CHAPTER 2: DESCRIPTION - CREATING A DOMINANT IMPRESSION

This chapter emphasizes connections between critical thinking and description. It maps important techniques for creating descriptions:

- Recognizing that a description builds a case for a future meaning
- Using concrete language to clarify abstract ideas
- Understanding the interaction of inference and implication
- Integrating description into other modes

What makes descriptive language different from other types of language? First, it is rooted in the body. It re-presents smell, sight, taste, touch, or hearing in words. For example, a doctor listens to your chest as you inhale and exhale, and writes in the chart, "pale, diaphoretic, male, 19 y.o., respiration 30, rales." Each of these words reports a fact about the body. None of them makes a judgment or interpretation. The doctor's notes recreate the condition of your body in words. The color of your flesh (pale), the sound of your breathing (rales), and your sweating body (diaphoretic) are re-presented in words. The notes are the description of the physical evidence upon which she will build the history and diagnosis that lead to therapeutic recommendations. Her language is entirely descriptive until she provides a diagnosis (a meaning) to the description of your body: "You probably have asthma exacerbated by smoking and environmental dust." She then names an action for the meaning: "We will treat it with steroids, breathing treatments, and a smoking cessation program."

Description is the basis of evidence; it provides the agreed-upon material from which interpretation and meaning can proceed. The first step in description requires accurate observation and careful reporting. While these are the crucial features of description, there are other, more subtle aspects of such writing. First among these is the selection and organization of information so that it implies a specific meaning.

Where in Your World are Descriptions?
_____

Description presents evidence for which an interpretation can be made. It is often part of modes such as narration.

Description in Daily Life
• Recommending a book or movie to a friend
• Explaining symptoms to a doctor or dentist
• Giving directions by referring to landmarks

Description at School
• Selecting courses based on catalog descriptions
• Writing a proposal for a research paper
• Posting a teacher evaluation on RateMyProfessor

Description at Work
• Writing film, book, and restaurant reviews
• Creating advertising brochures
• Writing an accident report

KEY FEATURES OF DESCRIPTION

What makes a description a description? First, it uses concrete language that attempts to re-create something from the real world. It requires accurate observation and exact vocabulary to carefully map the world. It selects its focus, its vocabulary, and its strategy of presentation to *imply* a meaning. We know that a description is good when the reader can *infer* the implied meaning. Remember: writers make implications; readers infer meanings. Good descriptive writing enables readers and writers to share an understanding.

I. General Features
- a. Creates a mutually understood world through
    - i. Accurate observation
    - ii. Concrete language
    - iii. Exact vocabulary
- a. Creates a specific meaning through
    - i. Conscious aim
    - ii. Carefully selected details whose implications
        - (1) Reflect the reader's knowledge, experience, expertise, and role
        - (2) Reflect a mutual exchange between writer and reader.
        - (3) Lead to predictable inferences
- c. Creates a dominant impression: the outcome of effective description

Thus, descriptive language attempts to create a verbal equivalent of the material world or the emotional world by providing words that mean the same thing to both writer and reader. Such writing means that both share an awareness of the context. For example, the doctor and her patient have somehow agreed that the communications will be about the body, about variations from physical norms, and that such differences will be explained on the basis of established medical knowledge. They come into the situation with a tightly focused understanding about what kind of language and what kind of meanings are allowed. The setting is a frame for the language. The charts on the wall, stethoscope, examining table, and all the other features of a *typical* medical office set expectations. If this understanding holds, description will do its work of signaling the presence of a frame that sets expectations.

Description is common in other contexts. The people who write advertisements describe their products and services with glossy images and with words to produce specific effects. Insurance adjustors have to document the damage to a car, police reports describe the scene of a crime, laboratory technicians report outcomes of tests, and even lovers try to describe their feelings. Many things are actually description, but their "objectivity" reflects the common ground upon which reader and writer stand. The nurse who reads the doctor's chart has to have the same meaning for "diaphoretic" as the doctor. The pathologist reporting a "squamous cell carcinoma" is using the same term that every other pathologist would use to describe the tissue sample. But descriptions are not neutral even if they are objective. For example, a description of the cigarette butts outside the office door could be mixed with descriptions of emphysema or heart disease.

