

## Description



Rudi Von Briel/PhotoEdit Inc.

### WHAT IS DESCRIPTION?

All of us respond in a strong way to sensory stimulation. The sweet perfume of a candy shop takes us back to childhood; the blank white walls of the campus infirmary remind us of long vigils at a hospital

where a grandmother lay dying; the screech of a subway car sets our nerves on edge.

Without any sensory stimulation, we sink into a less-than-human state. Neglected babies, left alone with no human touch, no colors, no lullabies, become withdrawn and unresponsive. And prisoners dread solitary confinement, knowing that the sensory deprivation can be unbearable, even to the point of madness.

Because sensory impressions are so potent, descriptive writing has a unique power and appeal. **Description** can be defined as the expression, in vivid language, of what the five senses experience. A richly rendered description freezes a subject in time, evoking sights, smells, sounds, textures, and tastes in such a way that readers become one with the writer's world.

## HOW DESCRIPTION FITS YOUR PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Description can be a supportive technique that develops part of an essay, or it can be the dominant technique used throughout an essay. Here are some examples of the way description can help you meet the objective of an essay developed chiefly through another pattern of development:

- In a *causal analysis* showing the *consequences* of pet overpopulation, you might describe the desperate appearance of a pack of starving stray dogs.
- In an *argumentation-persuasion essay* urging more rigorous handgun control, you might start with a description of a violent family confrontation that ended in murder.
- In a *process analysis* explaining the pleasure of making ice cream at home, you might describe the beauty of an old-fashioned, hand-cranked ice cream maker.
- In a *narrative essay* recounting a day in the life of a street musician, you might describe the musician's energy and the joyous appreciation of passersby.

In each case, the essay's overall purpose would affect the amount of description needed.

Your readers also influence how much description to include. As you write, ask yourself, "What do my particular readers need to know to understand and experience keenly what I'm describing? What descriptive details will they enjoy most?" Your answers to these and similar questions will help you tailor your description to specific readers. Consider an article intended for professional horticulturists; its purpose is to explain a new technique for controlling spider mites. Because of readers' expertise, there would be little need for a lengthy description of the insects. Written for a college newspaper, however, the article would probably provide a detailed description of the mites so student gardeners could spot them with ease.

While your purpose and audience define *how much* to describe, you have great freedom deciding *what* to describe. Description is especially suited to objects (your car or desk, for example), but you can also describe a person, an animal, a place, a time, and a phenomenon or concept. You might write an effective description about a friend who runs marathons (person), a pair of ducks that returns each year to a neighbor's pond (animals), the kitchen of a fast-food restaurant (place), a period when you were unemployed (time), the "fight or flight" response to danger (phenomenon or concept).

Description can be divided into two types: objective and subjective. In an **objective description**, you describe the subject in a straightforward and literal way, without revealing your attitude or feelings. Reporters, as well as technical and scientific writers, specialize in objective description; their jobs depend on their ability to detail experiences without emotional bias. For example, a reporter may write an unemotional account of a township meeting that ended in a fistfight. Or a marine biologist may write a factual report describing the way sea mammals are killed by the plastic refuse (sandwich wrappings, straws, fishing lines) that humans throw into the ocean.

In contrast, when writing a **subjective description**, you convey a highly personal view of your subject and seek to elicit a strong emotional response from your readers. Such subjective descriptions often take the form of reflective pieces or character studies. For example, in an essay describing the rich plant life in an inner-city garden, you might reflect on people's longing to connect with the soil and express admiration for the gardeners' hard work—an admiration you'd like readers to share. Or, in a character study of your grandfather, you might describe his stern appearance and gentle behavior, hoping that the contradiction will move readers as much as it moves you.

The *tone* of a subjective description is determined by your purpose, your attitude toward the subject, and the reader response you wish to evoke. Consider an essay about a dynamic woman who runs a center for disturbed children. If your goal is to make readers admire the woman, your tone will be serious and appreciative. But if you want to criticize the woman's high-pressure tactics and create distaste for her management style, your tone will be disapproving and severe.

The language of a descriptive piece also depends, to a great extent, on whether your purpose is primarily objective or subjective. If the description is objective, the language is straightforward, precise, and factual. Such *denotative* language consists of neutral dictionary meanings. If you want to describe as dispassionately as possible fans' violent behavior at a football game, you might write about the "large crowd" and its "mass movement onto the field." But if you are shocked by the fans' behavior and want to write a subjective piece that inspires similar outrage in readers, then you might write about the "swelling mob" and its "rowdy stampede onto the field." In the latter case, the language used would be *connotative* and emotionally charged so that readers would share your feelings. (For more on denotation and connotation, see pages 21–22 and 126–127.)

