**5 Model Descriptive Paragraphs**

Examples of Descriptive Writing

The purpose of [descriptive writing](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/description2ter.htm) is to make our readers see, feel, and hear what we have seen, felt, and heard. Whether we're describing a person, a place, or a thing, our aim is to reveal a subject through vivid and carefully selected [details](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/Detail-term.htm).

In its own way, each of the five [paragraphs](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/paragraphterm.htm) below responds to the guidelines in [How to Write a Descriptive Paragraph](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/descparhub.htm). The writers (three of them students, two of them professional authors) have selected a belonging or a place that holds special meaning to them. After identifying that subject in a clear [topic sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/topicsenterm.htm), they proceed to describe it in detail while explaining its personal significance.

*In the following paragraph, observe how the writer moves clearly from a description of the head of the clown (in*[*sentences*](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/senterm.htm)*two, three, and four), to the body (sentences five, six, seven, and eight), to the unicycle underneath (sentence nine). Notice also how the concluding sentence helps to tie the paragraph together by emphasizing the personal value of this gift.*

### 1) A Friendly Clown

1 On one corner of my dresser sits a smiling toy clown on a tiny unicycle--a gift I received last Christmas from a close friend. 2 The clown's short yellow hair, made of yarn, covers its ears but is parted above the eyes. 3 The blue eyes are outlined in black with thin, dark lashes flowing from the brows. 4 It has cherry-red cheeks, nose, and lips, and its broad grin disappears into the wide, white ruffle around its neck. 5 The clown wears a fluffy, two-tone nylon costume. 6 The left side of the outfit is light blue, and the right side is red. 7 The two colors merge in a dark line that runs down the center of the small outfit. 8 Surrounding its ankles and disguising its long black shoes are big pink bows. 9 The white spokes on the wheels of the unicycle gather in the center and expand to the black tire so that the wheel somewhat resembles the inner half of a grapefruit. 10 The clown and unicycle together stand about a foot high. 11 As a cherished gift from my good friend Tran, this colorful figure greets me with a smile every time I enter my room.

Here's the final version of the descriptive paragraph that appears in the exercise[*Practice in Supporting a Topic Sentence with Specific Details*](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/topicsupport.htm). Compare this version with the earlier one to see which descriptions have been retained, what information has been omitted, and how sentences have been reworded and rearranged.

### 2) The Blond Guitar

**by Jeremy Burden**

1 My most valuable possession is an old, slightly warped blond guitar--the first instrument I taught myself how to play. 2 It's nothing fancy, just a Madeira folk guitar, all scuffed and scratched and finger-printed. 3 At the top is a bramble of copper-wound strings, each one hooked through the eye of a silver tuning key. 4 The strings are stretched down a long, slim neck, its frets tarnished, the wood worn by years of fingers pressing chords and picking notes. 5 The body of the Madeira is shaped like an enormous yellow pear, one that was slightly damaged in shipping. 6 The blond wood has been chipped and gouged to gray, particularly where the pick guard fell off years ago. 7No, it's not a beautiful instrument, but it still lets me make music, and for that I will always treasure it.

In the next descriptive paragraph, the student writer focuses less on the physical appearance of her pet than on the cat's habits and actions.

### 3) Gregory

**by Barbara Carter**

1 Gregory is my beautiful gray Persian cat. 2 He walks with pride and grace, performing a dance of disdain as he slowly lifts and lowers each paw with the delicacy of a ballet dancer. 3 His pride, however, does not extend to his appearance, for he spends most of his time indoors watching television and growing fat. 4 He enjoys TV commercials, especially those for Meow Mix and 9 Lives. 5 His familiarity with cat food commercials has led him to reject generic brands of cat food in favor of only the most expensive brands. 6 Gregory is as finicky about visitors as he is about what he eats, befriending some and repelling others. 7 He may snuggle up against your ankle, begging to be petted, or he may imitate a skunk and stain your favorite trousers. 8 Gregory does not do this to establish his territory, as many cat experts think, but to humiliate me because he is jealous of my friends. 9 After my guests have fled, I look at the old fleabag snoozing and smiling to himself in front of the television set, and I have to forgive him for his obnoxious, but endearing, habits.

