

## Writing a description

Good descriptive writing creates an impression by **painting a vivid word picture**. To make the picture **sharp** and **clear**, the writer includes details that are significant, specific, and sensory.

**Significant details:** Few ways of writing are altogether right or wrong, though some are more effective than others. If you are describing a person you know, it is not wrong to start at the top with the person's hair, then to say something about the forehead, then the eyes, then the nose, then the mouth, chin, jaw, ears etc. Such a description is not wrong, but it will not be effective. *All those details will simply confuse the reader.* Much more effective will be a description that mentions **only significant, distinctive features** of the person whom you have chosen as your subject.

### Tip:

To make a description vivid, details should not be only significant but **specific** as well. In general **avoid** the vague, unexceptional detail that only blurs the image: "She has a nice smile", "He lived in an ordinary house", "They shopped at a big supermarket".

### Example I.

Aunt Sarah's husband was named William C. H. Curtis. He was small, rather wizened, light brown man. He had a grave face that was curiously lighted by his grey eyes. His head was absolutely bald on the whole top, but the hair grew thick and bushy low on the sides and the back. He wore a beard of medium length but scanty. He moved about the house almost stealthily in slippers, and talked so little that everyone listened whenever he did speak. Uncle William was a journeyman jeweller, but he had long given up his trade to become a manufacturer of regalia for secret societies. He carried on his business at home, and a good part of each day he spent at a big table cutting out badges and aprons and banners from bright – coloured silks.

1. Do you get a clear impression of the author's uncle?
2. Was he a big man?
3. What did his face look like?
4. How did he move about the house?
5. Was he talkative?
6. How did he spend much of his time?
7. A lot is omitted from the description. We are not told what kind of shirt he wore, or shoe size, but his eyes are mentioned. Why?

## The character sketch

A person is made up of many attributes: **appearance, interests, ideas, feelings, opinions, and individual ways of behaving and talking**. The writer who sets out to describe someone in a character sketch has a vast number of details from which to **choose**.

When writing a character sketch yourself, **you** will decide, what are your subject's outstanding characteristics. Then **you** will include only those *needed* to give your reader the **clearest possible impression** of the person you are describing.

## Example II.

You take Christopher; he's an eight – year – old boy. The source of our difficulty with him lies in the fact that he is interested in the precise value of words whereas we are only interested in having him pick up his clothes off the floor. I say, "Christopher, you take a bath and put all your things in the wash", and he says "OK, but it will break the Bendix". Now at this point the shrewd rejoinder would be, "That's all right, let it break the Bendix". But years of experience have washed over me in vain and I, perennial patsy, inquire, "Why will it break the Bendix?". So he explains, "Well, if I put **all** my things in the wash, I'll have to put my shoes in and they will certainly break the machinery".

"Very well," I say, all sweetness and control, "put everything but the shoes in the wash". He picks up my agreeable tone at once, announcing cheerily, "Then you do want me to put my belt in the wash". I don't know what I say at this point, but my husband says, "Honey, you mustn't scream at him that way".

Another version of this battle of semantics would be:

"Don't kick the table leg with your foot".

"I'm not kicking, I'm tapping".

"Well, don't tap with your foot".

"It's not my foot, it's a fork"

"Well, don't tap with the fork".

Christopher is an unusual child in other respects. I watch him from the kitchen window. With a garden rake in one hand he scampers up a tree, out across a long branch, and down over the stone wall, as graceful and as deft as a squirrel. On the other hand, he is unable to get from the living room into the front hall without bumping into at least two pieces of furniture. I've seen him hit as many as five, but that's championship stuff and he can't do it every time.

He has another trick which defies analysis, and also the laws of gravity. He can walk out into the middle of a perfectly empty kitchen and trip on the linoleum. I guess it's the linoleum. There isn't anything else there.

1. What impression of Christopher does this character sketch convey?
2. List some adjectives that you think describe his personality.
3. What details of his habits and surroundings make Christopher seem real and familiar?