Subjective and objective descriptions often overlap. Sometimes a single sentence contains both objective and subjective elements: "Although his hands were large and misshapen by arthritis, they were gentle to the touch, inspiring confidence and trust." Other times, part of an essay may provide a factual description (the physical appearance of a summer cabin your family rented), while another part of the essay may be highly subjective (how you felt in the cabin, sitting in front of a fire on a rainy day).

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At this point, you have a good sense of the way writers use description to achieve their purpose and to connect with their readers. Now take a moment to look closely at the photograph at the beginning of this chapter. Imagine you're writing a column, accompanied by the photo, for the local city newspaper. Your purpose is to encourage area businesspeople to provide financial support for the city's mural arts program. Jot down some phrases you might use when *describing* the mural and its impact on the community.

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## PREWRITING STRATEGIES

The following checklist shows how you can apply to description some of the prewriting strategies discussed in Chapter 2.



### DESCRIPTION: A PREWRITING CHECKLIST

*Choose a Subject to Describe*

- Might a photograph, postcard, prized possession, or journal entry suggest a subject worth describing?
- Will you describe a person, animal, object, place, time period, or phenomenon? Is the subject readily observable, or will you have to reconstruct it from memory?

*Determine Your Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Point of View*

- Is your purpose to inform or to evoke an emotional response? If you want to do both, which is your predominant purpose?
- What audience are you writing for? How much does the audience already know about the subject you plan to describe?
- What tone and point of view will best serve your purpose and make readers receptive to your description?

*Use Prewriting to Generate Details About the Subject*

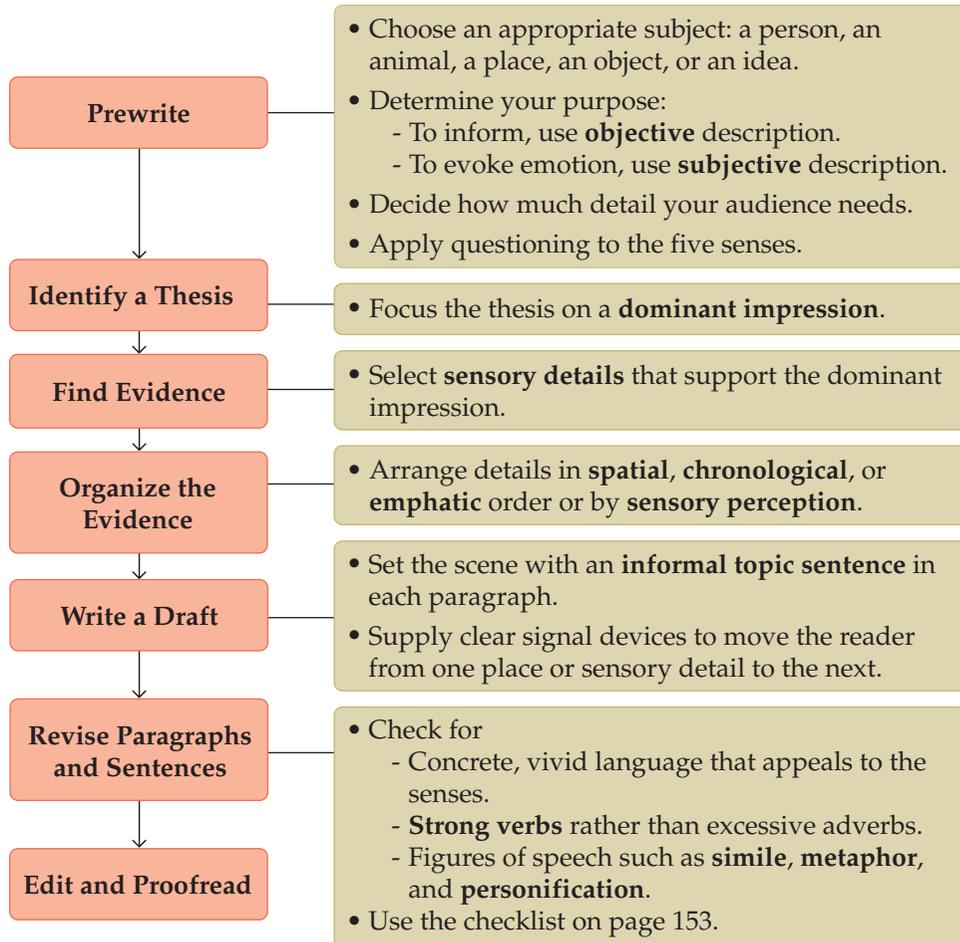
- How could freewriting, journal entries, or brainstorming help you gather sensory specifics about your subject?
- What relevant details about your subject come to mind when you apply the questioning technique to each of the five senses? What sounds (pitch, volume, and quality) predominate? What can you touch and how does it feel (temperature, weight, texture)? What do you see (color, pattern, shape, size)? What smells (pleasant, unpleasant) can't you forget? What tastes (agreeable, disagreeable) remain memorable?

