

Guidelines for a Descriptive Paper

Description is the use of words to represent the appearance or nature of something. Often called a word picture, description attempts to present its subject for the mind's eye.

Usually, description is divided into two types: *objective* and *subjective*. Objective description presents the subject clearly but outside the realm of feelings. If you were describing a computer chip or the human heart, for example, you would use objective description. Subjective description also presents the subject clearly, but it also conveys a feeling about the object or sets a mood. If you were describing a piece of jewelry that was passed down to you from your grandmother, for instance, you would probably have strong feelings associated with the object.

Several important elements are present in an effective descriptive paper:

1. Imagery

To provide a "word picture" for your reader, you will need to use *imagery*. Imagery appeals to the senses--in other words, your reader should be able to see, hear, feel, taste, and/or smell whatever you are writing about. Of course, you might not be able to use all five types of imagery in your paper, but explore your topic and try to use as many different types of imagery as you can. If you were describing your first car, for example, you might describe what it looked like, what the engine sounded like, and what it smelled like inside.

2. Dominant Impression

When describing, avoid giving all the details. Instead, be selective--choose a "dominant impression" that you want to create and stick with that. For instance, if you are describing your favorite room in the house, focus on the details that make it your favorite. Maybe it has pleasant lighting and is quiet. You wouldn't want to point out that since the chair in the corner is uncomfortable you never sit in it, because that detail doesn't fit in with what makes the room your favorite one.

3. Order (Time and Space)

Your details need some type of order. Usually, your details will be organized either in relation to time (when something occurred) or space (how something is laid out, such as the furniture in a room or the plants and shrubs in a garden).

Words that signal time order:

first, then, next, after, while, when, during, before, later, now, finally, soon

Words that signal space order:

next, below, under, above, behind, in the background, in the foreground, to the left, to the right