



Levels 2-11

# Descriptive Writing

## Introduction

When we teach any kind of writing genre, we want to start off with a clear definition. What, then, is descriptive writing?

Let's start with what it does. It describes—explains, pictures, illustrates, or vividly portrays—something to the reader. Descriptive writing uses words as an artist uses paint: he has a picture in his head and wants the other person to “see” it, too.

Yes, but what *is* it? What kinds of words characterize this genre? What are the common word tools that writers use when crafting a piece of descriptive writing?

- \* Vivid, concrete, and specific nouns: descriptive writing demands precision in choosing the very best nouns to name persons, places, things, or ideas
- \* Sharp, clear verbs: either action words that clearly portray the action of the piece or words that most clearly convey various states of being
- \* Carefully chosen adjectives that modify the nouns and add to the word picture
- \* Adverbs that add depth and meaning to the picture
- \* “Sensory” words: words associated with seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching
- \* Often, but not always, descriptive writing is expressed using the first person (the “I” voice).

## Teaching Descriptive Writing

In one way, descriptive writing is fairly easy because your child can “see” in his head what he is trying to describe. It is therefore somewhat simple and straightforward. But descriptive writing also demands that students craft their writing carefully. As you probably noticed in our list above, students must choose their words carefully because they are trying to convey information that is normally received by senses, not text. The old saying is that “a picture paints a thousand words.” At a glance, one takes in an entire picture and both comprehends and remembers. In a moment, a smell tells us, “fish for dinner” or “it *is* time for a diaper change!” A blow instantly reveals the presence of an enemy; the sound of harps can make us think of Heaven in a heartbeat. But how many words has it taken to convey all these sensory impressions to you, the reader? As with poetry, economy of language and the choice of specific, sensory-laden words is important to successful descriptive writing. So, like the game of chess, to learn the rules takes an hour; to master the game, a lifetime (if you're lucky!). Descriptive writing is fairly easy to explain structurally; the main challenge is content selection.

Below are two sample topics for descriptive writing as models for two basic (but subtly different) implementations of this genre. They are:

1. My first roller coaster ride
2. Pharaoh's court

Note the following about our sample topics above:

- \* Number 1 involves a first-person narrative that will include lots of sensory words.
- \* Number 2 involves a “big picture” with the need to paint a scene with words beyond the description of “how my senses react.” This is the more complex and challenging assignment: one needs to imagine the scene and also use words to depict the array of sights, sounds, etc.

## Prewriting

As with many writing curricula, *Writing Aids* suggests the use of graphic organizers when teaching students to do descriptive writing. A number of types are possible; choosing one is a



matter of personal taste. Two main choices are the Describing Wheel and the Sensory Chart. We will try to illustrate the differences between these two approaches using our sample topics.

