

## Lesson 3: Describing a Person

You have practiced with describing objects and animals. Now you will describe a person. Plan to observe a good friend, yourself, or a member of your family. Spend a few minutes studying your subject. This person may or may not be aware that you are watching him or her. Imagine you are seeing this person for the first time.

1. Look carefully at the face. Do you see freckles? Laugh lines around the eyes? A deep dimple in the left cheek? A faint scar over one eyebrow? Eyes that crinkle when the person smiles? Make notes on the attached observation worksheet.
2. Can you figure out your subject's mood? (see "Emotions" word list). Sometimes it helps to read their "body language." Pay special attention to facial expressions.
3. Posture and body movement also give clues about your subject's mood. Be descriptive. If your subject is happy, tell how you know that (he's whistling a tune, smiling broadly, walking with a bouncing step). If he's disheartened, describe how his body shows discouragement (slumped shoulders, drooping head, tears on cheeks).
4. Next, observe his overall appearance. What color is his hair? Is it straight or curly? Is the person of a slim or stocky build? Is he muscular and athletic, or soft and rounded? Are the hands rough and work-worn, or smooth and silky?
5. Finally, notice what your subject is wearing. Be prepared to describe the type of clothing (jeans, a party dress, a suit and tie, shorts and a tee-shirt) and the color or even the texture of the clothes. Also look for interesting detail, like a unique piece of jewelry, a hole in the knees, or a hat or headband.
6. Although this assignment's focus is physical appearance, don't forget to add a few personality details to make your subject more interesting. Look for clues in foreheads, dimples, lines of laughter or worry, softness or hardness of facial features. But remember, **your writing must be gracious**. This is a time to focus on your subject's positive features!
7. Your paragraph is about the person, not his or her activity or environment. It's not about the kitchen, the park, or the beach. It's not about John's swim meet or Megan's birthday party, either. Use the setting as a prop. If you mention that Mom is standing at the stove, don't get carried away by describing the features of the stove. Is your brother playing with toy cars? Don't focus on what the cars look like.



Correct: "Leaning against a shady sycamore, Dad slowly wipes his weary brow with a worn red hankie." (Dad is the focus of this sentence)

Incorrect: "The tall, stately sycamore tree offers Dad a shady place to rest." (The tree is the focus of this sentence)

8. Begin your paragraph with a strong topic sentence. Jump right in! It is never necessary to say, "I am going to describe my Grandpa Harry," or "This is about my oldest sister."
9. Your paragraph must be between five and seven sentences long, and you must begin one of your sentences with **paired adjectives**. Be sure this sentence does contain a misplaced modifier. The subject the paired adjectives describe must closely follow the comma. Ask your teacher for help if this is a new or unfamiliar concept.
10. You will need to be creative in finding synonyms for your subject. For example, your grandmother could be called Grandma, Grandma Ruth, my nana, and she. Your best friend could be referred to as Seth, my friend, playmate, pal, or he. Try not to use each synonym more than twice. The exception is pronouns (like he, his, she, and hers) which generally must be used more often.
11. End your paragraph with a strong closing sentence to wrap up your thoughts about this person. You might consider re-wording your *topic sentence*. **DO NOT** end by saying something like, "This is why I like Uncle Joe."

Here's an example:

*Lanky and tan, my brother proudly wears his new tee-ball uniform. Sandy blond hair peeks out from under the brim of a royal blue cap, and his twinkling brown eyes crinkle happily at me. Joshua's fresh blue and white shirt is tucked into my old pants, where grass stains still appear faintly at the knees. A broad smile lights up his freckled face, showing a gap where a tooth fell out last week. He jumps up and gives a joyful yell when Dad finally comes in to take him to his first game.*

If you are a high school student, your paragraph might look more like this:

*Squinting through pale, aged eyes, Granny peered beyond the dusty yard to the dark clouds forming on the horizon. With gnarled fingers, she pulled her worn shawl tightly about her bent shoulders. Hobbling down the creaky porch steps, she headed for the flapping sheets and began yanking them off the clothesline. An occasional gust of wind whipped at the woman's faded pink housecoat and tugged at the gray wisps of her thinning hair. Her stooped body moved slowly as she readied her home against the coming storm. Now and then a large raindrop*

*plunked onto her wrinkled frame, urging her on. In a frail voice Granny called for her yellow hound, picked up her basket of laundry, and shuffled up the old steps and into the house.*

**Important!**

You may discover that the second paragraph contains a story line, which qualifies it as a narrative. However, you will also find many words and phrases describing the subject. If your reader can come away from your composition with a clear picture in his head of how the person looks, you have done your job.

