

# DESCRIPTION

## What Description Is

For our purposes here, we might say that to describe something—object, emotion, thought, event, and on over the horizon of human experience—is to surround it with written words, much the way lines shape the subject of a drawing. The Greek root of the word “scribe” is instructive. It means to scratch, or sketch an outline. That implied lightness of touch can be important. We should seek to surround our subject not so much to capture it (and least of all to annihilate it) as to liberate it, let it stand forth in a new fullness and freshness. Descriptive writing can free its subject from itself, from the obscurity of experience, and in the same stroke bear it to a life larger than the words surrounding it. The words should not draw attention to themselves; rather, they should scratch a descriptive network so tough and resilient it can spring the subject free of its own description.

## How to Write Description

Good descriptive writing is first of all concrete. Search out the telling detail, the essential characteristic, then nail it down. But the warning above applies here as well: the subject must be nailed down without stabbing it to death. We are not out to pin dead dry bugs to a board. Keep them alive. Keep them moving. This is best done with verbs and nouns. When we run on to a chasm between the verb and the noun we can throw an adjective like a lifeline, or a bridge, between the two—always remembering, though, that such connections are seldom strong enough to support a sentence.

Here, from one of the familiar tales of the

Brothers Grimm, is a simple illustration of how sensual descriptive writing should be:

“Oh, Grandmother, what big ears you have,”  
she said.  
“The better to hear with, my dear.”  
“Grandmother, what big eyes you have.”  
“The better to see with, my dear.”  
“What big hands you have, Grandmother.”  
“The better to hold you with, my dear.”  
“But, Grandmother, what big teeth you have.”  
“The better to eat you up with, my dear.”  
Hardly had the Wolf said this, than he sprang  
from the bed and gobbled up poor little Red  
Riding Hood.

Poor Red Riding Hood indeed. She seems to have been lacking in one element vital to graphic description—imagination. But at least we can learn from the wolf. Let all descriptive writers put teeth in their words and gobble up the reader.

## Locating Subjects for Description

Description is clearly one of the broadest kinds of writing. Just about any subject listed in this book could inspire a descriptive passage. Descriptive writing is, by way of example, sometimes fundamental to creative and narrative writing. This would, then, be an appropriate time to begin to regard this book as a whole and to move, by directing the assignments to students, freely from part to part. The subjects in the present chapter will be seminal for descriptive writing exercises of all kinds, but the book strives to become, as a whole, a descriptive network not unlike the one we have described above, outlining, however lightly, the power and possibility of writing.

who has a second flowering  
 who opposes something without understanding it  
 who writes up the national psychological and vocational  
 examinations  
 who is a "living legend"  
 who is oracle, sage, and know-it-all  
 who is the ultimate fan  
 who is left speechless  
 who has a short fuse  
 who "says little, thinks less, and does nothing at all"  
 (quotation from George Farquhar)  
 who is trying to look sober but is not  
 who delights in order  
 who would rather give up life than material possessions  
 who has a mad impulse  
 who is a pragmatist  
 who is lonely  
 who is at a loss for words  
 who behaves like a deranged and frightened  
 Ichabod Crane  
 who loves rings  
 who has only one idea, and that one a wrong one  
 who is a pebble on the beach, one of the crowd  
 who is in spirited conversation with himself/herself  
 who is a compulsive taker of notes  
 who tries to appeal to everyone  
 whose identity is revealed only at the end of your  
 description  
 who is shrewd  
 who is one of those who will "inherit the earth"  
 who always says, "Let's get serious."  
 who is a saver or collector  
 who practices small economies such as string-saving  
 who is an unofficial psychoanalyst  
 who is expert at avoiding serious commitment  
 who has to settle for a second choice  
 who is just learning self-respect  
 who is on a soap box  
 who is "worth watching"  
 who is like his/her pet  
 who is in love with love  
 who has an unusual habit  
 who has an unusual interest  
 who is free again  
 who has gambling fever  
 who looks ignorant  
 who looks intelligent  
 who looks wealthy  
 who looks poor  
 who looks tragic  
 who looks self-pitying  
 who cuts into line

