

The Key to Descriptive Writing: Specificity¹

Descriptive writing, or the art of painting a picture in your reader's mind, is one of the most powerful techniques to master, whether you are writing fiction or nonfiction. The key to making it work – and to making your prose more powerful – is specificity.

Let's take an example.

A guy walks into a restaurant and orders a drink.

Now, this may paint a picture in a reader's mind, but it's pretty generic. It could be any guy, in any setting. A sentence this vague tells you right away this is going to be a make-believe story, not something that really happened. It would be a weak start to a nonfiction account or a novel.

Usually when people read nonfiction story, they want to know they are getting as close as possible to a firsthand account of events that really occurred. They want to feel as though they are hearing the story from someone who was there, and a genuine eyewitness can give specific details of what happened.

Although people know fiction is, well, fictional, good fiction should nonetheless have the ring of authenticity to it. Again, the way you convey that authenticity is by descriptive writing that includes specific details someone who was actually present would know.

So what could we do with our vague first sentence? One approach might be to continue our descriptive writing, adding more information as we go:

A guy walks into a restaurant and orders a drink. He was overheated and exhausted, and he wanted to escape the heat by drinking a lot of liquids and eating something.

Now this is slightly better, but not much. It tells us a little bit about the character and his intent, but as descriptive writing goes it is still pretty generic. Also, it breaks a key principle of good story telling: show, don't tell. This second sentence *tells* us what the character wants, whereas it's usually better to *show* the reader a specific detail and let the reader infer the character's desire.

So let's try a different tactic. Let's go back to the first sentence and replace some of the more generic words with more specific ones:



The sweaty teenager stumbled into the brightly lit McDonalds and demanded a super-sized Coke and two large fries.

Better. It is no longer a generic restaurant in a generic setting. We can infer that he's in a fast food restaurant. The character is not just any "guy," but a type of character we have all seen. The verbs "stumbled" and "demanded" convey more about his personality and the condition of his body, as does the adjective "sweaty." The type of things he orders and the quantity reveals something about his state of mind and his tastes. What's more, it does so by showing, rather than telling.

In fact, we may not need the second sentence ("He was overheated and exhausted, and he wanted to escape the heat by drinking a lot of liquids") now because we can infer the teenager's reason for ordering the Coke and fries. People usually don't "stumble" into a place if they are feeling happy and energetic. He needs to recharge.

If this was a writing exercise we were doing, we might continue the process of adding specific details to see what type of story emerged. (In fact, feel free to do this descriptive writing exercise with any simple sentence you come across.) Here's what I might get by specifying a few more details:

Taking Descriptive Writing a Step Further

The hot sun wasn't nearly done pouring its heat on Charlottesville for the day when Trevor McSperky, sweaty and overweight, stumbled into a McDonald's on Route 29. His face was red and soaked, his clothes were worn and soiled, and he panted like a tired dog. Leaning against the stainless steel counter to steady himself, Trevor wiped a spill of fresh sweat from his eyebrow, slammed a twenty onto the counter, and demanded his usual—a Coke, super-sized, and two large orders of fries—which he ate every day after school on his way to GameStop.

Specificity changes a bland, generic piece of descriptive writing into something far more interesting to read. It draws the reader into the world of the story and makes that world and its inhabitants far more tangible and believable.

Come to Your Senses!

In your descriptive writing, be sure to incorporate the senses—sight, smell, sound, feel, taste. Writing from the point of view of a character: what specifically would that character see, hear, smell, taste and feel? All of this brings the reader into the story. Also try provide the reader with specific answers to basic questions, such as *Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?* If your narrator is omniscient, include details that convey to the reader what it would have been like to be present in the story.

Each specific detail tells the reader much more about the characters and the world they inhabit than a general term can. Does your character have a fish, or a piranha? Does he like cheese or mozzarella? Does she live in a house or a two-story townhouse on a lake? Does he wear a watch or a Fossil?

Using specific nouns and verbs is also a very efficient way of telling your story. Sometimes replacing a single word with one that's more specific can tell the reader as much about a character than an entire paragraph of lame prose. Does your character have a *plan*, or a *scheme*? Your reader will respond differently, according to the words you choose.

How Much is Too Much?

The number of specific details you *could* build into a passage of descriptive writing is almost unlimited—which is why you have to know what to *leave out*. Too many details slows the action, and if they aren't of vital importance to the story, they can become boring. On the other hand, a few telling details inserted in the middle of the action can paint a rich picture for the reader without slowing things down.

The next time one of your chapters seems a little bland, try replacing some general words with specific details. You may be amazed how much power they contain.