

How can you develop a strong skill at describing?

Describing is representing an object, idea, or action in words.

To use description effectively, follow these steps.

Step 1. Identify sensory details using precise language and examples.

Step 2. Explain the significance of the details.

Before describing something yourself, see how a famous author uses description. On the next screen, writer Alice Walker describes Zora Neale Hurston. Walker's description was included in the book *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, by Robert E. Hemenway.

Zora was funny, **irreverent** . . . She once **sold hot dogs** in a Washington park just to record accurately how the black people who bought them talked. She would go anywhere she had to go—**Harlem, Jamaica, Haiti, Bermuda**—to find out anything she simply *had* to know. She loved to give parties. Loved to dance. Would **wrap** her head in scarves as black women in **Africa, Haiti, and every-where else** have done for centuries.

Precise language
(*irreverent, wrap*) creates a clear image of Hurston.

Examples (*sold hot dogs*) show the significance of Hurston's interest in accurate description.

Mentioning other places shows the significance of Hurston's connection to black culture around the world.

Directions: Analyze the description in the following excerpts.

On the eve of his departure to the United States, McKay appeared to be an ambitious, talented young man with a fine future in Jamaica. In his poetry he had closely identified himself with its people. He had also revealed a deeply sensitive, independent spirit.

Wayne Cooper, "Claude McKay and the New Negro of the 1920's"

Words such as *ambitious, talented, closely identified with its people, deeply sensitive, and independent spirit* describe McKay more precisely than general words such as *good* or *great* would have.

Directions: Analyze the description in the following excerpts.

In his poem, “Exhortation:
Summer 1919,” McKay expresses
his pride in his African heritage:

O my brothers, dreaming for
dim centuries,
Wake from sleeping; to the
East turn, turn your eyes!

This example from
McKay’s poetry is
significant because it
demonstrates how he
urges other African
Americans to look to
Africa for inspiration.

Directions: Write a descriptive passage about a writer, painter, musician or other artist, or a work of art.

Step 1. Identify sensory details using precise language and examples.

Consider words and examples that appeal to each of your five senses. Use a table such as the one on the following screens to organize your information.

Describing

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Sense	Words	Example
Sight		
Hearing		
Touch		

Describing

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Sense	Words	Example
Smell		
Taste		

Step 2. Explain the significance of the details.

Think about why you mention some details but not others. Why are some more significant than others?

Think about the words you chose. How does your choice of words reflect what you think is significant?

Directions: After you complete your descriptive passage about an artist or work of art, add comments explaining why you consider one of the details significant.