The descriptions could connect the two in a way that is meant to teach a lesson. They are not neutral at all and the writer activates our knowledge about tobacco's risks. Writer and reader share a framework for thinking about tobacco. The writer has activated that knowledge and implied a meaning. It falls to the reader to make the inference.

THREE EXAMPLES OF DESCRIPTION

Below are three examples that show how description is used as a building block for writing. The examples range from the work of an inexperienced first-term writer to the work of a professional food writer. Each example illustrates key features about description.

Example #1:

Below is a first draft by a student who has had little writing experience. As is, it is not a good example of description because the language is vague. Even if it is a weak description, it *is* a good first draft because it can be fixed by making some simple changes: sharper verbs, a better use of the five senses, and more concrete language. The writer seems to know what needs to be done, but has not yet used these basic descriptive tools. Once these tools sharpen the re-presentation of the world, we can ask two other questions: 1) what meaning is the writer implying; 2) what meaning can the reader infer?

My most favorite season of all is summer. When school is out, I can just do what I want all day. The first thing I do is go to the beach and lie out in the sun until I am really hot. Then I go into the water for a while and get cooled off. I like to get a really good tan in the summer. I usually get a hot dog and fries for lunch, then lie in the sun some more. At night, we always barbecue out in the backyard, usually my dad makes ribs or chicken and potato salad. Sometimes we roast marshmallows and make s'mores. I can stay up as late as I want because there's no school the next day. That is why I like summer the best	Good description relies on strong verbs. Note that the verbs marked in red are vague: "is"; "am"; "go"; "get"; "lie"; "makes"; "stay up." These red verbs can be replaced with descriptive verbs that yield phrases such as "plunge in the water" in place of "go into the water." You might also "wolf down a hotdog and fries." Not only does this need stronger verbs, but it also needs to be rooted in the body. How does the sun feel? Does it make you sweat? Does the sweat make lines in your sunblock? Go through the senses and make the experience concrete. Using shared physical senses creates a shared sensory experience and thus a bond between reader and writer.

What does this example tell us about description?

The student's writing describes summer's pleasures. It focuses on concrete subjects such as sunshine and food. It does have a dominant impression: summer is great. That seems to be a widely shared opinion, but the paragraph might become more effective *if* the writer used the senses to re-create physical sensations and provide a common set of bodily experiences for the pleasures of summer. Words like "makes" are vague because they are abstract. They do not draw the reader into the moment. Instead of "makes," the writer could use "grills," just as she might use "plunge" in place of "goes" or "stretch out in the sun" in place of "lie." These small changes describe the topic in terms that are grounded in the kinds of physical experiences we all share.

This description needs to "signal" the context where these details matter. As it stands, the reader is a bit lost, and asks, "Where does this information matter; what is it about?" Think of

the scene in the doctor's office. There, both patient and doctor shared a focus on the body, on illness, and on treatment. The office signaled what kinds of language would matter. Here, there is no shared focus that can give a meaning. The writer does not imply, and the reader cannot infer. There are various possibilities. For example, it could begin with a sentence such as, "The road to the beach runs past the locked gates of the abandoned steel mill, but I give myself a day so I can forget the weeds growing up in its parking lot." This sentence implies issues of employment, stress, relaxation, economic turmoil, and the limits of individual endurance. It creates an opening frame that can shape the following detail to imply important issues. Then, the reader can make inferences about the world within which "my summer vacation" took place.

Example #2:

The example below comes from a creative writing class. It is the opening of a long story, and it attempts to establish key settings, emotions, and characters. The description directs the reader to expect a specific kind of story. Thus, it illustrates that description embodies choices that control the readers' inferences.

