.’ In so many ways, Damascus is like Baghdad before the war—bustling streets, occasional traffic jams, markets seemingly always full of shoppers . . . And in so many ways it’s different. The buildings are higher, the streets are generally narrower and there’s a mountain, Qasiyoun, that looms in the distance.

The mountain distracts me, as it does many Iraqis—especially those from Baghdad. Northern Iraq is full of mountains, but the rest of Iraq is quite flat. At night, Qasiyoun blends into the black sky, and the only indication of its presence is a multitude of little, glimmering spots of light—houses and restaurants built right up there on the mountain. Every time I take a picture, I try to work Qasiyoun into it—I try to position the person so that Qasiyoun is in the background.

The first weeks here were something of a cultural shock. It has taken me these last three months to work away certain habits I’d acquired in Iraq after the war. It’s funny how you learn to act a certain way and don’t even know you’re doing strange things—like avoiding people’s eyes in the street or crazily murmuring prayers to yourself when stuck in traffic. It took me at least three weeks to teach myself to walk properly again—with head lifted, not constantly looking behind me.

It is estimated that there are at least 1.5 million Iraqis in Syria today. I believe it. Walking down the streets of Damascus, you can hear the Iraqi accent everywhere. There are areas like Geramana and Qudsiya that are packed full of Iraqi refugees. Syrians are few and far between in these areas. Even the public schools in the areas are full of Iraqi children. A cousin of mine is now attending a school in Qudsiya and his class is composed of twenty-six Iraqi children and five Syrian children. It’s beyond belief sometimes. Most of the families have nothing to live on beyond their savings, which are quickly being depleted with rent and the costs of living.

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5 Within a month of our being here, we began hearing talk about Syria requiring visas from Iraqis, like most other countries. Apparently, our esteemed puppets in power met with Syrian and Jordanian authorities and decided they wanted to take away the last two safe havens remaining for Iraqis — Damascus and Amman. The talk began in late August and was only talk until recently — early October. Iraqis entering Syria now need a visa from the Syrian consulate or embassy in the country they are currently in. In the case of Iraqis still in Iraq, it is said that an approval from the Ministry of Interior is also required (which kind of makes it difficult for people running away from militias OF the Ministry of Interior . . .). Today, there's talk of a possible fifty dollar visa at the border.

6 Iraqis who entered Syria before the visa was implemented were getting a one-month visitation visa at the border. As soon as that month was over, you could take your passport and visit the local immigration bureau. If you were lucky, they would give you an additional month or two. When talk about visas from the Syrian embassy began, they stopped giving an extension on the initial border visa. We, as a family, had a brilliant idea. Before the commotion of visas began, and before we started needing a renewal, we decided to go to one of the border crossings, cross into Iraq, and come back into Syria — everyone was doing it. It would buy us some time — at least two months.

7 We chose a hot day in early September and drove the six hours to Kameshli, a border town in northern Syria. My aunt and her son came with us — they also needed an extension on their visa. There is a border crossing in Kameshli called Yaarubiya. It's one of the simpler crossings because the Iraqi and Syrian borders are only a matter of several meters. You walk out of Syrian territory and then walk into Iraqi territory — simple and safe.

8 When we got to the Yaarubiya border patrol, it hit us that thousands of Iraqis had had our brilliant idea simultaneously — the lines to the border patrol office were endless. Hundreds of Iraqis stood in a long line waiting to have their passports stamped with an exit visa. We joined the line of people and waited. And waited. And waited . . .

9 It took four hours to leave the Syrian border, after which came the lines of the Iraqi border post. Those were even longer. We joined one of the lines of weary, impatient Iraqis. "It's looking like a gasoline line . . ." my younger cousin joked. That was the beginning of another four hours of waiting under the sun, taking baby steps, moving forward ever so slowly. The line kept getting longer. At one point, we could see neither the beginning of the line, where passports were being stamped to enter Iraq, nor the end. Running up and down the line were little boys selling glasses of water, chewing gum and cigarettes. My aunt caught one of them by the arm as he zipped past us, "How many people are in front of us?" He whistled and took a few steps back to assess the situation, "A hundred! A thousand!" He was almost gleeful as he ran off to make business.