An author knows what he has in mind when he writes a description, but sometimes he does not give the reader enough information. When you finish writing your paragraph, ask someone to draw a picture based on your description. If they can't do it, you probably need to describe your person more clearly. Then, have someone try drawing your subject again. Attach the final drawing to your composition.

## Lesson 3: Elements of a Character Sketch, Part 2

It's not unusual when describing a person to focus on your subject's activity rather than on his or her description. Your paragraph is not to be about your sister's dancing lesson, your friend's soccer game, or your brother's toy cars. Stick to the assignment of describing the subject! The following paragraph was written by a beginning writing student. Notice how the student described her sister's activity instead of describing her sister.

*My younger sister Katie unloads the dishwasher. She carefully carries the blue-flowered plates in her hands. Smaller than I, she stands on a stepstool, stretching to reach the high cupboards. Next, she opens the drawer and puts away the silverware. After finishing her chore, she runs outside to play.*

This paragraph is a narrative. Its focus is on the activity. You may be tempted to make a similar mistake. If I were your teacher, I would make the following suggestions:

Dear Chris,

You did a fine job of telling how your sister empties the dishwasher, but I think you got confused and missed the point of this assignment. Remember that you must concentrate on your *subject* (Katie) not on her *activity* (emptying the dishwasher).

After reading your paragraph, I should have been able to learn a little about Katie. However, there is no description of your sister except for "smaller than I." But what if I didn't know you? I wouldn't know how big or tall you are, so I couldn't picture your sister's size. Because you didn't describe your sister, I don't know what she's wearing. I don't know what color hair or eyes she has. I don't know if she has freckles or dimples or pigtails or a button nose. I can't tell if she's scowling or smiling or humming a tune or talking to you. The only thing I learned is that she empties the dishwasher.

I believe this may have been avoided had you more thoroughly filled in your Observing a Person worksheet. This was your brainstorming assignment, and one of the most important parts of writing. Brainstorming generates ideas. If you don't know what to write in the blanks, *you must sit down with someone and discuss it*. The brainstorming process becomes easier over time. Also, make use of the brainstorming material you did gather! Regrettably, the wonderful bits of information you *did* write on your worksheet (her hair and eye color, clothing, and attitude) never made it to your paragraph.

### **A word about editing**

Your paper will probably require less editing if you use your brainstorming sheets. These are designed to gather more information than you will use in your paragraph. Do not neglect this vital step; it is foundational to effective writing. You may be tempted to jot down a minimum of details instead of stretching your "mental muscles" by processing your thoughts and developing an adequate idea bank filled with descriptive details from which to draw.

It is important to realize that editing is not a punishment imposed on you by mean parents and writing teachers. It is a necessary process designed to refine and polish your work. All authors go through the revising process numerous times before arriving at a finished piece.

### **A garden metaphor**

Picture an overgrown, unkempt garden. Although it may be filled with beautiful flowers and lush foliage, it has lost its attractive, well-groomed appearance. Weeds have begun to invade and crowd out the healthy plants. Dead flowers must be picked. Dense, overgrown shrubbery needs to be trimmed and shaped or replanted elsewhere.

Or imagine just the opposite: a sparsely planted garden. Few shrubs and flowers decorate this bare plot. Many of the flowers are not in bloom, and the other plants seem bare and thin. This garden would benefit from more plants and added color. Perhaps an interesting piece of pottery or an unusual rock would add texture and appeal.

Your "sloppy copy" is like one of these gardens and you, the author, are the gardener. To prune and shape your "overgrown" paragraph, you must trim unnecessary words, remove vague and weak words, and find synonyms for repeated ones. Sentences may need to be rearranged or reworded.

Likewise, if your paragraph is sparse, you will need to insert more colorful, concrete words. You may need to add more information and description to fill in bare places.