Jim Moses sat in the mouth of the cave, searching the night sky for the north star and listening to the river rasping against the bank. His canoe sat ready for the crossing, and on the other side of the river he could see a field stretching in a long ribbon toward a distant square of yellow light. The wind blew through the grass, swirling it like a mother's fingers running through her child's hair, but Jim was not thinking of his mother. He was waiting to see if the wind would die, or if it would keep up enough to erase any track he might make through it. He wanted the wind to hide his passage, to blow away any scent the dogs could follow. He carefully laid the small rifle his father had made for him on the bottom of his canoe, and pushed off into the current. He would go up to the lighted window, do what he must, and perhaps on the man's desk would be a paper telling him where they had taken his mother.

The verbs (green text) are active: "searching"; "rasping"; "stretching," etc. They seem connected to the body. Metaphors describe the field as "stretching in a long ribbon," and a simile describes the wind as "like a mother's fingers running through her child's hair."

Like the restaurant review (below) the writer locates the reader's experience in physical sensations. Dogs can follow a scent, Jim can listen to the river. A careful reading would find that adverbs and nouns are also highly specific. The rifle is not only "small," but it is also made by Jim's father.

What does this example tell us about description?

Descriptions are *not* neutral re-creations of the real world. They are built by writers who choose objects that will have specific meanings to specific audiences. If the reader knows American history, s/he is likely to recognize the North Star as an emblem of an escaped slave. The star served as an astronomical compass that always pointed to the North and freedom. The historically minded reader would also know that bloodhounds were used to hunt escaped slaves. The concrete images of dogs, the North Star, and handmade rifles re-create the historical

moment prior to the Civil War. If this reader also knows American literature, s/he will probably think of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and the central figure of Jim, the escaped slave who travels with Huck. Readers come to this description knowing things, and writers create descriptions that reference what the readers know. If we just arrived from Mars, the passage would have no connection to what we know. Your descriptions have to speak to the reader's specific experience, and you must signal the context for the description.

So what? This all seems to be about literature, literary figures, and other things that you might not use in your life as a nurse, teacher, mechanic, physicist, or landscaper. Where does descriptive writing emerge in more practical settings? Let's take a look at a pathologist's report:

Clinical Data
IRON DEFICIENCY ANEMIA

PATHOLOGY REPORT
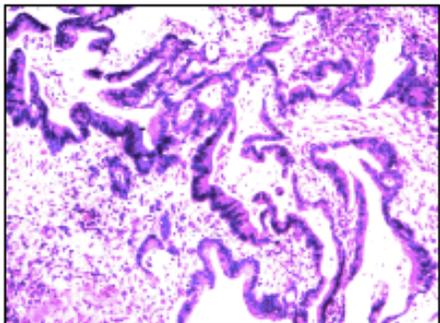
SPECIMEN 01 CECUM COLON, BIOPSY

MICROSCOPIC DESCRIPTION

Colonic tissue fragments showing irregularly shaped malignant tumor glands lined by pleomorphic cells with nuclear hyperchromasia. Malignant cells infiltrate the submucosa and have an associated desmoplastic and inflammatory response.

SPECIMEN 01, CECUM COLON, BIOPSY:
DIAGNOSIS:
Colonic tissue fragments with invasive adenocarcinoma, well to moderately differentiated.

GROSS DESCRIPTION: Received in formalin, labeled with the patient's name and "cecal mass biopsy" are multiple portions of tan-white soft tissue measuring 0.6 x 0.6 x 0.2 cm in aggregate, which are submitted in toto in one cassette labeled 1A.   kaf/m

SPECIMEN 02, DESCENDING COLON, BIOPSY:
DIAGNOSIS:
Tubular adenoma (adenomatous polyp).

GROSS DESCRIPTION: Received in formalin, labeled with the patient's name and "descending colon polyp" is a tan-pink polyp measuring 0.7 x 0.7 x 0.3 cm. The specimen is bisected and submitted in its entirety in one cassette labeled 2A.   kaf/s

MICROSCOPIC DESCRIPTION: Polypoid colonic mucosa with increased number of glands, glandular crowding and mucin depletion in some of the glands. The glands are lined by cells with enlarged and hyperchromatic nuclei.

CASE COMMENTS: Dr. Sample's office has been notified of the findings by telephone on 3/3/05.

