

How Would You Describe That?

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Well-written descriptions help our readers picture the characters, setting, and action of fiction and nonfiction writing. This makes our writing more believable, regardless of genre. But the best descriptions do even more. They can:

- Establish or enhance mood
- Illuminate character
- Illustrate theme
- Advance the plot

Tips

- Engage more than one sense when possible
- Choose your words carefully
 - Use strong, action verbs
 - Use concrete nouns
 - Use relevant adjectives but not for every noun
 - Avoid adverbs

Why are *be* verbs such a problem? They're boring and convey no sensory detail:

“Joan opened the front door. To her right was a couch, to her left was a chair, and a coffee table was in between them. There was a fire in the fireplace.”

Ho Hum! Much better to write:

“Joan opened the front door, stepped between the faded blue couch and the brown leather armchair, cracked her shin on the coffee table, and leaned against the mantel, letting the warmth of the fire ease the ache in her shin.”

This gives more detail about the apartment while giving us an idea of the kind of day Joan is having. Notice how much more information the action verbs provide, and how few adjectives are used—just enough to help the reader build a mental picture of the scene.

Caution: when describing past action, beware of anachronisms, like using a smart phone in 2003 (we used flip phones way back then). A bit of online research will tell you when a potential prop like a smart phone was first used (although IBM had a clumsy one in the 1990s, the first practical one was the Apple iPhone in 2007.)