

How to Approach a Descriptive Essay

Descriptive essays are one of the first types of essays that many students encounter in the classroom. These essays can be challenging because they ask students to describe precisely what they experienced; in other words, *descriptive essays ask students to show, not tell*. The easiest way to do this is to use the five senses to help the reader experience what the writer did. However, like other types of essays, descriptive essays must still have a central point and the main components of an essay, including a thesis statement, body paragraphs, introduction, and conclusion.

Choosing a Topic

Most of the time, you'll be given a prompt for a descriptive essay that will ask you to describe something. Some common examples are, "describe yourself to a stranger," "tell me about your favorite outfit," "describe your perfect vacation or favorite place," or something similar. When you're thinking about topics, select something that stands out vividly in your mind. The easier it is for you to imagine it, the easier it will be to write about!

Breaking It into Parts

Most of the time, descriptive essays are written using the **five-paragraph essay** model. This is the most commonly taught essay form, and it includes the following: an **introduction** that introduces the topic, **three body paragraphs** that explain the main points, and a **conclusion** that summarizes what was said and why it was important. When you're planning your descriptive essay, it helps to break your topic into three parts so that they'll easily fit into those body paragraphs. Here are some examples of prompts and examples:

- If the prompt was, "Describe yourself to a stranger," the three parts might be your appearance, your favorite hobbies, and your friends.
- If the prompt is, "Describe your favorite place," you might describe what the trip there looks like, what it's like when you're walking up to the place, and what it's like inside.
- If you're writing about the perfect first date, you might describe the ideal guy, the place, and what you would do while on the date.

The Five Senses

Once you have your three main parts, you'll use descriptive details (like the 5 senses) to make your points and sub-points.

<p>Sight describes things that you see. It can be helpful to think about colors, shapes, or textures when describing sight. For instance, instead of saying "There's a tree on the corner," you might say, "The oak tree had brilliant red leaves and cast a shadow over corner."</p>	<p>Sound describes what you hear. Close your eyes and think of the sounds you remember. Was there traffic, people talking, wind blowing through the trees or anything else like that? <i>Actions</i> normally make sounds, so it's a good idea to think about things that were happening in your mental image. An example might be, "I could hear the wind blowing through the trees and the water crashing against the rocks."</p>
<p>Touch involves the things you physically feel. Clothing, temperature, or anything like that are good choices. Was it hot or cold? Sunny or rainy? An example might be, "It was a cool autumn day, and the chilly wind felt sharp against my bare cheeks."</p>	<p>Taste and Smell aren't as commonly used, but they can add additional depth to an essay, especially when there's food involved. You might think about how things often taste, like salty, sweet, or bitter. For instance, you could write something like, "When I bit into the apple, it was sweet against my tongue."</p>

5 Steps for Writing a Descriptive Essay

As with any other type of essay writing, an organized approach will help you write this kind of essay more easily and quickly.

1. Start by mentally envisioning what you want to write about. Then, break it into the three parts as we talked about above.
2. Draft a **thesis statement** to outline the argument you're going to make. Your thesis statement will tell the reader what you're talking about, why it's important, and the three parts you mentioned above. For instance, you might say something like, "The most beautiful place I've been is a cabin by the woods because of the dynamic foliage on the drive up, the scenery outside, and the cozy accommodations inside."
3. Create an **outline** with your thesis statement and the basic information for each of the three body paragraphs. Then write down as many examples as you can think of for each of the five senses for each paragraph.
4. Once you have the outline written, you're ready to write the body of the paper. It's helpful to start with a **topic sentence** that outlines what the paragraph will be about. Then, describe the topic using the senses in your outline. In descriptive essays, it helps to use a **chronological** structure to walk the reader through the experience as if they were there.
5. Then, you'll write the introduction and conclusion. For the introduction, start with an interesting hook, then provide the reader with some background information on what you're writing about. You'll end the introduction with the thesis statement you created in step two. For the conclusion, you'll start by rephrasing your thesis statement, then summarize the main points you made in the body, and end by explaining why all of this matters – in other words, why should someone read your paper?

Once you've finished these steps, you should have a rough draft of your essay completed. You'll find that if you use the five senses and the steps above, writing a descriptive essay doesn't have to be hard or time-consuming.