Phrases such as "irregularly shaped malignant tumor glands lined by pleomorphic cells with nuclear hyperchromasia" and "an associated desmoplastic and inflammatory response" are not likely to mean anything to most of us. But to the writer -- a pathologist -- they mean a lot. What matters is that the reader -- the oncologist who will remove the tumor -- has exactly the same meaning for these words as the writer. This is a description of a deadly serious fact: colon cancer. If the description is poor, it can lead to death. If it is done so that the words here mean exactly the same to the oncologist (the audience for the report) as it does to the pathologist (the writer of the report), then the patient has a chance of surviving. Language matters, and in this case, the description relies on specialized language, a form that presents itself as a "Pathology Report," and which then has headings for each tissue sample. Precise adjectives such as "malignant" give the answer to the "So what?" that might be asked. The entire report implies that the patient is a candidate for treatment. The oncologist (the reader) makes the reasonable inference that s/he will undertake a treatment for the patient. This example illustrates the three key features of description: 1) a a shared world; 2) a meaning; and 3) a dominant impression.

The pathology report is descriptive, but it follows the description with an answer to the "So what?" The answer seems to be the diagnosis. How is the diagnosis *not* a narrative? This is a crucial point, especially in a textbook like this one that organizes writing into specific modes (narration, description, comparison, etc.). Good writers understand and exploit the modes, but good writers also know that the modes often travel in packs. They need each other, strengthen each other, and they respect the turf that the others manage best. So, the answer is that the pathology report is descriptive, but when it answers the "So what?" the reader begins to imagine chemotherapy or surgery. The writing itself may not be a narrative, but as the reader infers a meaning, the doctors might become "characters" in the implied story of the biopsy, characters who need facts so that they can begin the story of a treatment. The surgeon shares a vocabulary with the pathologist, and thus they occupy a common ground, but the patient is not likely to know the geography of that world. When s/he sits down with the surgeon, the description will be "re-written" in words, images, and stories taken from a different world. It is still a form of common ground, but it is the common ground of the patient and surgeon. At that point, the narrative begins.

The third example comes from an experienced writer who knows that the reader needs sensory detail -- smells, tastes, ingredients, sights, aromas, colors -- that re-create the food and the experience of the meal. It is a verbal snapshot taken with similes, specific adjectives, and other descriptive techniques. Like a snapshot of a lover, it is not the real thing, but the similarity can still make us salivate.

Due Ladroni	
For true foodies, no trip to Rome would be complete without a visit to one of the city's best kept secrets, Due Ladroni. It is **located in central Roma, about a quarter of a mile from the banks of the Tiber River on the Piazza Nicosia.** The original owners were **twin brothers who opened a tiny trattoria and served their mother's recipes to a clientele consisting mostly of truck drivers.** When their business thrived and the area became gentrified, the prices rose accordingly, and the truck drivers began referring to the brothers as "due ladroni," which means two thieves. The name stuck, and **the logo features two shady looking characters with mustaches and shifty eyes.** But there is nothing shady about the food on offer here. Due Ladroni is fairly expensive, but worth every euro.	The restaurant review opens by telling a story (narrative) about the restaurant's owners, customers, and popularity. It is a story filled with detail (see bolded words), but the story establishes a common ground between writer and reader by asking the reader to turn on her/his knowledge about food, restaurants, Italy, and the experience of life as a "foodie." The opening narrative creates a "place" for the following description. Think of the description as camera shots in a film, and the technique becomes clear.
The restaurant enjoyed a brief period of fame in the late 90s, when it became the place for celebrities to visit, and **the waiters still treat every customer like a movie star**. They are professional, friendly, and knowledgeable about every menu item, and very **eager to show off their English-speaking abilities to American tourists**.	The review becomes heavily descriptive: "like a movie star" is a simile that juxtaposes celebrities and regular customers. The description of the waiters' English skills signals the audience for the review: American travelers interested in exceptional food.
Inside are three small but elegant **dining rooms with white-washed walls** and **paintings by local artists**, but the most popular tables are in the **outdoor terrace covered with a canvas roof**. It offers a pleasant view of the Piazza and **an ancient flower-decked fountain**.	The "camera" that sees the restaurant recreates the setting by moving from parts of the three rooms (their walls and decoration) to the overall restaurant with its terrace and view of the surrounding town.