## STRATEGIES FOR USING DESCRIPTION IN AN ESSAY

After prewriting, you're ready to draft your essay. The suggestions in Figure 10.1 (on page 154) and those that follow will be helpful whether you use description as a dominant or supportive pattern of development.

- 1. Focus a descriptive essay around a dominant impression.** Like other kinds of writing, a descriptive essay must have a thesis, or main point. In a descriptive essay with a subjective slant, the thesis usually centers on the

**FIGURE 10.1**  
**Development Diagram: Writing a Description Essay**



**dominant impression** you have about your subject. Suppose you decide to write an essay on your ninth-grade history teacher, Ms. Hazzard. You want the paper to convey how unconventional and flamboyant she was. The essay could, of course, focus on a different dominant impression—how insensitive she could be to students, for example. What’s important is that you establish—early in the paper—the dominant impression you intend to convey. Although descriptive essays often imply, rather than explicitly state, the dominant impression, that impression should be unmistakable.

2. **Select the details to include.** The prewriting techniques discussed on pages 23–31 can help you develop heightened powers of observation and recall. Practice in noting significant details can lead you to become—in the words of

novelist Henry James—“one of those people on whom nothing is lost.” The power of description hinges on your ability to select from all possible details *only those that support the dominant impression*. All others—no matter how vivid or interesting—must be left out. If you were describing how flamboyant Ms. Hazzard could be, the details in the following paragraph would be appropriate:

A large-boned woman, Ms. Hazzard wore her bright red hair piled on top of her head, where it perched precariously. By the end of class, wayward strands of hair tumbled down and fell into eyes fringed by spiky false eyelashes. Ms. Hazzard’s nails, filed into crisp points, were painted either bloody burgundy or neon pink. Plastic bangle bracelets, also either burgundy or pink, clattered up and down her ample arms as she scrawled on the board the historical dates that had, she claimed, “changed the world.”

Such details—the heavy eye makeup, stiletto nails, gaudy bracelets—contribute to the impression of a flamboyant, unusual person. Even if you remembered times that Ms. Hazzard seemed perfectly conventional and understated, most likely you wouldn’t describe those times because they would contradict the dominant impression.

You must also be selective in the *number of details* you include. Having a dominant impression helps you eliminate many details gathered during prewriting, but there still will be choices to make. For example, it would be inappropriate to describe in exhaustive detail everything in a messy room:

The brown desk, made of a grained plastic laminate, is directly under a small window covered by a torn yellow-and-gold plaid curtain. In the left corner of the desk are four crumbled balls of blue-lined yellow paper, three red markers (all without caps), two fine-point blue pens, a crumbling pink eraser, and four letters, two bearing special wildlife stamps. A green down-filled vest and an out-of-shape red cable-knit sweater are thrown over the back of the bright blue metal bridge chair pushed under the desk. Under the chair is an oval braided rug, its once brilliant blues and greens spotted by soda and coffee stains.

Readers will be reluctant to wade through such undifferentiated specifics. Even more important, such excessive detailing dilutes the essay’s focus. You end up with a seemingly endless list of specifics, rather than with a carefully crafted word picture. In this regard, sculptors and writers are similar—what they take away is as important as what they leave in.



- 3. Organize the descriptive details.** It's important to select the organizational pattern (or combination of patterns) that best supports your dominant impression. The paragraphs in a descriptive essay are usually sequenced *spatially* (from top to bottom, interior to exterior, near to far) or *chronologically* (as the subject is experienced in time). But the paragraphs can also be ordered *emphatically* (ending with your subject's most striking elements) or by *sensory impression* (first smell, then taste, then touch, and so on).

You might, for instance, use a *spatial* pattern to organize a description of a large city as you viewed it from the air, a taxi, or a subway car. A description of your first day on a new job might move *chronologically*, starting with how you felt the first hour on the job and proceeding through the rest of the day. In a paper describing a bout with the flu, you might arrange details *emphatically*, beginning with a description of your low-level aches and pains and concluding with an account of your raging fever. An essay about a neighborhood garbage dump could be organized by *sensory impressions*: the sights of the dump, its smells, its sounds. Regardless of the organizational pattern you use, provide enough *signal devices* (for example, *about*, *next*, *worst of all*) so that readers can follow the description easily.

Finally, although descriptive essays don't always have conventional topic sentences, each descriptive paragraph should have a clear focus. Often this focus is indicated by a sentence early in the paragraph that names the scene, object, or individual to be described. Such a sentence functions as a kind of *informal topic sentence*; the paragraph's descriptive details then develop that topic sentence.