who rages at God whenever something goes wrong (such  
 as bad weather)  
 who is an actor without an audience  
 who has too little to do  
 who behaves characteristically  
 who is like Bartleby, a fictional character who says only,  
 "I would prefer not to."  
 who is a "roads" scholar, a tramp  
 who is always "the one in charge"  
 who daily "goes ape" over someone or something new  
 who sings while at work  
 who is always first with the worst  
 who is shaped by experience  
 who is "crazy like a fox"  
 who is a pied piper  
 who is poetry in black  
 who succeeds exceptionally well in something he/she  
 does not seem suited for  
 who has no enemies  
 who has no friends  
 who is a "city-slicker" in the country  
 who behaves spontaneously  
 who is a quick study, a superb mimic  
 who suffers from the effects of someone else's trying to  
 break a bad habit  
 who is in heart but not in sight  
 who likes to dance  
 who is all business  
 who is dressed up to scare  
 who knows how to answer the question "How lazy can  
 you get?"  
 who learns everything without help  
 who has no middle name  
 who is a middle name  
 who has only initials as a name  
 who is a name-dropper  
 who came very young to the throne (actual or symbolic  
 throne) and had to come of age quickly in order to  
 deal with the world  
 who is without vices  
 who is without a single virtue  
 who appears, but is not, intelligent  
 who appears, but is not, ignorant  
 who is an advocate  
 who monopolizes conversations  
 who is one of a kind  
 who is his own man/her own woman  
 who is misguidedly chauvinistic or zealous  
 who has a force or energy born of terror  
 who is like his/her residence  
 who is undeservedly famous  
 who is undeservedly infamous

who is brave in spite of an obstacle to bravery	who is like a chameleon in personality
who is a freelancer at something	who is describing himself/herself only by what he/she sees in a mirror
who, though in an official capacity, corrects you on the facts you give about yourself	who is a caricature
who is tight-lipped	who is discouraged because of having suffered in a natural disaster
who is a "wonder of wonders"	who, even if not known, ought to be Man/Woman of the Year
who is "programmed"	who is confused by the world but not worried about it
who is ageless	who is utterly without opinion or substance
who is self-consciously middle-aged	who has a face and manner of authority
who is a toastmaster	who wears "the smile of God"
who is a wayfaring stranger	who is a modern Sphinx
who is poetry in motion	who has absolute confidence
whose behavior is controlled by conditioning	who can see though blind
who is responsible for having changed your life	who is coming to terms with the fact of death
who is a hermit in the city	who is a double for someone else
who is outlandish	who is an "All-American" type
who is crazy as a loon	who has islands inside
who is a great impostor	who is so obsessed by TV as to have a pocket TV
who tries to stay on a diet	who is tied up in knots
who tries to give up smoking	who is used up or burnt-out
who tries to give up drinking	who is blissfully unaware
who characteristically over-reacts	who is in austerity
who is right off the comic page	who is a scapegoat
whose main weakness is _____	who is "square" or "straight-arrow"
who is an angel	who is egotistical
who has escaped from prison	who has an immense talent in hiding
who is a high-roller	who is eccentric
who is flaky	who is a good judge, though without experience
who runs the wrong way	who is a picture-straightener
who is seeking the unattainable	who is a perfectionist
who is too dangerously busy	who is in need of special attention
who coaches football but doesn't know what a football is	who is "always around"
who is "strange"	who is "never around"
who is a born leader	who is a high-climber
who is a born follower	who is just now finding a voice
who is in a shaky position	who never gives in
who is prematurely old	who delivers tedious speeches or sermons
who is cute (or "cutesy")	who is "asleep at the switch"
who is, though grown, a baby	who is a "wolf in the fold"
who is "Nature's darling" (Thomas Gray's reference to Shakespeare)	who is an outsider or a pariah
who is godlike	who is a master solicitor of funds
who is a "good person"	who is utterly imperturbable
who has the gift of gab	who is easily perturbed
who never confesses to losing an argument	who has a name that sometimes causes accidental humor
who has "coffee nerves"	who is hopeful of catching a fish
who has "nicotine fits"	who is hopeful of finding the right job
who delivers jeremiads	who has insurmountable scruples
who is just plain dumb	who is in prison for political reasons
who is spoiled by success	who is exhausted almost to the point of death
whose name and personality match exactly	who has noble qualities