## Example III.

Sketching oneself is a quite difficult task that requires an *accurate* and *sincere* self – knowledge. Most of the people do not possess an *acute* and *clear* image of themselves and tend to either idealize or underestimate themselves. Through the years I've learned not to lie to myself and though I am pretty **modest** I can also be **honest** and **truthful** towards both myself and other people. As a **cagey** person I don't open up easily but that does not reduce my sociability. It's just that I keep a lot of things to myself because I don't believe that family or friends should share every *secret* and *deepest* thought. *Extreme* sincerity sometimes borders rudeness and hurts people so some things should better be left unsaid. Since I am neither **rude** nor **thoughtless** I choose to remain **silent**, abstain from criticizing others, and avoid causing pain and hurt which I could very easily do as my education is well above average and I am able to use words as sharp knives. I might sound **arrogant** but, no matter what others might think of me, I know I am not. As a **sensitive** human being, with the passing of the years, I feel less and less **cheerful** and **joyful**. Dealing with all three kinds

of increasing violence (physical, psychological and verbal) deprives me of joy and light-heartedness. Animals and nature are the *equivalent* I need to regain my balance and become **jovial** again. At times I feel I am **incongruous**, like a spoon in a knife drawer, but even so I am past the point of the need to fit in. Sometimes I wish I were less **ambivalent** and more **decisive**. My ambivalence tortures me and I can't seem to bring myself to decide on everyday *frivolous* things such as what kind of shoes to buy or whether to purchase plain mustard or honey mustard. I usually end up buying nothing or buying both. When it comes to books, of course, it's even worse. I need to have them all. My friend says that *excessive* reading can damage my brain, however it remains to be seen. It's too soon to know. I could go on as I can be rather **prolific** when it comes to writing but that should be enough. I wouldn't want you to take me for a narcissist. I have already mentioned I am **modest**, haven't I?

#### Example IV.

*Sketching oneself is a quite difficult task that requires an accurate and sincere self - knowledge. Most of the people do not possess an acute and clear image of themselves and tend to either idealize or underestimate themselves. Being **earnest** and **efficient** I will try to describe myself the best I can. That should be quite easy as I am **educated** and **erudite**. I am **exuberant** and **extroverted** by nature. I enjoy life, love travelling, and spend my summers by the sea. But sometimes life can affect one's nature. As the years go passing by I've become **emotional** and **edgy** because I am not **egocentric** and I care about others. I don't lead an **extravagant** life but I can be quite **elegant** if required. Although our problems seem to multiply I am still an **energetic** and **exploratory** person who hates wasting precious time doing nothing.*

#### Example V.

*It is difficult for someone to describe oneself. It is more difficult for a 14 year – old girl to describe herself not because she is not clever enough but because she doesn't know exactly her personality. I hope I have self-knowledge. As I grow up every year, month or minute I discover something about myself that I didn't know before.*

*I am honest and truthful with other people and I don't like making fun of them and their life style or personality. I joke only with myself. As a shy and a bit cagey person I am not very sociable. That does not mean that I don't talk with people. I just want to keep things to myself. Also, I am a very anxious person but only with simple and important things.*

*Sometimes I feel lonely because I am different from my friends or the other teenagers. I don't listen to music or spend hours on my phone. Instead I like reading books, discovering new things, spending time with my family, watching old Greek movies (something that no-one likes doing any more). I don't want to change my personality to please other people. I don't care.*

#### Example VI.

*I can say that I know myself but describing my character is definitely a hard task, mainly because self description has to be quite accurate in order to have some value. Even though fashion is not my field I could pull something off to make me look elegant. I might not be elegant but I am energetic. You could see me randomly dancing or singing, doing sports or being that overly excited kid that starts jumping around at the slightest sight of toys. I find happiness in a lot of things: writing, listening to music, reading and photography are my passions. They somehow make me feel euphoric and calm at the same time. One thing I would never ever in a thousand years be is envious. I am happy seeing people getting what they desire especially when they have worked hard for it. As a person that feels deeply I can easily say I am empathetic. It is a little hard to share my feelings but I can easily understand other people's feelings and I love it because it's something that helps me get close with people and create amazing friendships. Something I shouldn't forget is my curiosity. The more I learn the more eager I am to know more.*

## **Now you try it.....**

To make it more fun and interesting use only adjectives starting with your initial. For example, if your name is Maria, use ONLY adjectives that start with "m".

<https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/parts-of-speech/adjectives/list-of-descriptive-adjectives.html>

<https://myvocabulary.com/word-list/descriptive-adjectives-vocabulary/>

<https://www.enchantedlearning.com/wordlist/adjectives.shtml>

<https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/style-and-usage/descriptive-words-that-begin-with-the-letter-e.html>