The seafood salad is a treat for the eye as well as the palate. The **coral prawns** and **bright green avocados** are **arranged in an alternating star pattern on a pale yellow platter** and **drizzled with a savory seafood sauce**.	The review pictures the food in terms of colors (coral, bright green, yellow), and offers a geometric term to let the reader view the arrangement of food on the plate.
First courses include linguine with lobster, 22 euros, gnocchi with smoked salmon, 20 euros, and ditalini and porcini mushrooms, 18 euros. The pasta is made on site, and done perfectly; the gnocchi, usually a heavy, dense dish, is light and tasty, a perfect complement to the house-smoked salmon.	The summary of the menu is almost a list. Some items are judged ("pasta is made on site, and done perfectly"), but the paragraph primarily summarizes information on the menu.
The second course, scallops alla limone was the best I ever tasted, created with angel hair pasta tossed in a light lemon and white wine sauce, decorated with bits of pancetta bacon and capers.	The writer focuses even more specifically on description by naming components of the main course: "angel hair pasta," "light lemon and wine sauce," "bits of pancetta bacon and capers."
The wine list is a comprehensive one, ranging from familiar commercial choices like Ruffino and Montalcino, at 25 euros, to local favorites like **La Sala, a Tuscan winery owned and operated entirely by women**, featuring an exceptional Chianti at 70 euros.	This paragraph -- like the summary of the menu -- provides information, but it includes a concrete detail that humanizes the writer while making the facts more vivid.
Although it does not appear on the dessert menu, regulars order the Nicosia Cup, a heavenly combination of **impossibly rich vanilla gelato and dark chocolate sauce swimming in amaretto**.	Again, the writer names components and relies on the readers' visual sense to describe the dessert.
A summer evening spent at Due Ladroni is an experience not to be missed - a perfect combination of Mediterranean cuisine and Italian hospitality.	Just as the first paragraph of the review opened the frame for the review's description, this paragraph draws the bottom of that frame so that the review ends clearly.

What does this example tell us about description?

Note that the reader and the writer become closely identified by the dominant impression of the description. The reader "sees" what the writer shows; "hears" what the writer says, and even "tastes" what the writer tastes. The "camera" of the writer moves from inside to outside, and from dish to dish. Clearly, she is the eye through which we perceive the restaurant and the meal. Both reader and writer trust that there is a shared experience of some sensations. Both agree to

use language that recreates the sensation. The visual element is the most powerful, but effective description goes into the other senses as well. We "hear" the Italian setting as the waiters try out their English. By the end of the review, readers have experienced (secondhand) the food, setting, and ambience of Due Ladroni. The re-creation puts reader and writer at the same table, and the dominant impression is of magnificent food served in a beautiful setting.

Putting Description to Work

The restaurant review (above) uses the five senses to create a physical sense of the setting, food, and experience of a fine meal. Use exactly the same sequence of descriptive elements to describe a fast food restaurant.

Point of View

To create a description, a writer has to decide where to stand while constructing the description. From that point of view, the description either begins with a detail and eventually encompasses the entire topic, or else it begins with the larger scene and zooms in on details. If you described your room, it might begin with a description of the Eminem poster above your bed and then enlarge the frame to include your harpsichord, and the massive engine block from a 1972 Corvette that you keep in your closet. Like a good filmmaker, your camera pulls back, and you grasp the whole scene. On the other hand, you could begin with the entire room, and zoom in on the pet ferret hiding in the engine block. In the restaurant review, the point of view is mobile, but it also goes from whole to parts. This seems to be a conscious strategy. Good writers choose how they will present the world.