10 I had such mixed feelings standing in that line. I was caught between a feeling of yearning, a certain homesickness that sometimes catches me at the oddest moments, and a heavy feeling of dread. What if they didn't agree to let us out again? It wasn't really possible, but what if it happened? What if this was the last time I'd see the Iraqi border? What if we were no longer allowed to enter Iraq for some reason? What if we were never allowed to leave?

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We spent the four hours standing, crouching, sitting and leaning in the line. The sun beat down on everyone equally—Sunnis, Shia and Kurds alike. E. tried to convince the aunt to faint so it would speed the process up for the family, but she just gave us a withering look and stood straighter. People just stood there, chatting, cursing or silent. It was yet another gathering of Iraqis—the perfect opportunity to swap sad stories and ask about distant relations or acquaintances.

We met two families we knew while waiting for our turn. We greeted each other like long lost friends and exchanged phone numbers and addresses in Damascus, promising to visit. I noticed the 23-year-old son, K., from one of the families was missing. I beat down my curiosity and refused to ask where he was. The mother was looking older than I remembered and the father looked constantly lost in thought, or maybe it was grief. I didn't want to know if K. was dead or alive. I'd just have to believe he was alive and thriving somewhere, not worrying about borders or visas. Ignorance really is bliss sometimes. . . .

Back at the Syrian border, we waited in a large group, tired and hungry, having handed over our passports for a stamp. The Syrian immigration man, sifting through dozens of passports, called out names and looked at faces as he handed over the passports patiently, "Stand back please—stand back." There was a general cry toward the back of the crowded hall where we were standing as someone collapsed—as they lifted him I recognized an old man who was there with his family being chaperoned by his sons, leaning on a walking stick.

By the time we had reentered the Syrian border and were headed back to the cab ready to take us into Kameshli, I had resigned myself to the fact that we were refugees. I read about refugees on the Internet daily . . . in the newspapers . . . hear about them on TV. I hear about the estimated 1.5 million plus Iraqi refugees in Syria and shake my head, never really considering myself or my family as one of them. After all, refugees are people who sleep in tents and have no potable water or plumbing, right? Refugees carry their belongings in bags instead of suitcases, and they don't have cell phones or Internet access, right? Grasping my passport in my hand like my life depended on it, with two extra months in Syria stamped inside, it hit me how wrong I was. We were all refugees. I was suddenly a number. No matter how wealthy or educated or comfortable, a refugee is a refugee. A refugee is someone who isn't really welcome in any country—including their own . . . especially their own.

We live in an apartment building where two other Iraqis are renting. The people in the floor above us are a Christian family from northern Iraq who got chased out of their village by Peshmerga, and the family on our floor is a Kurdish family who lost their home in Baghdad to militias and were waiting for immigration to Sweden or Switzerland or some such European refugee haven.

The first evening we arrived, exhausted, dragging suitcases behind us, morale a little bit bruised, the Kurdish family sent over their representative—a nine-year-old boy missing two front teeth, holding a lopsided cake, "We're Abu Mohammed's house—across from you—mama says if you need anything, just ask—this is our number. Abu Dalia's family live upstairs, this is their number. We're all Iraqi too. . . . Welcome to the building."

I cried that night because for the first time in a long time, so far away from home, I felt the unity that had been stolen from us in 2003.

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Examining the Reading

1. Why does Riverbend mention and describe the mountain? What is its significance?
2. Why does Riverbend object to the visa requirement?
3. What is Riverbend's attitude toward Iraqi authorities? How does she reveal it?
4. Explain Riverbend's statement "Ignorance really is bliss sometimes" (para. 12) in the context of this reading.
5. When and why does Riverbend finally feel the unity she has not experienced since 2003?
6. Explain the meaning of each of the following words or phrases as it is used in the reading: *normalcy* (1), *cultural shock* (3), *esteemed* (5), *withering look* (11), and *morale* (16). Refer to a dictionary as needed.