who is a non-heroic figure  
 who can be characterized by speech mannerisms  
 who has a voice "like a great bell swinging in a dome"  
 (quotation from James Elroy Fletcher)  
 who is an ~~esoteric~~ scholar  
 who is a member or a joiner  
 who has (in the words of John Ford) "shaked hands  
 with time."  
 who is nameless  
 who dares/who "dares not" do something  
 who is capable of inspiring confidence  
 who is exotic  
 who is a saint  
 who loves the stage (as observer, or as performer)  
 who has many kinds of deep troubles  
 who is a lover of the country  
 who is an audience of one  
 who speaks to one person as if to an audience  
 a relative or a close acquaintance  
 someone as the god(ess) of something  
 a pickpocket in action  
 the child in you  
 a friendly president of a small country  
 someone you love to hate  
 someone with a "singing face" (quotation by John  
 Fletcher)  
 a child in the White House  
 a teacher with only a sixth-grade education  
 someone trying to sleep when it is impossible to sleep  
 a reluctant Santa Claus  
 someone who expresses an opinion without thinking  
 a great person known to you  
 a lunatic employer  
 someone surviving the winter  
 someone with laughter like a bellows action  
 someone who is uncommonly shy . . . who laughs, for  
 example, with great embarrassment at just about  
 anything  
 someone surviving a great public embarrassment  
 someone who is ostracized  
 someone who is too conscious of his/her best profile  
 someone before and after  
 someone hard to catch, hard to conquer  
 an uninvited guest  
 someone picking cotton ("snapping") with the energy  
 of a very young person  
 someone who is lovable and loving  
 someone who is unorthodox  
 someone throwing a tantrum  
 someone who is an authority on a wide range of *obscure*  
 subjects: for example, darbies, hieroglyphs, praying  
 mantises

a first-time Broadway playwright awaiting first reviews  
 someone who is a "clear-cut choice"  
 someone who has the lowdown on someone  
 someone who has retained elegance and charm  
 the president as through the eyes of a child  
 what your inferiority complex is like  
 the child in ~~someone~~  
 an heir/heirress  
 someone climbing a lamp post during a celebration  
 the unknown soldier/the unknown citizen  
 a bouncer  
 an angel in the \_\_\_\_\_  
 a broken individual  
 your interview with a famous person  
 someone in the moment before death  
 a veteran  
 someone who is self-consciously kind  
 a night security guard at work  
 someone who would like to harm you  
 someone watching something intently  
 an IRS official as seen by a reluctant taxpayer  
 a reluctant taxpayer as seen by an IRS official  
 the thing in you that others admire  
 someone who is unknowingly self-revealing  
 someone surviving the loss of the savings of a lifetime  
 someone surviving the failure of an important  
 examination  
 someone rushing to catch a bus  
 someone suddenly realizing he/she is late  
 someone reacting to an unfunny joke  
 someone reacting to a speech  
 someone suddenly remembering something  
 yourself as you were at one time  
 someone, such as a small child, who can get dirty where  
 no dirt is  
 a lazy-lipped person  
 someone with a vigorously recurring (but seldom  
 lasting) spiritual regeneration  
 someone who walks hundreds of miles to prove love to  
 the one waiting at the destination  
 someone in despair  
 "someone I ought to know better"  
 an old man/woman in school  
 someone who "wrote the book" on \_\_\_\_\_  
 the top-sergeant, still more active than the recruits  
 after more than thirty years of military service  
 someone who has weathered *everything*  
 an underdog who likes the role of underdog  
 someone real or fictional who is a slumbering giant  
 awakening  
 someone who is made up of many different parts, all  
 of which are funny