

# Lesson 1: Description: The Fireworks of Writing

## Appeal to the Senses

Although most of the Sherlock Holmes detective tales are short stories, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is a full-length novel. Arthur Conan Doyle, a Scottish writer of the late Victorian period, firmly established the popularity of the detective genre. He gave us our first super sleuth, Sherlock Holmes.

► From page 4:

In this passage the author mainly appeals to the sense of sight. The reader “sees” the progress of the fog as it wisps its way across the moor. Words such as “white,” “woolly,” “fog-wreath,” “shadowy,” “swirl,” and “golden square” are vivid words for the eye.

Along with *Rip Van Winkle* (1819), *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) is one of Washington Irving’s most famous short stories. These were the first tales by an American author to receive wide circulation overseas.

► From page 5:

This paragraph is loaded with words that appeal to the sense of hearing: “dead hush,” “barking of the watchdog,” “crowing of a cock far, far off,” “chirp of a cricket,” and “guttural twang of a bull-frog.”

Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) was an extremely popular Victorian novelist. He wrote sensation novels, which always revolved around some type of mystery or crime, and he popularized the idea of a detective searching for clues.

Herman Melville (1819–1891) did not sell many copies of *Moby-Dick* in his lifetime. It wasn’t until the twentieth century that scholars saw it as a remarkable and original work of American literature.

(from page 6)

If you feel it would benefit your students, you can point out that while most of the examples given in this lesson are taken from the fiction genre, it is easy to find quality description in other types of writing as well. For instance, description plays an important part in the following account of the process of tattooing, found in the ship’s log of Captain James Cook.

Their method of tattooing I shall now describe. The color they use is lamp black, prepared from the smoke of a kind of oily nut, used by them instead of candles. The instrument for pricking it under the skin is made of very thin flat pieces of bone or Shell . . . and about an inch and a half long. One end is cut into sharp teeth, and the other fastened to a handle. The teeth are dipped into black liquor, and then drove, by quick, sharp blows struck upon the handle with a stick for that purpose, into the skin so deep that every stroke is followed with a small quantity of blood.<sup>1</sup>

1. from *Captain Cook’s Journal During His First Voyage Round the World* by James Cook

The purpose of Captain Cook’s description is to help readers understand the Tahitians<sup>2</sup> method of tattooing. Cook finds description necessary to detail the steps of the process. Students will have some practice describing a process in lesson 5.

Description is also necessary in explaining ideas. It helps readers to form pictures in their heads so that they can clearly “see” what the author means. In his book *Secrets of the Woods*, naturalist William J. Long illustrates the lack of food available to animals in the month of March by describing a fallen sparrow.

March is a weary month for the wood folk. One sees that life is a struggle,—a keen, hard, hunger-driven struggle to find enough to keep a-going and sleep warm. . . . It is then that the sparrow falleth. You find him on the snow, a wind-blown feather guiding your eye to the open where he fell in mid-flight; or under the tree, which shows that he lost his grip in the night. His empty crop<sup>3</sup> tells the whole pitiful story, and why you find him there cold and dead, his toes curled up and his body feather-light.

Finally, description is used to develop the ethos, or credibility, of a speaker or writer. In the preface to his book *An Anatomical Study on the Motion of the Heart and the Blood in Animals*, William Harvey describes himself as an expert to his fellow scientists. He is advancing the new idea that the heart circulates blood throughout the body, and he hopes that by detailing his past experience, he can persuade his peers to take his idea seriously.

I have already and repeatedly presented you, my learned friends, with my new views of the motion and function of the heart, in my anatomical lectures. I have now for nine years and more confirmed these views by multiplied demonstrations in your presence, illustrated them by arguments, and freed them from the objections of the most learned and skillful anatomists.<sup>4</sup>

Students will use description to establish ethos in the second half of this book.

## Tell It Back—Narration

From page 6:

Description is essential because without it, a story, essay, or speech would be boring and lifeless, or might even be hard to understand. One purpose of description is to help readers experience what they are reading. Scenes come alive when they are described with vivid words. Description can also be used to catch a reader’s attention, to explain a difficult idea, or to make a speech more interesting.

## Talk About It—

1. The first building would make a better house for a scary story because it looks creepier. In the image, there are birds or bats flying overhead and vines growing on the walls, which makes the building look like it’s falling apart. Also, the artist uses freer, choppy pen strokes, making the house look shakier and less stable. People seem to connect a tumble-

2. Tahitians: native people of the island of Tahiti in the Pacific Ocean

3. crop: an organ in a bird that stores food

4. anatomist: a scientist who dissects the body to understand its structures and workings

down house to death and decay—the perfect setting for ghosts. The second house seems less creepy. The weather appears to be beautiful and fair, and so the house is seen in its best light. It is symmetrical, free of vines or signs of decay, and it has a well-kept fence and yard. Artists make some houses look creepier than others by giving them the appearance of deterioration and disrepair.

2. Buchan engages every sense from sight (“every hill showing as clear as a cut amethyst”) to sound (“swung along that road whistling,” “brawling stream”) to touch (“frosty morning”) to smell (“queer, rooty smell of bogs”) to taste (“thick sweet milk”). By using rich sensory language, rather than simple adjectives, Buchan is showing rather than telling. The reader experiences the scene along with the main character.
3. Based on the passage, it seems that a sod mason is like a bricklayer. He constructs walls with pieces of turf rather than bricks. The text says that the author “orders” the contractor to put the roof on as soon as the walls are high enough, so it seems that a contractor is a hired builder.

### Memoria—

1. This quote claims that the senses, intelligent friends, and books can all be valuable teachers. We learn about the world as we experience it through our senses, we learn from the people with whom we surround ourselves, and we also learn from the books we read.
2. It is through our senses that we learn about the world, so books can teach like a schoolmaster by giving readers sensory experiences through descriptive writing. Furthermore, they can give us experiences in our minds that we might not get to experience in reality. If, for example, an author writes a vivid description of the Sahara Desert, his readers don’t actually have to visit the Sahara to have some knowledge of it.