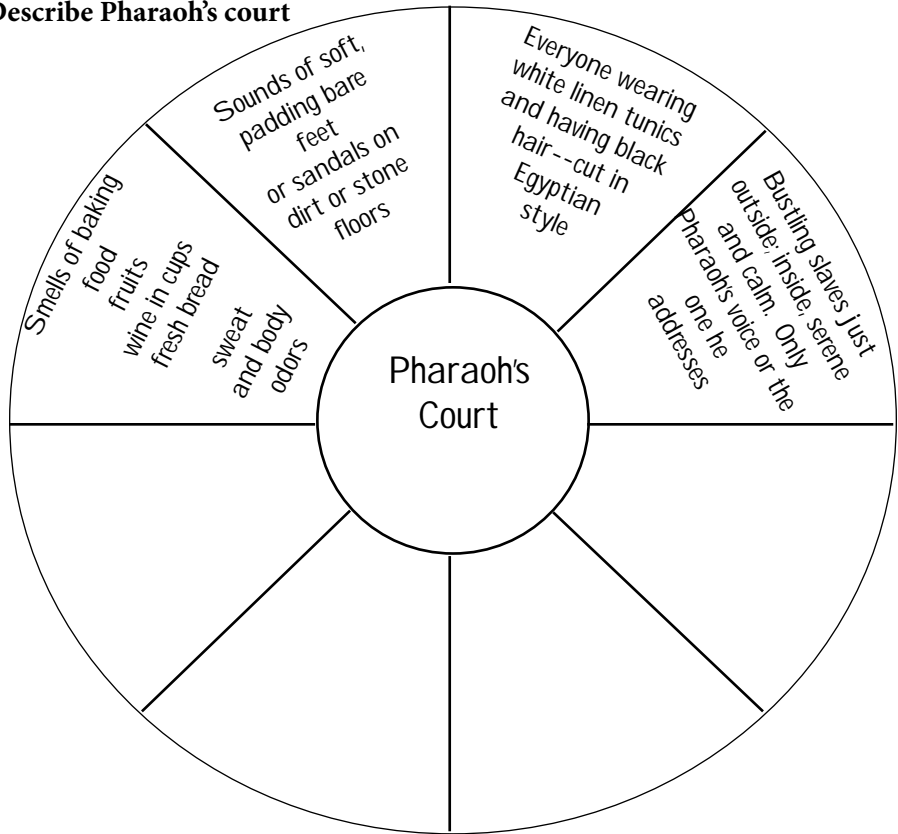
**Using Graphic Organizers**

WA Disc Supplements offer several kinds of organizers for prewriting that will work for the descriptive genre. For the two examples listed, we would recommend a Sensory Chart for #1 and a Describing Wheel or 5 W's Chart for #2. Below are examples of each filled in for our sample assignments.

**Topic #1: My first roller coaster ride**

See	Hear	Taste	Touch	Smell
cars whizzing around the track	other kids screaming as we got close	I just finished my cotton candy	smooth seat	smells of the carnival--fried dough, hot dogs
view from the top	quiet and excited talking	taste of fear??	smooth crash bar	fresh air at the top
plunging down	me screaming		cool breeze at the top	
closed eyes tight!	Joe screamed, too!		rushing air as we plunged down	

**Topic #2: Describe Pharaoh's court**



As is probably obvious, you will need to help younger children to fill in the blanks on these organizers. Sit with them and prompt them. They may not fill every cell.



Who	What	When	Where	Why
Pharaoh courtiers slaves merchants visitors priests	waiting on Pharaoh talking before him showing wares  others before him are begging for their lives, or asking for favors.	morning	the throne room  large, high ceiling stone pillars	A merchant is going to petition Pharaoh for rights to trade with the royal household.

Much of the real work of descriptive writing is done in the brainstorming and prewriting process. If there is a story component to the assignment (as there could be in assignment #2), the student will probably benefit from making a brief outline or plot line as well.

### Drafting

From the prewriting skeleton, the student should craft sentences that flesh out the paragraphs of the piece. For the initial draft, don't be picky with the student's word choices. It can be challenging enough to get his ideas down on paper, and that's what the draft is all about. Organization is much more important than word choices here.

### Editing

After the student has gotten his initial draft done, have him do an extra step of self-proofing his word choices. As we said earlier, descriptive writing is one of the most crafted genres. Have him read his draft carefully, editing it not only for mechanical errors (periods, commas, etc.) according to his writing ability, but also for the use of concrete, specific words. Each word should be as exact as possible, and convey as much sensory information as is needed to express the picture or experience that the student is attempting to transfer to the mind of his reader.

### Polishing and Presenting

Go through his draft after he has edited it. Mark any mistakes and suggestions for word substitutes on his paper, then go through these marks orally to make sure he understands your corrections.

For first-person narratives about experiences the student has actually had (like our example #1), work with the student especially closely on verb choices. If the piece is in any place vague or confusing, help the student to call to mind his sensations and actions as precisely as possible. Then help him to capture those in concrete, specific words.

Descriptive writing can get wordy. In our example #2, make sure the student stays on topic. Help him cut away "dead wood"—words and phrases that complicate sentences. Generally speaking, tell young writers to use mainly simple sentences, changed up with short, introductory phrases now and again. Shorter phrases and sentences convey motion and excitement, and the reader can take them in quickly and keep moving. Long, complex descriptions tend to put a reader to sleep.

When you have finished marking up the paper and explaining your marks to your student, have him enter the changes and print a finished copy for display!