- 4. Use vivid sensory language and varied sentence structure.** The connotative language typical of subjective description should be richly evocative. The words you select must etch in readers' minds the same picture that you have in yours. For this reason, rather than relying on vague generalities, you must use language that involves readers' senses. Consider the difference between the following paired descriptions:

**Vague**

The food was unappetizing.

The toothpaste was refreshing.

Filled with passengers and baggage, the car moved slowly down the road.

**Vivid**

The stew congealed into an oval pool of muddy brown fat.

The toothpaste, minty sweet, tingled against my bare teeth, finally free from braces.

Burdened with its load of clamoring children and bulging suitcases, the car labored down the interstate on bald tires and worn shocks, emitting puffs of blue exhaust and an occasional backfire.

Unlike the *concrete, sensory-packed* sentences on the right, the sentences on the left fail to create vivid word pictures that engage readers. While all good writing blends abstract and concrete language, descriptive writing demands an

abundance of specific sensory language. (For more on specific language, see pages 127–128 in Chapter 8.)

Although you should aim for rich, sensory images, avoid overloading your sentences with *too many adjectives*: “A stark, smooth, blinding glass cylinder, the fifty-story skyscraper dominated the crowded city street.” Delete unnecessary words, retaining only the most powerful: “A blinding glass cylinder, the skyscraper dominated the street.”

Remember, too, that *verbs pack more of a wallop* than adverbs. The following sentence has to rely on adverbs (italicized) because its verbs are so weak: “She walked *casually* into the room and *deliberately* tried not to pay attention to their stares.” Rewritten, so that verbs (italicized), not adverbs, do the bulk of the work, the sentence becomes more powerful: “She *strolled* into the room and *ignored* their stares.” *Onomatopoeic* verbs, like *buzz*, *sizzle*, and *zoom*, can be especially effective because their sounds convey their meaning. (For more on vigorous verbs, see pages 128–130 in Chapter 8.)

*Figures of speech*—nonliteral, imaginative comparisons between two basically dissimilar things—are another way to enliven descriptive writing. *Similes* use the word *like* or *as* when comparing; *metaphors* state or imply that the two things being compared are alike; and *personification* attributes human characteristics to inanimate things. (For further discussion of figures of speech, refer to pages 131–132 in Chapter 8.)

The examples that follow show how effective figurative language can be in descriptive writing:

### Simile

Moving as jerkily as a marionette on strings, the old man picked himself up off the sidewalk and staggered down the street.

### Metaphor

Stalking their prey, the hall monitors remained hidden in the corridors, motionless and ready to spring on any unsuspecting student who tried to sneak into class late.

### Personification

The scoop of vanilla ice cream, plain and unadorned, cried out for hot fudge sauce and a sprinkling of sliced pecans.

(For suggestions on avoiding clichéd figures of speech, see page 131 in Chapter 8.)

Finally, when writing descriptive passages, you need to *vary sentence structure*. Don't use the same subject-verb pattern in all sentences. The second example above, for instance, could have been written as follows: “The hall monitors stalked their prey. They hid in the corridors. They remained motionless and ready to spring on any unsuspecting student who tried to sneak into class late.” But the sentence is richer and more interesting when the descriptive elements are embedded,

eliminating what would otherwise have been a clipped and predictable subject-verb pattern. (For more on sentence variety, see pages 115–118 in Chapter 8.)

## REVISION STRATEGIES

Once you have a draft of the essay, you're ready to revise. The following checklist will help you and those giving you feedback apply to description some of the revision techniques discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.



### DESCRIPTION: A REVISION/PEER REVIEW CHECKLIST

#### *Revise Overall Meaning and Structure*

- What dominant impression does the essay convey? Is the dominant impression stated or implied? Where? Should it be made more obvious or more subtle?
- Is the essay primarily objective or subjective? Should the essay be more personal and emotionally charged or less so?
- Which descriptive details don't support the dominant impression? Should they be deleted, or should the dominant impression be adjusted to encompass the details?

#### *Revise Paragraph Development*

- How are the essay's descriptive paragraphs (or passages) organized—spatially, chronologically, emphatically, or by sensory impressions? Would another organizational pattern be more effective? Which one(s)?
- Which paragraphs lack a distinctive focus?
- Which descriptive paragraphs are mere lists of sensory impressions?
- Which descriptive paragraphs are too abstract or general? Which fail to engage the reader's senses? How could they be made more concrete and specific?

