

MINI-LESSON



DESCRIPTION

Description is where we are getting a detailed look at something in the story. When you add description, you help your reader feel like they are really experiencing the events in your story, and this makes them care more about what happens.

WHAT to Describe

Just like with exposition and dialogue, your descriptions should be focused only on *relevant* details—things that really matter in the story. In “Frog,” the clothes Bree is wearing don’t have any impact on the story, so the story doesn’t include a description of her clothes. Instead, the detailed description is given to the frog himself:

He was a brownish-gray color, and bumpy. At first I thought he might be a leaf, but I didn’t remember seeing a leaf on my way back. When I took a step closer and got a better look, I was sure. He was tiny—no bigger than the little handheld pencil sharpener I kept in my backpack.

WHEN to Describe

As the author, you get to decide *when* to describe things in your story. Just like with exposition, description can work best if you spread it around your story, rather than dumping it all out in one place.

A good guideline to follow is to add description right at the times when a character would be noticing, experiencing, or thinking about that thing. In “Frog,” we don’t see the description of the frog until the frog actually shows up in the story.

HOW to Describe

You can use a variety of techniques to describe things. Here are a few options.

- **Sensory Details:** Use sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch to describe something. It’s not necessary to use ALL senses to describe something. Only choose the senses that fit the situation. For example, Bree couldn’t smell or taste the frog, it didn’t make a sound, and she definitely didn’t want to touch it, so the description of the frog was just visual.

Here are some other examples of descriptions using different senses:

The bread was still hot from the oven. The salty taste of butter flooded my mouth as I sunk my teeth in. (taste, touch)

Every now and then the *boom-boom* of a passing car stereo would make the glasses in our kitchen cabinets rattle. (sound, touch)

Hours after she hugged me, the smell of cigarette smoke and perfume stuck to my clothes. (smell)

- **Similes and Metaphors:** Another way to describe what something is like is to compare it to something else. In “Frog,” the frog is compared to a chicken wing, which gives the reader a clearer picture of what it looks like.

...his squatty little body was a silhouette in the light coming from the living room, like a buffalo wing someone had dropped on the floor.

I stood there for a good five minutes more, just staring at him, that little green buffalo wing who was ruining my whole night.

The first example above uses a **simile**, which compares two things using *like* or *as*. The second example is a **metaphor**, which compares two things without using *like* or *as*.

- **Personification:** Using human-like characteristics to describe a non-living thing is another option. If I wanted to make the ocean seem powerful and scary, I might write something like, “The waves reached out and pulled us in.”
- **Interpretation:** Sometimes the only way to describe things is to talk about how a character understands or interprets them. When Bree’s parents look at each other in “Frog,” instead of trying to describe their actual facial expressions, the story just gives us a description of how Bree interprets their expressions:

They gave each other that look. The look that said *What do you think?* And then the other one that said, *I don’t know, what do YOU think?*

Showing vs. Telling

A common piece of writing advice is “Show, don’t tell.” Most of the time, this is good advice, because a good story lets the reader experience things instead of just being told about them. Instead of writing, “She was angry,” it’s more interesting to write “She slammed the door so hard it shook the whole house.” In the second sentence, the writer is showing us how angry she is, instead of just telling us she was angry.

But there are times when it makes more sense to combine showing and telling, because it helps readers get a better idea of the meaning you’re trying to convey. Take a look at one of the examples from earlier:

Every now and then the *boom-boom* of a passing car stereo would make the glasses in our kitchen cabinets rattle.

If we add just a little bit of telling to this description, it can change its whole meaning.

Every now and then the *boom-boom* of a passing car stereo would make the glasses in our kitchen cabinets rattle, and every time I prayed it would stop at our house—then I would know my brother was finally home.

Every now and then the *boom-boom* of a passing car stereo would make the glasses in our kitchen cabinets rattle, and every time I held my breath, praying it would pass by.

What to Do Now

- Find places in your story to add description: Use sensory details and try adding a metaphor, a simile, some personification, or an interpretation.
- Put most of the description in places where the characters would notice those things.
- Remove description that isn’t relevant to the story.
- Are there places where you are telling, but you could be showing instead? Are there places where you are showing that need more telling to make sense?