

# Description

## Slide 1: DESCRIPTION

Throw out everything you heard about using compelling, unusual images and vivid word pictures. Description uses simple language to build a complete picture that is easy for readers to imagine, and will look more or less the same in every reader's imagination.

### Example 1:

LaTeesha swept into the room grandly, like a wind off the mountain peaks, her chin high as any queen's. Behind her came poor Jill, cringing like a kicked spaniel, like a whinging dog crawling on its belly in the dust of utter despair.

Why doesn't it work?

- The sentence structure is needlessly complex.
- The imagery is melodramatic, and the tone doesn't match the circumstances.
- Although something important may be about to happen that will necessitate larger, more ornate imagery, the reader doesn't know that, and it hasn't happened yet.
- The reader is expected to assign several mental pictures to a single moment (Jill is cringing, acting like a kicked dog, and the dog is a spaniel, which is also whinging and crawling on its belly).
- There is no such thing as despair dust, so it's impossible to mentally picture.

### Example 2:

LaTeesha sailed through the door like a ship of the line, Jill trailing behind her like a bit of seaweed caught on a rudder.

Why does the second example work?

- The images are easy to picture
- The tone and imagery match—the wording is wry, and the images are comedic
- LaTeesha gets one image, Jill gets one image. The reader doesn't need to picture a string of images and somehow make all of them match one character in one particular moment.

## Slide 2: YOUR POV CHARACTER IS THE ONE DESCRIBING THINGS

- Even third person stories must have a main character, and all descriptions must happen in that character's individual voice.
- In stories with alternating POV, the narrator's voice and descriptive terms must change to match the new character's style.
- Even with alternating points of view, there must still be only one main character.
  - The story is ultimately about how everything and everyone worked together to produce a significant change **in the main character**, even if additional character arcs unfold along the way.

- The narrator's priorities determine what parts of the scene will be described. The author cannot head-hop to include information the POV character wouldn't notice or care about. Instead, those details must be:
  - Introduced when they become important to the main character, OR
  - Introduced through dialogue with a person who is likely to notice and care about those things for reasons of his own.

### Examples of differing POVs describing the same scene:

- A teenage girl: The party was bangin'. It seemed like everyone in school was there. And I guess some people brought beer and stuff. I heard somebody was doing fentanyl, but I didn't see it. And I think Chad and Amy hooked up in my parent's bedroom.
- A parent: The party was out of control. The kids were doing things that I'm sure they wouldn't want their parents to know about. The house was a mess. There was vomit on the carpet. They'd spilled beer everywhere and there were bottles of alcohol on the kitchen counter.
- A police officer: The party was in a home in a residential area, at the end of a cul-de-sac. The homeowners were not present. There were thirty-eight people between the ages of sixteen and seventeen in the main areas and bedrooms of the house. There was underage drinking and evidence of additional substance abuse.

## Slide 3. ADDING A NEW POV EQUALS ADDING A NEW PLOTLINE

POV exists to tell one story: the POV character's story.

If you add a new POV, you are committing to writing a subplot involving that character.

- The subplot must have its own character arc, with challenges designed specifically for that character.

Avoid head-hopping

- You get one POV per scene. One.

Example 1:

Martin shouldered up to the bar and ordered a martini, shaken, not stirred. The bartender, who was working a double shift, couldn't believe he had to serve an idiot who thought he was James bond. But maybe the guy would be a big tipper. Lucy, sitting two stools down from the new guy, wondered if any girl would be desperate enough to talk to him. Probably not.

Why it doesn't work:

- The reader doesn't know who to root for
- There isn't a single character driving events forward
- There isn't a single, clear narrative voice
- Each of these characters seems equally important to the plot
- The jump from one perspective to the next is confusing and jarring

### Example 2:

Martin shouldered up to the bar and ordered a martini, shaken, not stirred. He liked them that way. It wasn't his fault that the Bond films popularized it. Martin caught the bartender's look of disdain and forced himself to ignore it. It was harder to ignore the pretty blond sitting two stools away, who rolled her eyes and fished the ornamental pineapple slice out of her drink like she was planning to throw it at somebody. Martin watched her in the mirror as she bit into the pineapple. She looked like the kind of woman who expected to be watched.

## Slide 4: THE HISTORY IS IN THE DETAILS

Experiences shape us, and they shape characters.

The best descriptive details include suggestions about backstory; they leave the reader asking why certain details are mentioned:

- Why does that woman only wear long sleeves?
- Why does that girl wear the same flower barrette every day?
- Why is that lake only muddy in the far corner?
- Why does everyone in the family have red hair but Baby Jonathan?
- Why is the starving dog reluctant to accept handouts?