#### *Revise Sentences and Words*

- What signal devices (such as *above*, *next*, *worst of all*) guide readers through the description? Are there enough signals? Too many?
- Where should sentence structure be varied to make it less predictable?
- Which sentences should include sensory images?
- Where should flat verbs and adverbs be replaced with vigorous ones? Where would onomatopoeia enliven a sentence?
- Where should there be more or fewer adjectives?
- Do any figures of speech seem contrived or trite? Which ones?

## STUDENT ESSAY: FROM PREWRITING THROUGH REVISION

The student essay that follows was written by Marie Martinez in response to this assignment:

The essay “Sister Flowers” is an evocative piece about a place that had special meaning in Maya Angelou’s life. Write an essay about a place that holds rich significance for you, centering the description on a dominant impression.

After deciding to write about the salt marsh near her grandparents’ home, Marie used the prewriting technique of *questioning* to gather sensory details about this special place. To enhance her power of recall, she focused, one at a time, on each of the five senses. Then, typing as quickly as she could, she listed the sensory specifics that came to mind.

When Marie later reviewed the details listed under each sensory heading, she concluded that her essay’s dominant impression should be the marsh’s peaceful beauty. With that dominant impression in mind, she added some details to her prewriting and deleted others. Below is Marie’s original prewriting; the handwritten insertions indicate her later efforts to develop the material:

### Questioning Technique

See: What do I see at the marsh?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• line of tall, waving reeds <i>bordering the creek</i></li> <li>• path--flattened grass</li> <li>• spring--bright green <i>(brilliant green)</i></li> <li>• autumn--gold <i>(tawny)</i></li> <li>• winter--gray</li> <li>• soil--spongy</li> <li>• dark soil</li> <li>• birds--little, brown</li> <li>• low tide--steep bank of creek</li> <li>• <del>an occasional beer can or potato chip bag</del></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• grass under the water--green waves, <i>shimmers</i></li> <li>• fish--tiny, with <i>(minnows)</i> silvery sides, dart water and vegetation <i>and underwater tangles</i></li> <li>• blue crabs</li> <li>• creek--narrow, sinuous, can’t see beginning or end <i>less than 15’ wide</i></li> <li>• center of creek--everything water and sky</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

Hear: How does it sound there?

- chirping of birds *(“tweep, tweep”)*
- splash of turtle or otter
- mainly silent

Smell: Why can’t I forget its smell?

- salt
- soil

Feel: How does it feel?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• soil--spongy</li> <li>• water--warmer than ocean; rub</li> <li>• my face and neck; mucky <i>and oily</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mud--slimy <i>(through toes)</i></li> <li>• crabs brush my legs</li> <li>• feel buoyant, weightless</li> </ul> |
|--|---|

When Marie reviewed her annotated prewriting, she decided that, in the essay, she would order her brainstormed impressions by location rather than by sensory type. Using a spatial method of organization, she would present details as she moved from place to place—from her grandparents' home to the creek. The arrangement of details was now so clear to Marie that she felt comfortable moving to a first draft without further shaping her prewriting or preparing an outline. As she wrote, though, she frequently referred to her prewriting to retrieve sensory details about each location.

Now read Marie's paper, "Salt Marsh," noting the similarities and differences between her prewriting and final essay. You'll see that the essay's introduction and conclusion weren't drawn from the prewriting material, whereas most of the sensory details were. Notice, too, that when she wrote the essay, Marie expanded these details by adding more specifics and providing several powerful similes. Finally, consider how well the essay applies the principles of description discussed in this chapter. (The commentary that follows the paper will help you look at the essay more closely and will give you some sense of how Marie went about revising her first draft.)

### Salt Marsh

by Marie Martinez

#### Introduction

In one of his journals, Thoreau told of the difficulty he had 1  
 escaping the obligations and cares of society: "It sometimes happens  
 that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some  
 work will run in my head and I am not where my body is--I am out of  
 my senses. In my walks I . . . return to my senses." All of us  
 feel out of our senses at times. Overwhelmed by problems or  
 everyday annoyances, we lose touch with sensory pleasures as we  
 spend our days in noisy cities and stuffy classrooms. Just as  
 Thoreau walked in the woods to return to his senses, I have a  
 special place where I return to mine: the salt marsh behind my  
 grandparents' house.

#### Dominant impression (thesis)

#### Informal topic sentence: Definition paragraph

My grandparents live on the East Coast, a mile or so inland 2  
 from the sea. Between the ocean and the mainland is a wide fringe  
 of salt marsh. A salt marsh is not a swamp, but an expanse of  
 dark, spongy soil threaded with saltwater creeks and clothed in a  
 kind of grass called salt meadow hay. All the water in the marsh  
 rises and falls daily with the ocean tides, an endless cycle that  
 changes the look of the marsh--partly flooded or mostly dry--as  
 the day progresses.

