

Creating a Visual Text: Images within Descriptions

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Timeframe: approximately 60 minutes

Target Audience: This lesson can be used for any class that teaches basic techniques of writing and composition. Some elements of this lesson have been used for writing workshops for remedial student as well as for first-year composition students. However, activities in this lesson can be beneficial for anyone who seeks to enhance creative and academic writing skills.

Materials needed: Computer; access to the internet; YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=719YRk3RAWc>; LCD Projector (with optional laser pointer); PowerPoint presentation, “Description: Key Features and Exercise Instructions”; whiteboard and markers; lined paper and pen (for students)

Objectives: After the lesson, students will be able to

- identify key features of describing as a writing strategy such as mode, details, vantage point, and dominant impression.
- write a vivid description that stimulates the reader’s imagination by using specific and sensory details, subjective or objective mode, stationary or moving vantage point, and an appropriate tone to convey an implied impression.

Introduction to Lesson [3 minutes]:

“Describing is an effective strategy that can help strengthen your writing skills and make your essays more interesting. It allows you to present certain types of information in your writing in an engaging way and keep the reader’s interest throughout the text. To be able to write a vivid description, you have to learn what constitutes an effective description. We are going to do an exercise that will help you understand the mechanics within this process and will let you practice writing an effective description so that you can later use this skill in composing your essay. The exercise is based on a video which is a foreign commercial. Visual content can be understood as a type of text that has a certain purpose and form. The visual images you see on the screen can be transferred into a verbal form. The transition of the story, the images, and the impression of the video into words is successful when your written description conveys these elements accurately enough to produce the same effect on the audience as the video does.”

Write the agenda on the board:

Description: Purpose and Language

Hands-on Practice

Key Features

Modifications

Procedures [50-55 minutes]:

Step 1: Brainstorming Session [10 minutes]

Have a brief discussion about description as a strategy. The following questions can help guide the discussion:

- Where can we find descriptions? (literature, articles, commercials, etc.)
- What is the purpose of a description? (to provide specific details, to create an image, to portray a character, to convey a certain mood, etc.)
- What words are often used in a descriptive language? (adjectives, adverbs)

Here is an example of a description from *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann (translated by John E. Woods). (This section can be substituted by the instructor's material of choice.)

"Yet there was a momentary hint of blue sky, and even this bit of light was enough to release a flash of diamonds across the wide landscape, so oddly disfigured by its snowy adventure. Usually the snow stopped at that hour of the day, as if for a quick survey of what had been achieved thus far; the rare days of sunshine seemed to serve much the same purpose—the flurries died down and the sun's direct glare attempted to melt the luscious, pure surface of drifted new snow. It was a fairy-tale world, child-like and funny. Boughs of trees adorned with thick pillows, so fluffy someone must have plumped them up; the ground a series of humps and mounds, beneath which slinking underbrush or outcrops of rock lay hidden; a landscape of crouching, cowering gnomes in droll disguises—it was comic to behold, straight out of a book of fairy tales. But if there was something roguish and fantastic about the immediate vicinity through which you laboriously made your way, the towering statues of snow-clad Alps, gazing down from the distance, awakened in you feelings of the sublime and holy."

Once the instructor has read the description, ask students the following questions:

- What is the purpose of this particular description?
- What words or expressions stood out for you?

Step 2: Individual Activity [20 minutes]

Step 2A: Instructions for watching the video [5 minutes]

"You are going to watch a video that is a commercial from Denmark. The first time you watch the video, you are not going to see the English subtitles. You have to figure out what the commercial is for and how the subject is portrayed. Pay special attention to the details in the video (the ages and the reactions of people, the sequence of events); try to identify the tone and overall impression."

Watch the video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=719YRk3RAWc>.

Step 2B: Discussion about the video [5 minutes]

Ask students the following questions:

- What is advertised in the clip?
- What features of the bus are highlighted? In what ways is this done?

- What details are important in the description of the features? (big windows, buttons, soft seats, maneuvering, . . .)
- What adjectives and adverbs would you use to describe some of the features of the new bus? (cool, long, fast, comfortable, . . .)

Step 2C: Recreating the description in writing [5 minutes]

“On a piece of paper, write down what you remember from the video to recreate the storyline, the tone, and the images that affect different senses of the viewer/reader. Remember, you are not telling someone about the commercial but verbalizing the sequence and the imagery of it. Use the present verb tense for your description.”

This sample description may be shared with the students:

A well-dressed man lays on the road as if listening to something. It is a quiet before the storm. Suddenly he jumps up, puts his thumbs up, and high fives his friends. In the distance a brightly colored blue bus speeds toward the excited crowd. People rush to get inside to get the most amazing experience ever! Everything is cool about the new bus! The bus driver is cool, and he knows it too! Passengers are fighting for comfortable and soft seats. One girl slowly falls into the seat in ecstasy, her hair flowing in the air. The other guy hugs the seat like a pillow. A beautiful girl caresses the windows that are unbelievably wide and clear.

It is not important to finish the whole description if there is not enough time.

Step 2D: Sharing [5 minutes]

Ask some students to share their descriptions. Note vivid images that correspond with those in the video. Give praise for successful use of vocabulary.

Step 3: Presentation of Key Features [7-8 minutes]

Project the “Key Features of Describing” PowerPoint presentation. Go over the slides and the examples. At the end of the presentation, leave the review slide up so that students can refer to it during the second round of watching the commercial.