Descriptions can completely avoid words. Look at this image of chocolate cake:

Although it is only an image printed on paper, it elicits physical responses because we have *already experienced the elements that make up the item*. The raspberries cascade across the frosting; the cake is cut to expose the inner layers, and the gloss tells about the freshness. If you have never seen a cake, this might be a bizarre and disturbing image, but if

you are familiar with cake, you will salivate, your stomach will growl, and you will feel the urge to eat something sweet. The picture represents -- re-presents -- the cake in concrete terms to enable the writer's implication and the reader's inference to converge. The writer has to signal the frame that will let this shared understanding take place. Think again about the frame that signals the meaning of this pastry. If the image is in a magazine for pastry chefs, it has a positive meaning. If it is part of a handout titled "Threats to Controlling Your Blood Sugar," it becomes an image of self-destruction.

Putting Description to Work:

So far, you have read descriptions and understood how they connect readers and writers, and you have understood that description attempts to re-present the world. You have moved from the simple "describe your summer vacation" to pathology reports. What began as a relatively simple idea has grown complex. Below are questions that students frequently ask about description:

1. I understand that portraits of material objects are a form of description, but it seems that descriptions can also re-present feelings, emotions, and thoughts. How can such things yield to descriptions? Can you give me an example of a description that deals with such issues?

Example: Student's Answer	Probable Teacher Response
One assumption of description is that language can re-create "things." When we think about emotions, feelings, and thoughts, we sometimes forget that we *know how we're feeling because our body is reacting in a highly specific fashion.* For example, love makes my palms sweaty, my heart race, and my eyes light up. Time passes slowly, and I am distracted. But imagine how an alien might describe love. To describe love, a cyborg from planet Deadheart would provide a list: • pulse = 90; • respiration = 80; • pupils dilated 2cm. • diaphoretic Humans tend to be less clinical. A love note might say, "It seems like days since I saw you this morning. I'm antsy and cannot read a page without thinking about you. Even the words seem brighter on the page, and my breath comes fast enough for both of us." Our love letters are as descriptive as the cyborg's. Each references the physical condition of the body, but each has its own set of underlying realities. The robot speaks to robots; the human speaks to humans.	Audience especially matters in descriptive writing because the writer's choices have to be understandable to the reader. A description succeeds when the writer begins by assessing the expertise, interests, needs, and experience of the audience. Only then can the description go about the business of presenting the world in words. The world that is re-presented has to enable the reader to make an inference about the intended meaning of the words. The reader is able to provide her or his own answer to the question "So what?" even when the answer is not directly stated by the writer.

Question: . : Descriptions seem almost deceitful. The audience is carefully analyzed, and then the writer finds language that hides the fact that there is a conscious strategy behind the writing. Is this level of planning part of all writing, or is it more evident to writers as they write descriptions? Is it unethical?

Here is a simple definition of descriptions: they use concrete language, they show rather than tell, and they require a detailed understanding of the audience so that the writer and reader find themselves sharing the same understanding of images, words, etc. Those techniques imply a meaning and create a dominant impression. A writer who wants to frighten an audience -- think of writing a terrifying film like *The Exorcist* or *Saw IV* -- makes choices based on what is known about viewers: bulging eyes, demons, rusty blades, dark rooms, and spilled blood are scary. The selected objects are not neutral. They are taken from the list of items labeled, "This Stuff Makes People Scream." Thus, good descriptions rely on a relatively small set of techniques, but they rely on a thorough understanding of audience. It is crucial to remember that descriptions tap into all of our senses: hearing, taste, smell, sight, and touch. A good writer often stops and asks about the role of each sense in the description being created.

> Note: sometimes a film fails because its choices are too obvious. Beloved films such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space, Starship Troopers,* and a host of others inspire laughter rather than fear. On the other hand, a cult film such a*s Rocky Horror Picture Show* or the series of *Scream* films seem to be interested in describing the pieces of any horror film.

The "dominant impression" does not appear out of nothing; it is planned and implemented by a writer with an aim. Once we realize how description creates a common ground between writer and reader, we should not be surprised to see them in many places: data sheets, police reports, insurance reports, travel books, music and restaurant reviews, car magazines, and advertisements.