- 3     ▲ Heading out to the marsh from my grandparents' house, I follow a short path through the woods. As I walk along, a sharp smell of salt mixed with the rich aroma of peaty soil fills my nostrils. I am always amazed by the way the path changes with the seasons. Sometimes I walk in the brilliant green of spring, sometimes in the tawny gold of autumn, sometimes in the grayish-tan of winter. No matter the season, the grass flanking the trail is often flattened into swirls, like thick Van Gogh brush strokes that curve and recurve in circular patterns. Informal topic sentence: First paragraph in a four-part spatial sequence  
 No people come here. The peacefulness heals me like a soothing drug. Simile
- 4     ▲ After a few minutes, the trail suddenly opens up to a view that calms me no matter how upset or discouraged I might be: a line of tall waving reeds bordering and nearly hiding the salt marsh creek. To get to the creek, I part the reeds. Informal topic sentence: Second paragraph in the spatial sequence
- 5     ▲ The creek is a narrow body of water no more than fifteen feet wide, and it ebbs and flows as the ocean currents sweep toward the land or rush back toward the sea. The creek winds in a sinuous pattern so that I cannot see its beginning or end, the places where it trickles into the marsh or spills into the open ocean. Little brown birds dip in and out of the reeds on the far shore of the creek, making a special "tweep-tweep" sound peculiar to the marsh. When I stand at low tide on the shore of the creek, I am on a miniature cliff, for the bank of the creek falls abruptly and steeply into the water. Below me, green grasses wave and shimmer under the water while tiny minnows flash their silvery sides as they dart through the underwater tangles. Informal topic sentence: Third paragraph in the spatial sequence
- 6     ▲ The creek water is often much warmer than the ocean, so I can swim there in three seasons. Sitting on the edge of the creek, I scoop some water into my hand, rub my face and neck, then ease into the water. Where the creek is shallow, my feet sink into a foot of muck that feels like mashed potatoes mixed with motor oil. But once I become accustomed to it, I enjoy squishing the slimy mud through my toes. Sometimes I feel brushing past my legs the blue crabs that live in the creek. Other times, I hear the splash of a turtle or an otter as it slips from the shore into the water. Otherwise, it is silent. Informal topic sentence: Last paragraph in the spatial sequence  
Simile

The salty water is buoyant and lifts my spirits as I stroke through it to reach the middle of the creek. There in the center, I float weightlessly, surrounded by tall reeds that reduce the world to water and sky. I am at peace.

### Conclusion

The salt marsh is not the kind of dramatic landscape found on picture postcards. There are no soaring mountains, sandy beaches, or lush valleys. The marsh is a flat world that some consider dull and uninviting. I am glad most people do not respond to the marsh's subtle beauty because that means I can be alone there. Just as the rising tide sweeps over the marsh, floating debris out to the ocean, the marsh washes away my concerns and restores me to my senses.

7

Echo of idea in introduction

## Commentary

### The Dominant Impression

Marie responded to the assignment by writing a moving tribute to a place having special meaning for her—the salt marsh near her grandparents' home. Like most descriptive pieces, Marie's essay is organized around a *dominant impression*: the marsh's peaceful solitude and gentle, natural beauty. The essay's introduction provides a context for the dominant impression by comparing the pleasure Marie experiences in the marsh to the happiness Thoreau felt in his walks around Walden Pond.

### Combining Patterns of Development

Before developing the essay's dominant impression, Marie uses the second paragraph to *define* a salt marsh. An *objective description*, the definition clarifies that a salt marsh—with its spongy soil, haylike grass, and ebbing tides—is not to be confused with a swamp. Because Marie offers such a factual definition, readers have the background needed to enjoy the personalized view that follows.

Besides the definition paragraph and the comparison in the opening paragraph, the essay contains a strong element of *causal analysis*: Throughout, Marie describes the marsh's effect on her.

### Sensory Language

At times, Marie develops the essay's dominant impression explicitly, as when she writes "No people come here" (paragraph 3) and "I am at peace" (6). But Marie generally uses the more subtle techniques characteristic of *subjective description* to convey the dominant impression. First of all, she fills the essay with strong *connotative language*, rich with *sensory images*. The third paragraph describes what she smells (the "sharp smell of salt mixed with the rich aroma of peaty soil") and what she sees ("brilliant green," "tawny gold," and "grayish-tan"). In the fifth



paragraph, she uses *onomatopoeia* (“tweep-tweep”) to convey the birds’ chirping sound. And the sixth paragraph includes vigorous descriptions of how the marsh feels to Marie’s touch. She splashes water on her face and neck; she digs her toes into the mud at the bottom of the creek; she delights in the delicate brushing of crabs against her legs.