The following paragraph opens the third chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston'sThe Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts(Knopf, 1976), a lyrical account of a Chinese-American girl growing up in California. Notice how Kingston integrates informative and descriptive details in this account of "the metal tube" that holds her mother's diploma from medical school.

### 4) The Magic Metal Tube

**by Maxine Hong Kingston**

1 Once in a long while, four times so far for me, my mother brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma. 2 On the tube are gold circles crossed with seven red lines each--"joy" ideographs in abstract. 3 There are also little flowers that look like gears for a gold machine. 4According to the scraps of labels with Chinese and American addresses, stamps, and postmarks, the family airmailed the can from Hong Kong in 1950. 5 It got crushed in the middle, and whoever tried to peel the labels off stopped because the red and gold paint came off too, leaving silver scratches that rust. 7 Somebody tried to pry the end off before discovering that the tube falls apart. 8 When I open it, the smell of China flies out, a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain.

In this paragraph (originally published inWashington Post Book Worldand reprinted inFaith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art[HarperCollins, 2003]), Joyce Carol Oates affectionately describes the "single-room schoolhouse" she attended from first through fifth grades. Notice how she appeals to our sense of smell before moving on to describe the layout and contents of the room.

### 5)Inside District School #7, Niagara County, New York

**by Joyce Carol Oates**

1 Inside, the school smelled smartly of varnish and wood smoke from the potbellied stove. 2 On gloomy days, not unknown in upstate New York in this region south of Lake Ontario and east of Lake Erie, the windows emitted a vague, gauzy light, not much reinforced by ceiling lights. 3 We squinted at the blackboard, that seemed far away since it was on a small platform, where Mrs. Dietz's desk was also positioned, at the front, left of the room. 4 We sat in rows of seats, smallest at the front, largest at the rear, attached at their bases by metal runners, like a toboggan; the wood of these desks seemed beautiful to me, smooth and of the red-burnished hue of horse chestnuts. 5The floor was bare wooden planks. 6 An American flag hung limply at the far left of the blackboard and above the blackboard, running across the front of the room, designed to draw our eyes to it avidly, worshipfully, were paper squares showing that beautifully shaped script known as Parker Penmanship.

**How to Organize a Descriptive Paragraph**

Drafting a Description

Once you have settled on a[*topic for your descriptive paragraph and collected some details*](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/descparhub.htm), you're ready to put those details together in a rough[*draft*](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/draftterm.htm). Let's look at one way of[*organizing*](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/organizaterm.htm)a descriptive paragraph.

### A Three-Step Method for Organizing a Descriptive Paragraph

Here's a common way of organizing a descriptive paragraph.

1. Begin the paragraph with a [topic sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/topicsupport.htm) that identifies your prized belonging and briefly explains its significance to you.
2. Next, describe the item in four or five sentences, using the [details](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/Detail-term.htm) that you listed after [probing your topic](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/descparhub.htm).
3. Finally, [conclude](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/conclusterm.htm) the paragraph with a sentence that emphasizes the personal value of the item.

There are various ways to organize the details in a descriptive paragraph. You may move from the top of the item to the bottom, or from the bottom to the top. You may start at the left side of the item and move right, or go from right to left. You may start with the outside of the item and move in, or go from inside to out.

Choose the one pattern that seems best suited to your topic, and then stick to that pattern throughout the paragraph.

