

## Exercise 34 (Paragraph Construction)

### Writing Descriptive Paragraphs

When you want to help your readers visualize, or form a mental picture of, an object, a scene, or a person, you write a **description**. Good descriptions place the reader right in front of what is being described. Your task is to help the reader experience your sensations and see through your eyes.

Descriptive passages are useful in almost any kind of writing. In a report on the problems of building a new highway, for example, you might begin with a description of the lovely countryside that would be destroyed by the new road. In a letter to a friend who lives in another city, you may want to describe the sights and sounds of a football game or concert you attended. On a literature test, you may be asked to describe a character from a short story or a novel.

A good way to begin a descriptive paragraph is with a topic sentence that gives the dominant, or main, impression or feeling that the person or thing has created in your mind. The word *dominant* means "strongest and most influential."

Once you have decided on the dominant impression, you have a reason for choosing which details to include and which to exclude. Bring the dominant impression to life by helping the reader understand what the object or place looks like, sounds like, feels like, tastes like, and smells like. Use specific words and images that appeal to the senses. Such words and images are called **sensory details**.

- A. Canadian writer Al Keith opened his short story "White Nightmare" with the following paragraph.

The moment I stepped clear of the trees at the end of the ski trail and saw what lay ahead, I began to feel uneasy. I had expected to see the wide expanse of Laurentian Lake, frozen and silent under a thick layer of northern Ontario snow. What I saw instead was a stormy, white inferno ... visibility down to fifteen metres. I knew the lake was there because I had crossed it peacefully on my skis just this morning, only a few hours ago. Now, all the white peacefulness was gone. The wind tore straight at me with the screams of a hundred banshees and it was flinging thick clouds of snow flurries into my face. I had to bend and lean forward just to stay on my feet. And I was caught on the far side of the lake from home. The sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach deepened.

1. What overall impression of Laurentian Lake does Al Keith create in this paragraph? Which word in the first sentence sums up that impression?  
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2. List five sensory details Keith uses to help the reader see and feel the discomfort the author is describing.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What purpose does the last sentence in this paragraph serve?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Writing Descriptive Paragraphs (continued)

- B.** Look carefully at the house in the photograph at the right. First, decide what dominant impression you feel as you look at it. Next, list the sensory details that gave you that impression. Go beyond just what you can see. Think about the sounds and smells you might experience as you wandered through this house. How would the wood and wall coverings feel? Choose your details carefully. Try to imagine that you are actually at this site.



Dominant impression \_\_\_\_\_

Sensory details \_\_\_\_\_

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Before writing the paragraph, take a few minutes to decide on the best order to present your details. You may want to organize them in the same way they originally struck your senses. Other possibilities include from near to far, from left to right, from outside to inside, and more.

Finally, write a paragraph in your notebook describing the house. Begin by stating the dominant impression and then develop the paragraph with sensory details. Use words that make the reader see, hear, and feel what you have observed.

- C.** Write a description of a place that you know well. Choose one from the following list or select your own place. If possible, visit the site before you start to write, and take notes on what you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch.
1. your bedroom
  2. a place you particularly enjoy visiting on holiday
  3. the school gymnasium near the end of a very close basketball game
  4. a swimming pool, skating rink, or inline skating rink
  5. a department store during a Boxing Day sale