### Figurative Language, Vigorous Verbs, and Varied Sentence Structure

You might also have noted that *figurative language*, *energetic verbs*, and *varied sentence patterns* contribute to the essay’s descriptive power. Marie develops a simile in the third paragraph when she compares the flattened swirls of swamp grass to the brush strokes in a painting by Van Gogh. Later she uses another simile when she writes that the creek’s thick mud feels “like mashed potatoes mixed with motor oil.” Moreover, throughout the essay, she uses lively verbs (“shimmer,” “flash”) to capture the marsh’s magical quality. Similarly, Marie enhances descriptive passages by varying the length of her sentences. Long, fairly elaborate sentences are interspersed with short, dramatic statements. In the third paragraph, for example, the long sentence describing the circular swirls of swamp grass is followed by the brief statement “No people come here.” And the sixth paragraph uses two short sentences (“Otherwise, it is silent” and “I am at peace”) to punctuate the paragraph’s longer sentences.

### Organization

We can follow Marie’s journey through the marsh because she uses an easy-to-follow combination of *spatial*, *chronological*, and *emphatic* patterns to sequence her experience. The essay relies primarily on a spatial arrangement since the four body paragraphs focus on the different spots that Marie reaches: first, the path behind her grandparents’ house (paragraph 3); then the area bordering the creek (4); next, her view of the creek (5); last, the creek itself (6). Each stage of her walk is signaled by an *informal topic sentence* near the start of each paragraph. Furthermore, *signal devices* (marked by italics here) indicate not only her location but also the chronological passage of time: “As I walk along, a sharp smell . . . fills my nostrils” (3); “After a few minutes, the trail suddenly opens up . . .” (4); “Below me, green grasses wave . . .” (5). And to call attention to the creek’s serene beauty, Marie saves for last the description of the peace she feels while floating in the creek.

### An Inappropriate Figure of Speech

Although the four body paragraphs focus on the distinctive qualities of each location, Marie runs into a minor problem in the third paragraph. Take a moment to reread that paragraph’s last sentence. Comparing the peace of the marsh to the effect of a “soothing drug” is jarring. The effectiveness of Marie’s essay hinges on her ability to create a picture of a pure, natural world. A reference to drugs is inappropriate. Now, reread the paragraph aloud, stopping after “No people come here.” Note how much more in keeping with the essay’s dominant impression the paragraph is when the reference to drugs is omitted.

## Conclusion

The concluding paragraph brings the essay to a graceful close. The powerful *simile* found in the last sentence contains an implied reference to Thoreau and to Marie's earlier statement about the joy to be found in special places having restorative powers. Such an allusion echoes, with good effect, the paper's opening comments.

## Revising the First Draft

When Marie met with some classmates during a peer review session, the students agreed that Marie's first draft was strong and moving. But they also said that they had difficulty following her route through the marsh; they found her third paragraph especially confusing. Marie reviewed her classmates' peer review worksheets and then entered their comments, numbered in order of importance, in the margin of her first draft. Reprinted here is the original version of Marie's third paragraph, along with her annotations:

### Original Version of Third Paragraph

① Chronology is confusing

As I head out to the marsh from the house, I follow a short trail through the woods. A smell of salt and soil fills my nostrils. The end of the trail suddenly opens up to a view that calms me no matter how upset or discouraged I might be: a line of tall, waving reeds bordering the salt marsh creek. Civilization seems far away as I walk the path of flattened grass and finally reach my goal, the salt marsh creek hidden behind the tall, waving reeds. The path changes with the seasons; sometimes I walk in the brilliant green of spring, sometimes in the tawny gold of autumn, sometimes in the gray of winter. In some areas, the grass is flattened into swirls that make the marsh resemble one of those paintings by Van Gogh. No people come here. The peacefulness heals me like a soothing drug. The path stops at the line of tall, waving reeds standing upright at the border of the creek. I part the reeds to get to the creek.

③ Make more specific

② Develop more fully—maybe use a simile

When Marie looked more carefully at the paragraph, she agreed it was confusing. For one thing, the paragraph's third and fourth sentences indicated that she had come to the path's end and had reached the reeds bordering the creek. In the following sentences, however, she was on the path again. Then, at the end, she was back at the creek, as if she had just arrived there. Marie resolved this confusion by breaking the single paragraph into two separate ones—the first describing the walk along the path, the second describing her arrival at the

creek. This restructuring, especially when combined with clearer transitions, eliminated the confusion.

While revising her essay, Marie also intensified the sensory images in her original paragraph. She changed the “smell of salt and soil” to the “sharp smell of salt mixed with the rich aroma of peaty soil.” And when she added the phrase “thick Van Gogh brush strokes that curve and recurve in circular patterns,” she made the comparison between the marsh grass and a Van Gogh painting more vivid.

