

IF YOU'VE GOT IT...

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*Show it!*

Descriptive writing is all  
about showing, not telling

By Bobby Hawthorne  
Austin, TX 2007

# *description*

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- Generates interest, suspense
- Compares something abstract to something concrete
- Puts the reader in a specific time and place
- Gives the story a human face

## **Use examples to illustrate**

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Rather than: It's a close-knit community

Write: If someone's cat is lost, the whole block seems to move in unison to search the bushes and the alleys.

## **Use concrete nouns and verbs**

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Along Burlew Street in East Dallas, the body of a dead cat lies on the sun-dried concrete. A torn 3-legged armchair stands near the curb. A swarm of flies hovers over the cat.

Nearby on San Jacinto Street, more flies swarm around a rusty bench where two young women sit with a cluster of children at their knees. In a run-down apartment complex, a group of kids sit playing with rubber bands. More children, bedraggled, hang from the stairs. This ground is sticky, littered with orange peels. The odor of rotting food fills the humid air.

This is Little Asia — what Alice Bun, 16, calls home. She and her family moved here seven years ago after fleeing Cambodia.

## **Losing builds character**

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All season long, senior Archie Whitt heard about how losing builds character.

“I’ve got plenty of character by now,” he said after the team’s ninth consecutive loss. “I just want a victory.”

The burly, crew-cut lineman could chuckle as he said that. No matter how bad the Wylie Pirates looked in the newspapers — 0-10, five shutouts, a total of 29 points scored and 326 given up, Friday night frustration week after week — Whitt said he wouldn’t be anywhere else.

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“Ever since I was little, I always wanted to be a Wylie Pirate,” Whitt said. “I’m so proud to be here. We’ve played hard all year. We never gave up ‘til the last down. We might not be a winner on the field, but in our hearts, we’re winners.”

Coach Ronnie Watkins agreed.

“You look at the scoreboard and think, ‘What a horrible team.’ But I loved coaching these boys,” Watkins said. “I’m not going to kid you. We didn’t have a lot of talent, but these young men had a ton of heart. There wasn’t a moment that they gave up, and I’m proud to have been their coach.”

## **Fast as a speeding...**

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By 1977, when the British punk band the Jam recorded “London Traffic,” the average speed of a car in central London was 12 miles an hour, or a little faster than the top running speed of a domestic pig.

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That morning, in fact, waiting downstairs for him in a cavernous boardroom was a group of strategists who were highly paid to do just that. It was telling that most of these strategists were not from London at all but from a place with much worse traffic problems and a much more treacherous political climate for trying to solve them: New York City. (Average traffic speed: about seven miles per hour, no faster than a running possum.)

— Randy Kennedy, *The New York Times*



# look for details

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- Body language.
- Clothes. Jewelry. Face. Hands.
- Sounds. Loud. Quiet. Thoughtful. Brash.
- Aromas. Tobacco. Body odor. Cologne
- Don't describe what the reader already knows. Find the tiny details that are most often overlooked.

## **Crucible that ended...**

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A chain-link fence, two wooden crosses and a plywood heart with angel's wings are all that remain. That and a rectangle of red concrete from the crucible that ended 99 lives and charred many more. The truckload of mementos left by the mourning hordes — soggy wedding pictures, tangled prayer beads, fading plastic pansies — has been carted away.

The long line of craned-neck drivers on Cowesett Road is gone, too. The sign at a nearby restaurant that had urged passers-by to remember the dead now urges them not to forget Mother's Day.

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The funerals are over. The dead are buried. The fund-raising parties and memorial concerts have dwindled to one every other week or so.

“It is time to get on with life,” said Missy Minor, cradling her 4-month-old daughter, Mara-Jade, in her red, mottled arms. “You just have to get up and move on.”