### Example One:

The attic was small and dusty. It had a bunch of cardboard boxes, labeled so that you could easily tell the contents. There was a lightbulb with a pull string attached to the ceiling. I bumped my head because the rafters were low. When I sat down, there was dust on the floor and boxes. I saw an old trunk in the corner and wondered what was in it.

Why doesn't it work?

- The contents don't raise questions in the reader's mind.
- The description doesn't suggest that there might be anything meaningful or memorable about the items in the attic.
- There's no sense that the description is leading to anything, either to what might happen next or further on in the story.
- The narrator doesn't seem to care about what he's seeing; there is no sense of personality or history in the narration.

### Example Two:

The attic was smaller than I remembered. Of course, the last time I'd been to the cabin, I'd been eight years old and gangly, with big hands and feet that I had yet to grow into. Now I bumped my head on a rafter and had to sit down in the dust until the pain and dizziness passed. That's probably the only reason I noticed the trunk. It was shoved to one side under the eaves, an old-fashioned brick wrapped in cracked leather, with brass studs and clasp and a handle of polished ivory. It probably weighed twenty pounds all by itself. And unlike the rest of the detritus in the attic, a jumble of dust-caked cardboard boxes labeled with my grandmother's elegant, upper-crust cursive, the trunk had not a speck of dust on it.

Why does it work?

- We get a sense of who the narrator is, as well as what the attic looks like (partly because the passage is now written in first person).
- The details chosen reflect the narrator's priorities.
- The details suggest the trunk and attic's history, as well as the narrator's.
- The details make the reader think about that history and wonder why it's significant enough to mention.
- The description centers on the trunk, rather than the attic as a whole, because the trunk is the detail that moves the story forward.
- The description is obviously leading the reader somewhere, because it's broad in the beginning, and becomes more and more specific and focused.

## Slide 5: CLICHES LACK SPECIFICITY

A cliché is a phrase used in so many different stories and contexts, it is no longer a single image assigned to a specific thing. The phrase has come to represent lots of unrelated things.

**Similes**—comparisons using like and as—are, when done well, symbols for a person, object, force or state of being.

- A good simile is powerful because it's a symbol that clarifies an aspect of reality in a way that is immediately clear to most readers.

Example one: She had lips red as the rose.

Why doesn't it work?

- Which rose?
- This doesn't differentiate her from any other woman with red lips.

Example two: She had lips red as Crayola #FD0E35 Scarlet.

Why does it work?

- It tells you the tone of the piece (comedic).
- It suggests the personality of the narrator.
- It gives you a new symbol representing red lips (a specific pair)
- It's an image nearly all readers will recognize.

**Metaphors**—phrases depicting two dissimilar things as exactly the same, using is/was/were—are powerful when the reader has to pause for only a microsecond before mentally filling in the word that would normally be used.

- Clichéd metaphors are particularly hard for writers to avoid because the brain is so quick to fill the phrases in.

### **Example one: The wind was a dragon.**

Why doesn't it work?

- There isn't a direct connection between wind and dragon; a dragon can fly, but it can also breathe fire and attack with teeth and claws.
- Fire is the first thing people think of with dragons.

### **Example two: The wind was a howling beast with icy, jagged teeth.**

Why does it work, even though the wind is invisible and there's no concrete image to imagine?

- It uses descriptors that are commonly paired with specific images, to create an immediate association in the reader's mind.
- There's a direct association between:
  - Wind and howling
  - Wind and icy
  - Beasts and howling
  - Beasts and teeth
  - Jagged and teeth
  - Wind and teeth/biting

## **Slide 6: BLOCK OUT YOUR SCENE**

Know where everything is in relation to everything else.

### **Example:**

Sarah was looking out the window when Ralph came into the room. He walked over to talk to her, but she wasn't willing to talk unless they were sitting down, so they went to the couch to sit. But it was hard to make out Sarah's face because the light wasn't on, so Ralph reached over to flip the switch.

## **Slide 7: CLARITY OVER STYLE**

No matter what genre you're writing in, you must prioritize clarity.

- Use words the way they are meant to be used.
- Keep sentences straightforward and stripped down.
- Evocative language is not fancy language. It's simple language used well.

### **Example 1:**

Effluvia perambulated along the parapet faster than an arrow dipped in a conflagration of oil and basilisk sputum and emerged onto the walk-way, casting a beatific glance full of the heart of sunshine at the gobsmacked knight a stone's throw her right.

**Example 2:**

Effie left her lantern just beyond the doorway, the shutter half-closed. There was a knight somewhere up here on the parapet, keeping watch for intruders just like her, but she couldn't hear the clank of armor. Clouds covered the moon, and the residents of the castle had all blown out their candles and retired for the night. Without the lantern, she was just one more shadow in the dark. It was a perfect hour for thieving.