With this in mind, consider editing a beneficial step in the writing process. You are creating a garden of words designed to please and uplift your reader.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Describing a Person

### Lesson 3: Student Writing Skills Checklist

#### CONTENT (check your "sloppy copy" against this list)

- ☐ Do all my sentences support my topic sentence (no "carrots in my cookie jar")?
- ☐ Are my topic and choice of words pleasing to the Lord and edifying to others?
- ☐ Does my title capture the essence of my paragraph?

#### STYLE (check your "sloppy copy" against this list)

- ☐ Did I choose a strong topic sentence that introduces my paragraph?
- ☐ Did I use no more than two forms of "to be" words (is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been)?  
(Circle to be words in RED)
- ☐ Did I choose synonyms instead of repeating main words? (Underline repeated words in BLUE)
- ☐ Did I use concrete words that are specific, vivid, and sensory? (Underline vague words in GREEN)
- ☐ Did I check my "Weak Words" list for empty words? (Underline any of these in GREEN)
- ☐ Did I vary my sentence structure by beginning one sentence with paired adjectives?
- ☐ Did I describe my subject's physical appearance?
- ☐ Did I describe my subject's activity WITHOUT focusing on the activity itself?
- ☐ Did I write concisely, avoiding wordiness? (Cross-out unnecessary words or phrases)
- ☐ Did I write a strong closing sentence that gives a feeling of ending?

#### MECHANICS (check your first revision against this list)

- ☐ Did I put my name and date in the upper right hand corner?
- ☐ Is my paragraph 5-7 sentences long? How many? \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Did I indent my first sentence? (If not, draw an arrow → to show that you need to indent)
- ☐ Did I leave margins around my paragraph?  
(If not, draw a light pencil line down the right side of your page)
- ☐ Did I remember to skip every other line?  
(If not, before you rewrite, draw a light X on each line you want to skip)
- ☐ Did I use good spacing between words and sentences? (If not, draw two vertical lines || to separate)
- ☐ Did I double-check my spelling? ((Circle) suspected words; look up and make changes)
- ☐ Did I double-check capitalization and punctuation? (Correct any errors)
- ☐ Did I use complete sentences and avoid run-on sentences?
- ☐ Did I finish and turn in my observation worksheet?
- ☐ Did I find someone to draw a picture of my subject based on my descriptions? (not an optional activity!)
- ☐ Did I correctly use this Checklist, including using colored pencils to underline and circle as directed?

☐ **BEFORE TURNING MY WORK IN:** Did I staple my papers together in this order? (Worksheet on the very bottom, "sloppy copy" on top of that, neatly rewritten copy next, and this Writing Checklist on the very top)

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Describing a Person

### Lesson 3: Teacher Writing Skills Checklist

Edit your paragraph one more time, making any necessary changes or improvements.

#### CONTENT

OK	needs improvement	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Followed instructions for this assignment
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All sentences support topic sentence (no "carrots in your cookie jar")
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Topic and choice of words are pleasing to the Lord and edifying to others
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Title captures the essence of the paragraph

#### STYLE

OK	needs improvement	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strong topic sentence that introduces the paragraph
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Used no more than two forms of "to be" (is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chose synonyms instead of repeating main words
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Used concrete words that are specific, vivid, and sensory
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoided the use of "weak" words
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Varied sentence structure by using paired adjectives
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Described subject's physical appearance
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Described subject's activity without focusing on the activity itself
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Wrote concisely, avoiding wordiness
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strong closing sentence that gives a feeling of ending

#### MECHANICS

OK	needs improvement	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Name and date in the upper right hand corner
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Paragraph is 5-7 sentences long
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	First sentence of the paragraph is indented and margins left around the paragraph
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Remembered to skip lines
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Used good spacing between words and sentences
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Double-checked spelling by circling and looking up suspected words
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Capitalized the first word of each sentence as well as proper nouns
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoided capitalizing common nouns
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Appropriate punctuation mark at the end of each sentence
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Used complete sentences, avoided run-on sentences
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Writing is neat and easy to read
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Included someone's drawing of your subject, based on your description
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Correctly used writing skills checklist, including using colored pencils, circling and underlining as directed
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Included brainstorming sheet, all drafts of this paragraph, AND your Writing Skills Checklist

Comments \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_