Step 4: Watching the Video for Key Features [7-8 minutes]

This time the video is going to have English subtitles so that students can see the text that came with the visual. Students should focus on the key features in the video.

“Watch the video again and discuss details, mode, vantage point, and dominant impression.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75F3CSZcCFs>

- What other details have you noticed that you missed the first time?
- How would you identify the mode in the video? (It is mostly subjective as we perceive the cool features of the bus through various “riders.”)

- What vantage point is used? (It is a combination: moving when looking at the street from the bus, stationary when noting the “cool” things inside the bus.)
- What dominant impression does the video have? (funny, exaggerated, positive, . . .)

Step 5: Modification of Key Features [7 minutes]

“What happens when one of the key features is modified? For the sake of experiment, change the dominant impression of the video from funny/positive to sad/negative.” It is particularly fun to work with opposites when changing the dominant impression. Give students a couple of minutes to change the beginning of their previous description.

Provide the following example as a model:

A poorly dressed man lays on the road as if listening to something. The weather is stormy, and heavy grey clouds are covering the sky. The man reluctantly gets up to his feet, and he sadly walks to his friends with his thumbs down. A really old squeaky bus slowly pulls up.

Share a few of the students’ samples and your own. Ask students what changes they had to make to create a completely opposite dominant impression.

Closure/Evaluation [5 minutes]:

Ask students the following questions: What changes do you anticipate when other key features are modified? Can you give some examples? Was watching the video a second time, after learning about the elements of describing, helpful for making adjustments to your previous description? How does knowing the key features of description help make your writing more effective?

Lesson Analysis:

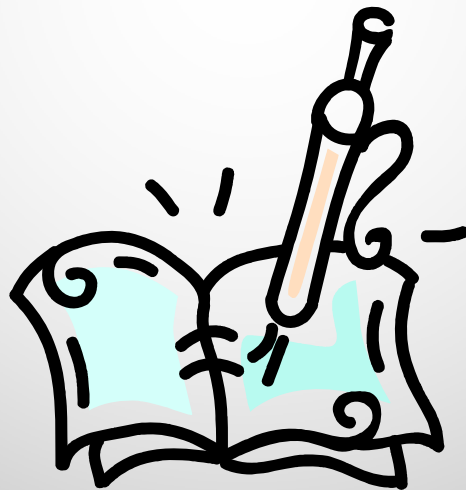
The strength of the activity is in its flexibility as it can be based on various videos as long as they have vivid details to support interesting descriptive writing. Videos can be discipline specific. To adjust the activity for other disciplines, the instructors can choose visual content appropriate for their topic and can ask students to work with specific criteria of that visual content to create a vivid and accurate representation of it in their writing. The same can be applied to the description sample in step one.

The exercise can be extended in various ways: it can be tied to the discussion of other rhetorical devices such as purpose and audience, and students can brainstorm the types of material (other than a commercial) and the types of audience that can be influenced by various features of describing.

Another way to utilize this lesson is to explore the boundaries between various genres of writing: students can be asked to turn their descriptions into narrations or arguments with the follow-up analysis of the changes they made to achieve their results. This activity is quite versatile when it comes to teaching the differences between the styles or strategies of writing.

Describing as a Writing Strategy:

Key Features



Details

The goal of using details is to be as specific as possible, providing information that will help your audience imagine the subject or make sense of it.

Instead of "I bought a car," you could say, "I bought a brand new, red car that drove beautifully and got great gas mileage."



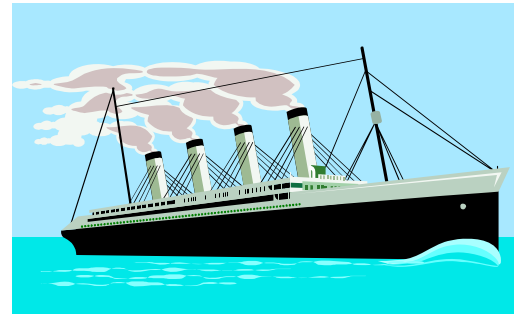
Objectivity and Subjectivity

- Descriptions can be written with objectivity, with subjectivity, or with a mixture of both.
- Objective descriptions are uncolored by personal opinion or emotion.

Titanic struck the iceberg at approximately 11:40 pm.

- Subjective descriptions allow the writer's opinions and emotions to come through.

The sinking of Titanic is the greatest tragedy of all time.



Vantage Point:

where you locate yourself in relation to what you are describing.

Stationary vantage point lets you see your subject from one angle only, as if you were a camera.

From below, we could see the smoke pouring from the building and firemen climbing a rescue ladder.



Moving vantage point affords a broad overall view or changing perspective of a subject from various angles.

There is something wonderful about the effect: here, the city, with its winding avenues; there, on the other side of the wall, the country, fertile and gray green.

Dominant Impression:

the overall feeling that the individual details create.

The dominant impression can be directly stated:

As soon as I walked in the house, a feeling of warmth and comfort wrapped me like a cozy blanket.

The dominant impression can be implicit, conveyed through the use of images and figurative language:

I remember the fragrance as of something freshly baked.



Review

- Detail
- Objectivity/Subjectivity
 - Vantage Point
- Dominant Impression