Why it works:

- The meaning is clear
- The sentence structure is straightforward
- The words are used correctly
- The setting is easy to picture
- The description is obviously leading the reader toward a story event
- The details mentioned and the tone and word choice match the POV of the main character.

**Slide 8: AVOID A SLY, ARCH OR SUPERIOR TONE**

Slyness:

- Reminds the reader that it's a story, so the reader has no chance to suspend disbelief
- Turns a story into a moral lesson and forces the reader to sit in judgement over the characters
- Belittles heroes the reader wants to identify with
- Makes villains look cartoonish, rather than dangerous
- Robs scenes of emotional impact
- Slows pacing
- Adds unnecessary exposition
- Ends the story before it starts (because it implies that neither the hero nor the world will change).

**Example 1:**

Peter was an average boy. So when he saw the pie cooling on the windowsill, why, he did what any average boy is bound to do: he glanced one way, then the other, making very sure that the angry dog that lived two houses down wasn't looking on with an eye to biting young boys who needed a lesson in manners. Then he crept forward, telling himself the usual sort of youthful lies about forgiveness and permission, and reached up to avail himself of the pie.

**Example 2:**

The pie was apple. With lots of cinnamon and butter and just enough ginger to be interesting. You could smell it a block away, that pie. You just knew that the crust would break into flaky chunks and the apples would be tart and sweet and just soft enough, not too mushy, not crunchy. And there it sat on the windowsill with nobody watching over it, all golden and topped with a sprinkling of glossy sugar. An apple pie. Peter's favorite kind in the whole world.

## **Slide 9: SUBGENRE**

Time to nail down exactly what yours is!

## **Slide 10: FIND YOUR SUBGENRE**

(Instructions on slide)

## **Slide 11: DESCRIPTION CAN SERVE AS FORESHADOWING**

Assume that everywhere your character goes, he is ready to attack or defend.

- The things we notice when we walk into a potentially difficult or dangerous situation reflect our expectations

### **Example:**

Ruby peeked through the window at the top of the door to class 2-E. None of her friends were in the room. But Ellen was there, holding her compact down near her hip so the teacher couldn't see her checking herself out in the little mirror. And Larry was there, with a straw in his mouth, the end aimed at the back of Milo's head. Poor Milo would have spitballs on his back again.

Unfortunately, there was only one desk with nobody sitting at it. The desk in the front row, right in the middle. Right in front of the blackboard, the teacher's desk, and the entire rest of the class.

What didn't I mention?

- A description of the teacher
- The location of the wall clock
- Any decoration on the walls
- Anything written on the blackboard.

Why is this foreshadowing?

- The class is already seated
- The only empty desk is at the front
- None of the main character's friends is present
- The three kids mentioned—out of all the kids in the class—are bullies and a kid who is always bullied

## **Slide 12: DESCRIPTION IS A DRINK THAT SHOULD BE SIPPED**

Rather than frontload a scene with a bunch of description, provide a few details and add more as the character interacts with the environment

Adding description a bit at a time:

- Allows you to control pacing
- Prevents infodumping
- Allows you to demonstrate a character's emotions in the way she interacts with her environment
- Allows you to direct the reader's attention to specific objects, people or events (by dwelling on them)
- Builds tension steadily throughout the scene

Rule of thumb: the more time you spend on something, the more important it will seem to the reader.

**Example:**

Ruby grabbed the round, metal handle and turned it gently, pulling the banged-up door open a little at a time. The click the handle made seemed louder than a firecracker, especially when every head in the classroom turned to watch her sidle in, past the doorframe, under the white wall clock with hands like minus signs, only to halt two steps in, her feet glued to the gray checkerboard linoleum floor. The teacher was in front of the blackboard, his hand hovering a few inches above his half-written name, and he was looking at her too. He had glasses with thick black frames and his brown hair was thinning on top, and his eyes were red and watery. He was wearing corduroy pants. That was a bad sign.

Why it works:

- It's solidly in the main character's POV
- The similes and metaphors set a particular tone (white wall clock with hands like minus signs)
- The description focuses the reader's attention on the first hurdle & adversary
- The details are mentioned in an order that matches the POV character's progression through a physical space (first the doorway, then under the clock, then in front of the teacher).
- There are very few similes and metaphors. The description is almost entirely a list of various objects in the room.
  - When similes and metaphors are used, it's to make the reader pause to experience Ruby's emotion, and to build tension

What to describe next?

- Each time the POV character interacts with another character, use it as an opportunity to add a setting detail or two.
- Utilize elements of the setting to demonstrate the character's changes in mood (Ruby trips over an outstretched leg, bangs into a desk, scoots her chair back and makes it squeak, etc.)