Analyzing the Writer's Technique

1. What dominant impression does Riverbend convey in this essay? Is it stated or implied? Explain your answers.
2. What is the significance of the essay's title?
3. How does Riverbend's descriptive language allow you to understand and picture the line at the border? What words and phrases are most descriptive in this section?
4. What patterns other than description does Riverbend use in this essay? What purposes do they serve?

Visualizing the Reading

Riverbend conveys information about her journey and surroundings by using many of the characteristics of descriptive essays. Analyze her use of these characteristics by completing the following chart. Give several examples for each type of characteristic used, including the paragraph numbers for reference. The first one has been done for you.

Descriptive Characteristic	Examples
Active verbs	1. "as he zipped past us" (para. 9) 2. "I beat down my curiosity" (12)
Sensory details (sound, smell, touch, sight, taste)	
Varied sentences	
Comparisons	
Connotative language	

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Thinking Critically about Description

1. What connotation does Riverbend find in the word “refugee”?
2. Riverbend does not discuss how and why her family left Iraq, at least not in this post. How do you think this omission affects the essay?
3. What connotation does the phrase “esteemed puppets in power” (para. 5) have?
4. Is the essay objective, subjective, or a mixture of both? Explain your answer.
5. Describe Riverbend’s tone in this essay. What information does her tone convey that is not directly stated?

Reacting to the Reading

1. Given the hardships of her refugee experience, how and why do you think Riverbend maintains a blog?
2. Discuss the factors that may have led to Riverbend’s family’s decision to leave Iraq.
3. Riverbend states that she “was suddenly a number” (para. 14). Discuss situations in which you or others have felt this way.
4. Write an essay in which you agree or disagree with Riverbend’s statement that “ignorance really is bliss sometimes.” Describe situations from your experience that either support or reject her view.

Applying Your Skills: Additional Essay Assignments

Using what you learned about description in this chapter, write a descriptive essay on one of the topics listed below. Depending on the topic you choose, you may need to conduct library or Internet research.

To Express Your Ideas

1. Suppose a famous person, living or dead, visited your house for dinner. Write an essay describing the person and the evening and expressing your feelings about the occasion.
2. In “Eating Chilli Peppers,” the author describes the love that some people have for eating peppers. Write an essay for your classmates describing a food that a family member or close friend enjoys but that you dislike.

For more on locating and documenting sources, see Part 5.

To Inform Your Reader

3. Write an essay describing destruction or devastation you have observed as a result of a natural disaster (hurricane, flood), an accident, or a form of violence.
4. Write a report for your local newspaper on a local sporting event you recently observed or participated in.

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To Persuade Your Reader

5. Write a letter to persuade your parents to loan you money. The loan may be to purchase a used car or to rent a more expensive apartment, for example. Include a description of your current car or apartment.
6. Both "Heatstroke with a Side of Burn Cream" and "The Deer at Providencia" contain descriptions of food, either its preparation or its consumption. Do you think that Americans are overly concerned with food, or is food an important social and cultural experience? Write a persuasive essay taking a position on the role of food in American culture.

Cases Using Description

7. Imagine that you are a product buyer for a cosmetics distributor, a food company, or a furniture dealership. Write a descriptive review of a product recommending to the board of directors whether or not to distribute it. Use something that you are familiar with or come up with your own product (such as an electronic gadget, an advice book on parenting, or a new cosmetic). Describe the product in a way that will help convince the company to accept your recommendation.
8. Write a brief description of your ideal internship. Then write an essay to accompany your application for your ideal summer internship. The sponsoring agency requires every applicant to submit an essay that describes the knowledge and experience the applicant can bring to the internship and the ways that the position would benefit the applicant personally and professionally.