



Exercises for Developing Descriptive Skills

- Pick someone you have some objective distance from to describe, maybe a teacher, a quirky relative, or a friend. Use details that tell us who they are without describing internal traits. Look for a “telling” detail to bring them into focus. For this exercise allow yourself to stray from the truth if necessary, or exaggerate. 10 min. (5 min. each)
- Describe a person in action, doing a task - maybe a grandparent or parent performing some task you remember. Cooking chores, jobs, hobbies, etc. I remember my dad polishing all of our shoes. Break the task into individual parts and describe each one in order.
- Describe something using a “back door technique” by saying what it is not. “My mother was not the best housekeeper in the world, nor was she a good cook. She didn’t tell funny stories or....”
- Describe an inanimate object using active verbs.
- Make lists of words to use for every sense. (Touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing.)
- Keep a sensory journal. Assign one sense per day M – F. Note 3 things you smelled on Monday, 3 things you touched on Tuesday, etc. This heightens your awareness of your sensory experience. On weekends - take a break, or read through your sensory journal and write a longer description. These can become source material for your stories, or other work.
- Write a description of a scene using only one sense.
- Write a description mixing concrete with abstract. Example: Amy Tan: “She had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow.”
- Describe a food you really love, one that has connotations and memories for you.
- Write a story from your list with the most extravagant descriptive language you can think of – completely over the top.
- Describe a photograph of someone that reveals something about him/her that your story does not yet reveal.
- Describe your character using every sense but sight.

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- Describe your character in three different environments, perhaps at work, with friends, alone,
- Write a particular trait, emotion or attitude and three actable actions that might reveal that quality, e.g. vanity - glancing at reflection in storefronts, wearing turtlenecks to hide wrinkles in neck, undergoing liposuction. Describe in a way that reveals but doesn't tell.
- Make lists of places you spent a lot of time in as a child, places you spend a lot of time in now, places tied to a specific event, places tied to a specific person. Choose one that interest you and write a description.
- Put yourself in a scene that is about someone else.
Make notes to respond to each question:
 - What sounds can you hear in this place?
 - What is the most distant sound you can hear, the sound you might not notice if you weren't paying special attention?
 - What smells do you associate with this place?
 - What are you wearing? How does it feel against you skin?
 - What else can you touch? not only with your fingertips, but with your whole body - the small of your back? the soles of your feet?
 - What can you taste?
 - What colors do you associate with this place?
 - What do you see to the left, overhead, on the horizon?
 - What emotions does this place evoke in you?
- Pick four emotions - make two lists for each (8 lists in all) that describes the body language of a person experiencing that emotion (external) & physical sensations (internal). Read over your list - which seem fresh & original - which seem overly familiar?
- Take a central character in your memoir and describe them 3 different ways: by different senses, in different settings, or at different times.
- Develop a practice of writing a Haiku every day – practice getting to the essence of an object or a moment. Don't worry about the syllables – use three lines & write “tight.”