### A Model Descriptive Paragraph: "My Tiny Diamond Ring"

The following student paragraph, titled "My Tiny Diamond Ring," follows the basic pattern of topic sentence, supporting sentences, and conclusion:

On the third finger of my left hand is the pre-engagement ring given to me last year by my sister Doris. The 14-carat gold band, a bit tarnished by time and neglect, circles my finger and twists together at the top to encase a small white diamond. The four prongs that anchor the diamond are separated by pockets of dust. The diamond itself is tiny and dull, like a sliver of glass found on the kitchen floor after a dishwashing accident. Just below the diamond are small air holes, intended to let the diamond breathe, but now clogged with grime. The ring is neither very attractive nor valuable, but I treasure it as a gift from my older sister, a gift that I will pass along to my younger sister when I receive my own engagement ring this Christmas.

### An Analysis of the Model Description

Notice that the [topic sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/topicsenterm.htm) in this paragraph not only identifies the belonging (a "pre-engagement ring") but also implies why the writer treasures it (". . . given to me last year by my sister Doris"). This kind of topic sentence is more interesting and revealing than a bare announcement, such as, "The belonging I am about to describe is my pre-engagement ring." Instead of announcing your topic in this way, [focus](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/Focusing-Composition.htm) your paragraph and gain the interest of your readers with a complete topic sentence: one that both identifies the object you're about to describe and also suggests how you feel about it.

Once you have introduced a topic clearly, you should stick to it, developing this idea with details in the rest of the paragraph. The writer of "My Tiny Diamond Ring" has done just that, providing specific details that describe the ring: its parts, size, color, and condition. As a result, the paragraph is [unified](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/unityterm.htm)--that is, all of the supporting sentences relate directly to one another and to the topic introduced in the first sentence.

You shouldn't be concerned if your first draft doesn't seem as clear or as well constructed as "My Tiny Diamond Ring" (the result of several [revisions](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/revisedesccheck.htm)). Your aim now is to introduce your belonging in a [topic sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/topicsupport.htm) and then [draft four or five supporting sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/organizedesc.htm) that describe the item in detail. In later steps of the [writing process](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/writingprocessterm.htm), you can focus on sharpening and rearranging these sentences as you revise.

**NEXT STEP**  
[Practice in Organizing a Descriptive Paragraph](http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/organizedesc.htm)

# 40 Writing Topics: Description

Writing Suggestions for a Descriptive Paragraph, Essay, or Speech

*f you want to be a successful writer, you must be able to*[*describe*](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/description2ter.htm)*[your subject], and in a way that will cause your reader to prickle with recognition. . . . Thin description leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted. Overdescription buries him or her in*[*details*](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/Detail-term.htm)*and*[*images*](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/imagterm.htm)*. The trick is to find a happy medium.*  
(Stephen King, *On Writing*, 2000)

Descriptive writing calls for close attention to factual and sensory details: *show, don't tell*. Whether your subject is as small as a strawberry or as large as a fruit farm, you should begin by observing your subject closely and deciding which details are most significant.

To get you started, here are 40 topic suggestions for a descriptive paragraph, essay, or speech. These suggestions should help you discover a subject that especially interests *you*.

**40 Topic Suggestions: Description**

1. a waiting room
2. a basketball, baseball glove, or tennis racket
3. a smartphone
4. a treasured belonging
5. a laptop computer
6. favorite restaurant
7. your dream house
8. your ideal roommate
9. a closet
10. your memory of a place that you visited as a child
11. a locker
12. an accident scene
13. a city bus or subway train
14. an unusual room
15. a child's secret hiding place
16. a bowl of fruit
17. an item left too long in your refrigerator
18. backstage during a play or a concert
19. a vase of flowers
20. a rest room in a service station
21. a street that leads to your home or school
22. your favorite food
23. the inside of a spaceship
24. the scene at a concert or athletic event
25. an art exhibit
26. an ideal apartment
27. your old neighborhood
28. a small town cemetery
29. a pizza
30. a pet
31. a photograph
32. a hospital emergency room
33. a particular friend or family member
34. a painting
35. a storefront window
36. an inspiring view
37. a work table
38. a character from a book, movie, or television program
39. a refrigerator or washing machine
40. a Purim costume

Source:

<http://grammar.about.com/od/developingparagraphs/a/nervnormanpar.htm>