

DESCRIBING a place or an object

Descriptions are “word pictures.” You tell how something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and sounds. In this lecture, you will learn to write a good description. When you write a description, you tell what something—a person, an object, or a place—looks like.

There are two keys to writing good descriptions:

1. Use space order to organize your description.
2. Use lots of descriptive details.

SPACE ORDER

Imagine that you are standing in the doorway of your classroom. How would you describe the room to someone who has never seen it? Here are some possibilities:

- You might start at the left side of the doorway and work your way around the room in a clockwise direction to the right side, ending at the doorway again.
- You might start at the front of the room and go from front to back, first describing the chalkboard, the teacher’s desk, and the area around the teacher’s desk. Then you might describe the students’ desks in the center of the room, and finally the walls and/or windows at the back and sides of the room.

This kind of organization is called space order. Here are other kinds of space order that you can use to write a description:

top to bottom bottom to top

right to left left to right

far to near near to far

outside to inside inside to outside



Model Text 1 *The Shared Refrigerator*

My roommate and I share a refrigerator. My roommate's half of our refrigerator is very neat. On the top shelf is a carton of milk, a pitcher of orange juice, and a bottle of mineral water. These are arranged in a straight line on the shelf. On the next shelf are cans of soda. These are carefully lined up in rows. Orange soda is in the first row, cola in the second, and lemon lime in the third. On the third shelf, he keeps dairy foods, such as butter, cheese, eggs, and yogurt. On the bottom shelf sit plastic containers of leftovers. These are neatly arranged by size. The large ones are in the back, and the small ones are in the front. There are two drawers in the bottom of the refrigerator. In his drawer, my roommate keeps vegetables and fruit. Each item is in a separate plastic bag in the drawer. In conclusion, my roommate is an organized person, and his half of our refrigerator really reflects his personality.

Which space order did the writer use?

(top to bottom bottom to top right to left left to right
far to near near to far outside to inside inside to outside)

TOPIC AND CONCLUDING SENTENCES FOR DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPHS

The topic part of a topic sentence for a paragraph of description usually names the person, place, or thing to be described. The controlling idea part usually gives a general impression (*beautiful, neat, messy, interesting, unusual, crowded, busy, noisy, and so on*). Here are some examples of topic sentences for paragraphs of description.

TOPIC + CONTROLLING IDEA

The old house looked ready to fall down.

The cave was a dangerous place to enter.

The club was full of young people having fun.

The concluding sentence of a description may repeat the idea stated in the topic sentence. It may also give the writer's opinion or feeling about the topic. Here are other examples of concluding sentences for paragraphs of description.

- *In short, I doubt the old house will survive one more winter.*
- *My friend and I were very happy when we got out of the cave.*
- *To sum up, music, dancing, and flashing lights make clubs exciting and fun.*

Model text 2

My Tall Nephew

The first thing you notice about my nephew is that he is extremely tall — six feet, six inches tall, to be exact. His head sticks up almost a foot above everyone else's. His hair is short, light brown, and curly, and his eyes are blue. His nose is straight, and his mouth curls into a smile easily and often. His casual clothes are typical of young people everywhere: a T-shirt and jeans. On the front of his shirt, you can read the name of his school in red and blue letters. As your eyes move down his long legs, you notice that his jeans are a little too short. Perhaps he can't buy pants to fit his long legs and narrow waist, or perhaps he doesn't care much about clothes. On his feet, he wears sneakers. Maybe his sneakers were white when they were new, but now they are gray with age and wear. Despite his casual clothes, my nephew is not a casual person. He stands as tall and straight as a redwood tree, and you think to yourself, "This is a strong and confident young man."

- 1) Analyze the topic sentence: the topic? the controlling idea?
- 2) What is the nephew's most noticeable physical feature?
- 3) Which sentence is the concluding sentence? What word in the topic sentence is repeated in the concluding sentence?
- 4) What kind of space order does the writer of this paragraph use?

(top to bottom bottom to top right to left left to right

far to near near to far outside to inside inside to outside)

SPECIFIC DETAILS

The second key to writing a good description is to use specific details. When you describe something, you paint a picture with words. Your goal is to make your reader "see" what you have described. The way to do this is to use a lot of specific details. Specific means exact or precise. The opposite of specific is too general, or vague. The more specific you can be, the better your reader can see what you are describing.

Here are some examples:

general	specific
A lot of money	\$500,000
A large house	a six-bedroom, four-bathroom house

Jogs a lot	jogs three miles in the park every day
A pretty face	warm brown eyes, shining black hair, and sparkling white teeth

PLANNING A SPACE-ORDER PARAGRAPH

You plan a space-order paragraph the same way you plan a time-order paragraph.

First, decide which space order to use — right to left, left to right, front to back, and so on.

Then list your details in that order.

Finally, make an outline by adding a topic sentence, capital letters to each detail, and a concluding sentence.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Prepositions are little words such as ***of, to, from, in,*** and ***at.*** Most prepositions are one word. A few prepositions are two words (***because of***) or three words (***in front of***). Here is a list of common prepositions.

about	besides	near	under
above	between	of	until
across	beyond	off	upon
after	by	on	with
against	down	out	without
along	during	outside	according to
around	except	over	because of
at	for	since	in addition to
before	from	through	in back of
behind	in	throughout	in front of
below	inside	till	in place of
beneath	into	to	next to
beside	like	toward	out of

Some words, such as **to**, are sometimes prepositions and sometimes another part of speech. Compare these two sentences.

We went to the supermarket.

We wanted to buy some fruit.

A preposition is usually combined with a noun or noun phrase to make a prepositional phrase:

in the house

at six o'clock

Some prepositional phrases answer the question **where**. These are prepositional phrases of place. Prepositional phrases of place are useful in space-order paragraphs to show the location of objects in a description.

on the desk

opposite the door

next to the window

in the closet

under the bed

in the middle of the room

in front of the house

in the distance

Other prepositional phrases answer the question **when**. These are prepositional phrases of time. Prepositional phrases of time are useful in “how to” paragraphs to give the order of the steps.

at last

before the test

after that

upon arrival

after class

in the morning

on New Year's Day

at midnight

Other prepositional phrases show possession:

(the father) of the bride

(the colors) of the rainbow

(the name) of my boss

(the president) of the company

Others describe or identify someone or something:

(the woman) with red hair

(the man) in the blue shirt

(the student) from Ecuador

(the car) with the flat tire

USING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES TO VARY SENTENCE OPENINGS

One way to improve your writing is to start sentences with prepositional phrases of time and place. A paragraph in which every sentence follows the same subject-verb-object pattern can be boring. Vary your sentence openings by sometimes starting a sentence with a prepositional phrase. Notice that you put comma after a prepositional phrase at the beginning of a sentence.

Get eight hours of sleep before a big exam.
Before a big exam, get eight hours of sleep.

Moving a prepositional phrase is also possible in sentences beginning with ***there is/there are*** and ***there was/there were***.

There are several kinds of trees in the park.
In the park, there are several kinds of trees.