UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DARTMOUTH WRITNG & READING CENTER

**USING SPECIFIC DETAILS**

**Specific Details**, also known as **descriptive** or **concrete details**, allow readers to visualize what the writer is trying to convey. Specific details are frequently used in creative writing but are also useful in other genres. Readers tend to respond more strongly if they're given an image to "see."

Specific details are used to describe person, places, or objects. In the following excerpt from *Middlemarch*, George Eliot uses specific details to describe character Dorothea Brooke.

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by a poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appears to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible - or from one of the elder poets - in a paragraph of today's newspaper.

In the above passage, the writer describes the "plain dress" of Miss Brooke in order to convey what kind of woman she is; that is, one whose beauty is "thrown into relief by poor dress." We have the sense of an individual whose appearance improves when she wears plain clothing. Eliot conveys this sense not only by using adjectives like "poor" and "bare," but also by drawing comparisons ("the Blessed Virgin") and metaphor ("the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible").

Writers can also use specific details to describe a place or scene as well as a person. In the following excerpt from Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," the writer describes the scene outdoors, as viewed by the central character, Mrs. Mallard:

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the leaves.

Here, the writer uses descriptive adjectives like "delicious" and "new" not only to convey a sense of scene but also to show the reader how Mrs. Mallard is feeling. As she gazes out her window, she doesn't just see the square below her but instead she interprets it. The rain is "delicious" and the trees are full of "new spring life." By using such details, Chopin is able to convey the scene through the eyes of a character hopeful with the promise this new life has to offer. Because of specific details, the reader can see this too.

Specific details can also be used to describe a person's mannerisms:

[Mrs. Mallard] was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

Writers often refer to the use of specific details as "showing" rather than "telling." By *showing* the reader, a writer paints a picture with words. When *telling*, the writer uses summary to inform the reader about what happened: *Miss Brooke wore cheap dresses. Mrs. Mallard looked out the window and saw the square below.*

Specific details are not only the property of fiction writers. In "Salvation," by Langston Hughes, the author uses specific details to describe a time in his childhood when he began questioning his faith.

The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmic sermon, all moans and shouts and lonely cries and dire pictures of hell, and then he sang a song about the ninety and nine safe in the fold, but one little lamb was left out in the cold. Then he said: "Won't you come in? Won't you come to Jesus? Young lambs, won't you come?" And he held out his arms to all us young sinners there on the mourner' bench. And the little girls cried. And some of them jumped and went to Jesus right away. But most of us just sat there.

In the above passage, Hughes describes the scene as his younger self has experienced it: the "moans and shouts and lonely cries," the "dire pictures" as imagined by the preacher, and the image of the little children stretched across the mourner' bench. He even captures the rhythmic cadence of the preacher's speech by using a mixture of direct dialogue (with "quotations") and indirect dialogue (without quotations).

**Exercise**: Using Descriptive Details

Choose one of the following and describe, using as many specific details as possible. Remember, you can rely on adjectives, metaphor, simile, or any literary device. Also, if writing about a character, pay attention to speech patterns and mannerisms.

* A summer day in the backyard as seen by someone who has just suffered a terrible loss
* A department store just before Christmas, as seen by someone who doesn't celebrate the holiday
* A harried woman or man shopping in a grocery store
* A young child being driven to his or her first day of school
* An elderly relative in the process of making his or her breakfast
* And object of great significance to you or someone else

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UMD Writing Center, 2011