## **‘I could use a little help...’**

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It was finals week at Columbia University and Angela needed a miracle. Like many of her classmates, Angela, a bleary-eyed junior, had already pulled a pair of all-nighters to get through a paper on “Finnegan’s Wake,” a French test and an exam for her music humanities class. All that remained was a Latin American literature final, but as midnight approached, her stamina was beginning to fade.

“This week is killing me,” she said, taking a cigarette break in front of the school library. “At this point, I could use a little help.”

## **‘I could use a little help...’**

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Thanks to a friend, the tiny orange pill in her purse would provide the needed miracle. Angela, who asked that her last name not be published for fear of alarming her family and angering university officials, popped a 30-milligram tablet of Adderall into her mouth, washed it down with coffee and headed back to the library for another night of cramming. The next morning, she sailed through the exam confidently and scored an A.

“I don’t think I could keep a 3.9 average without this stuff,” she said afterward.

## **‘I could use a little help...’**

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At many colleges across the country, the ingredients for academic success now include a steady flow of analeptics, the class of prescription amphetamines that is used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Since Ritalin abuse hit the radar screen several years ago, the reliance on prescription stimulants to enhance performance has risen, becoming almost as commonplace as No-Doz, Red Bull and maybe even caffeine. As many as 20 percent of college students have used Ritalin or Adderall to study, write papers and take exams, according to recent surveys focused on individual campuses.

— Andrew Jacobs, The New York Times  
“The Adderall Advantage”

## **What did it look like?**

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Coach Miles stepped out of the field house into the blinding lights of the television cameras. The bags under his glassy eyes hung like leather pouches on a white horse. He'd been crying.

## **What did it look like?**

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Parcells is never satisfied. One moment, he looks as if he has just eaten a bad oyster. Seconds later as if he has just been told his car has a flat tire.



## **What did it smell like?**

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The lobby of his old building, as he'd expected, seemed smaller to him but the smell caught him off guard: a claustrophobic stankiness — urine and cigarette butts tossed into a coffee can full of old bacon grease.

## **What did it taste like?**

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On their first date, Jerry kissed Sue, perhaps more passionately than she had expected or wanted. She tasted like Wintergreen Altoids. He tasted like Frito pie.

## **What did it feel like?**

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The steak was as chewy as rubber vomit.

Her headaches arrive now on a regular basis, generally once a day, generally late afternoon. They feel as if a blacksmith is pounding a railroad spike behind her left ear.

## **A little about your brain**

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I'd like to tell you a little about your brain. It is an amazing organ, infinitely complex and mysterious, although at first glance it resembles nothing more than a large, soft, very wrinkled walnut. It weighs almost 3 pounds. Of that, about 2 1/4 pounds is water and the rest tissue. The combination explains why the brain is often described as looking like Jello, but the better comparison would be mayonnaise. Push your finger into the gray blob protoplasm and it will adhere.

## **What did it sound like?**

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He plays for a rock and roll band whose music sounds like a lawn mower at full throttle falling through a plate-glass roof into a pile of aluminum pots and pans.

# bad description

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- interrupts the narrative.
- describes nonessential surroundings.
- focuses on unimportant action.
- is too general. A drink rather than a martini.

## **Don't describe the irrelevant stuff**

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Taking a sigh of relief, Larry Harris walked into the hospital room, wearing a pale yellow Polo sweater and faded Levi's 501 jeans. He was chewing on a piece of Wrigley's Doublemint gum. Entering the institutional gray room, the 5-foot, 10-inch junior saw his father, lying in the standard-issue hospital bed, near death.

## **Describe the important details**

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Junior Larry Harris gasped as he walked into the hospital room to see his father, a Vietnam veteran and former college linebacker, reduced to a sallow shell, barely able to lift his soft blue eyes or his hand to greet his son.



# *p*ulling it all together

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- Use description to advance the story.
- Blend description into the story. Don't use just to fill space.
- Avoid ordinary details. Look for the unique, the unexpected, the bizarre.
- Look for irony.
- Listen for dialogue.
- Be specific. Be concrete.

**For more great examples...**

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THE *Radical Write*

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