**Slide 13: PARAGRAPH AND SCENE-LEVEL TELLING**

- Common places to find told prose
  - Story setup (also called "throat clearing")
  - First chapter of novel
  - Beginnings of scenes
  - First time character is introduced
  - First visit to a new location or setting
  - (With multiple POV stories) every time the POV switches to a new character

**Infodump:** the author jumps in to provide an exhaustive description of aspects of the story world.

- Examples:
  - The full set of rules and regulations for the hockey game
  - The worldwide effects of the apocalypse on every plant and animal on every continent
  - The entire pantheon of gods and goddesses and the accounts of all their wars
  - The political history of the nation from its inception to the current corrupt monarch
  - The steps to every country dance performed at the regency ball.

**Example 1:**

When the comet crashed, hurtling through the atmosphere toward Miami beach and causing a crater that demolished three quarters of the city, the change in the earth's magnetism had cataclysmic effects on the entire world. The peruvian jaguar went extinct, along with the peruvian toucan, the mud-burrowing snapping turtle, the furry fruit bat, the five-plumed angler bird, and the zonk fish. In the Antarctic, whole colonies of walrus sprouted hair and began to walk upright, the Antarctic Salmon developed purple spots, and whales began swimming in counterclockwise circles every other day. In Alaska . . .

Why it doesn't work:

- It's a list of examples unrelated to one another
- There's no story, just a list of losses
- The scale is too grand and diverse to emotionally connect with
- Without a personal narrative to give it meaning, the details are unfortunate, rather than heartbreaking

**Example 2:**

When the comet crashed into Miami, the world changed. Three-quarters of the city was crushed in a cataclysm of fire and roaring and quaking, crumbling earth. Thousands perished in an instant. Thanks to the change in the earth's magnetism, the seas rose and the poles melted. Jungle animals went extinct. Sea life mutated. And in Annie's home town, all the robins died.

Why it works:

- There's a momentum that drives you toward the introduction of the hero
- The scale starts broad, then narrows to a single, powerful image
- The events listed give the reader just enough information to understand the situation, without overwhelming her with unnecessary detail
- The description ends on the plight of the hero, not the plight of the whole world.

**Backstory:** the author provides a wealth of information about a character's personal history that is not relevant to the story (or provides details before the reader needs to know them)

- Examples:
  - The difficult childhood
  - The good memories of time with grandpa
  - The list of bad boyfriends
  - The history of the friendship
  - The awful school

**Example 1:**

Marivella crept through the servant's passageway, careful to keep her steps light. She hoped there weren't rats. She'd been terrified of rats ever since she was five years old and walked into the palace pantry, only to find a giant gray rat nibbling on a haunch of venison. The rat had been huge and its tail had looked like a fat earthworm, and she'd screamed and screamed. The rat had perched on its haunches and hissed at her, and rushed at her like it was going to attack. Marivella shuddered and hurried down the passageway, eager to reach the study and dust it before the master arrived.

- Why it doesn't work:
  - The details about the encounter with the rat shift the reader to a different place and time, right in the middle of the narrative.
  - Hating rats is not unusual, and therefore requires no extended explanation.
  - While we are hearing about the rat, nothing is happening in the story. The interlude doesn't move the story forward.

**Example 2:**

Marivella crept through the servant's passageway, keeping her steps light. She hoped there weren't rats. A rat had scared her badly once when she was young, and she'd never quite got over the fear. It was so dim in the passageway, too. They were only supposed to bring one candle in, which didn't seem quite fair. At least she was near the Master's study. She'd get the whole room dusted before he arrived. She'd show that nasty underbutler she wasn't shirking her duties.

- Why it works:
  - The paragraph is about Marivella's reason for being in the passage and about her destination, rather than about her fear—which moves the story forward.
  - The paragraph remains focused on the here and now, rather than jumping back in time.
  - The paragraph illustrates why the fear of rats is important to the story—it might keep Marivella from going where she's supposed to go.
    - This makes the fear of rats an obstacle that must be overcome, rather than just a character trait.

**Flashbacks:** Uses an entire scene to infodump or explain backstory

**Example:**

Antony looked up from the espresso machine in time to see Clementine push open the shop door and step inside. She folded up her umbrella and looked about as if searching for the best place to sit. Her gaze met his, and seeing those brown eyes reminded Antony of that summer he'd been trying so hard to forget.

*Antony rushed down the beach toward the dock. He was wearing his new swim shorts, and he'd been waiting ever since he bought them for the moment he could cannonball off the end of the dock into the lake. But before he could step onto the old wooden planks, a girl climbed onto them. A red-haired girl in a pink swimsuit, her hair in pigtails . . .*

Ask yourself:

1. Is this information necessary for the reader to understand what's going on right now?
2. Will this information move the actual story forward?
3. Can this information be broken up and woven into the story bit by bit?
4. If you cut this scene, will the story suffer? Will it be less impactful or seem half-finished?