KNOWING THE AUDIENCE

Here are some basic techniques for analyzing the audience. Where narration helps us think about narrators, description helps us recognize the need to understand audiences:

You (the writer) have to understand your relationship to your readers. If you are unclear about that, then the writing will not work. Consider the following email and its revision:

Very very very wrong	A bit better
Miss. Smith: I missed class on Friday cuz my favorite cousin was here from Mississippi and we just had to party, you know! Anyhoo, did I miss anything important? I been looking for the book Yellow wallpaper and can't find it. Who wrote it anyway? Tawny	Dear Professor Smith: I am writing to explain my absence from class this past Friday. While I rarely miss a class, I found myself tending to my cousin who arrived unexpectedly from Mississippi, a cousin whose paperwork I had to finish for her admission to Henry Ford Hospital. In the chaos of buses, medical forms, and phone calls, I have lost the assignment (and even the name of the novel we're studying). I'm embarrassed to ask, but if you could send me the name of the novel, I'd be grateful. Yours truly, Tawny

The email on the left was received by a professor. You have already seen this message in a previous chapter, but let's look at it more closely. It is a shocker because it fails to understand some key aspects of the writer's relation to the audience, but one of the reasons it does not work is that it is an incomplete narrative rather than a description. It tells a story: my cousin came; we partied; I was too hung over to come to school; I missed the assignment; I realize I need information; give me the information. The teacher might respond with "TMI," but the answer is that it is not only too much information, but the wrong kind of information for the situation. Here is why:

1. **Recognized Need:** the professor does not need the information in the note. The student is absent, and that is not really the teacher's problem. The teacher does not need anything at all. On the other hand, the student needs to know what has been assigned, and also needs to demonstrate a genuine interest in the class if she expects to pass. Thus, the note has two purposes: obtain information; placate the person with power while getting the information.

2. **Power**: the writer is a student; the audience is a professor. By explaining herself, the student acknowledges the greater power of the professor. She has to make gestures of respect. These include addressing the teacher in a way that reflects their relationship. The difference between "Miss. Smith" and "Professor Smith" goes beyond the mistaken use of a period. "Professor Smith" signals that the writer understands the power relationship. The careful spelling of the revised note, the complete sentences, and the formal tone reflect careful editing.

3. **Expertise**: the professor hears excuses all the time and is probably an expert on excuses. The note assumes that drunkenness is a legitimate reason for not coming to class. That is a bit problematic. The revised note invokes important images of the family and illness. It describes a moment of overwhelming responsibility in concrete terms (medical forms, buses, and hospitals) in a context that makes it nearly impossible to deny the request. Even if the revised email (on the right) is untrue, it is crafted in a fashion that understands the teacher's past experience with such documents. A teacher might well accept the document simply because it reflects a sharp understanding of the writer's own needs, power, and expertise. It begins with a frame: "I rarely miss class," and then uses concrete language to imply that the purpose of the picture is an inference based in values that are shared by the teacher and the student.

Why does audience matter so much in descriptive writing? The first email *implied* a sort of juvenile friendship between teacher and student, a friendship that finds education a waste of time. That might work if it were addressed to a friend on the playground, but that's not the audience. It paints a picture of the student as a slacker who does not take the class seriously. The

notes implies a relationship that the teacher will not infer. The email is very very very wrong because its misunderstanding of the audience prevents the writer from succeeding.

On the other hand, the revised version of the email depicts a student interested in the class who needs to know what she missed. The professor will *infer* the kind of student she is -- and her values -- to make a judgment about helping her. Note that the descriptions serve a purpose. Just as a narrative answers the question, "So what?" so also does a description. Here, the answer to the "So what?" is something like, "I'm a good, respectful, organized, family-supporting student . . . who needs a favor."

A FLOW CHART FOR WRITING DESCRIPTIONS

WRITER
Informative, Persuasive, or Expressive Task

Communication
Gap

READER
Comprehension Need

Identifies Communication Task

Signals the Descriptive Framework

Identifies Shared Sensory Experience

Uses Concrete Language to *Imply* a fact, desire, feeling

Recognizes Descriptive Framework

Responds to Concrete Language

Infers a fact, desire, feeling

WRITER
Informative, Persuasive, or Expressive Task

Dominant Impression Implied by Writer and Inferred by Reader

READER
Comprehension Need