These are just some of the changes Marie made while rewriting the paper. Her skillful revisions provided the polish needed to make an already strong essay even more evocative.

## ACTIVITIES: DESCRIPTION



### Prewriting Activities

1. Imagine you're writing two essays: One explains how students get “burned out”; the other contends that being a spendthrift is better (or worse) than being frugal. Jot down ways you might use description in each essay.
2. Go to a place on campus where students congregate. In preparation for an *objective* description of this place, make notes of various sights, sounds, smells, and textures, as well as the overall “feel” of the place. Then, in preparation for a *subjective* description, observe and take notes on another sheet of paper. Compare the two sets of material. What differences do you see in word choice and selection of details?
3. Prepare to interview an interesting person by outlining several questions ahead of time. When you visit that person's home or workplace, bring a notebook in which to record his or her responses. During the interview, observe the person's surroundings, voice, body language, dress, and so on. As soon as the interview is over, make notes on these matters. Then review your notes and identify your dominant impression of the person. With that impression in mind, which details would you omit if you were writing an essay? Which would you elaborate? Which organizational pattern (spatial, emphatic, chronological, or sensory) would you select to organize your description? Why?

### Revising Activities

4. Revise each of the following sentence sets twice. The first time, create an unmistakable mood; the second time, create a sharply contrasting mood. To convey atmosphere, vary sentence structure, use vigorous verbs, provide rich sensory details, and pay special attention to words' connotations.

- a. The card players sat around the table. The table was old. The players were, too.
  - b. A long line formed outside the movie theater. People didn't want to miss the show. The movie had received a lot of attention recently.
  - c. A girl walked down the street in her first pair of high heels. This was a new experience for her.
5. The following sentences contain clichés. Rewrite each sentence, supplying a fresh and imaginative figure of speech. Add whatever descriptive details are needed to provide a context for the figure of speech.
- a. They were as quiet as mice.
  - b. My brother used to get green with envy if I had a date and he didn't.
  - c. The little girl is proud as a peacock of her Girl Scout uniform.
  - d. The professor is as dull as dishwater.
6. The following descriptive paragraph is from the first draft of an essay showing that personal growth may result when romanticized notions and reality collide. How effective is the paragraph in illustrating the essay's thesis? Which details are powerful? Which could be more concrete? Which should be deleted? Where should sentence structure be more varied? How could the description be made more coherent? Revise the paragraph, correcting any problems you discover and adding whatever sensory details are needed to enliven the description. Feel free to break the paragraph into two or more separate ones.

As a child, I was intrigued by stories about the farm in Harrison County, Maine, where my father spent his teens. Being raised on a farm seemed more interesting than growing up in the suburbs. So about a year ago, I decided to see for myself what the farm was like. I got there by driving on Route 334, a surprisingly easy-to-drive, four-lane highway that had recently been built with matching state and federal funds. I turned into the dirt road leading to the farm and got out of my car. It had been washed and waxed for the occasion. Then I headed for a dirt-colored barn. Its roof was full of huge, rotted holes. As I rounded the bushes, I saw the house. It too was dirt-colored. Its paint must have worn off decades ago. A couple of dead-looking old cars were sprawled in front of the barn. They were dented and windowless. Also by the barn was an ancient refrigerator, crushed like a discarded accordion. The porch steps to the house were slanted and wobbly. Through the open windows came a stale smell and the sound of television. Looking in the front door screen, I could see two chickens jumping around

inside. Everything looked dirty both inside and out. Secretly grateful that no one answered my knock, I bolted down the stairs, got into my clean, shiny car, and drove away.

## PROFESSIONAL SELECTIONS: DESCRIPTION



### MAYA ANGELOU

Born Marguerite Johnson in 1928, Maya Angelou rose from a difficult childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, to become a multitalented performer and writer. A professor at Wake Forest University since 1991, she has danced professionally; starred in an off-Broadway play; acted on television; and become a prolific, highly regarded writer. Her work includes several volumes of poetry, such as *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1988), and *A Brave and Startling Truth* (1995); collections of essays, the latest of which is *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997); children's books, including *Kofi and His Magic* (1996); and a series of autobiographical books, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), from which the following selection is taken, through *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002). Raped at the age of eight in St. Louis, Angelou responded by speaking to no one but her brother, Bailey. She and Bailey were soon sent to Stamps to live with their grandmother (Momma), at which point this excerpt begins.

Please note the essay structure diagram that appears following this selection (Figure 10.2 on page 172).

### Pre-Reading Journal Entry

Growing up isn't easy. In your journal, list several challenges you've had to face in your life. In each case, was there someone who served as a "life line," providing you with crucial guidance and support? Who was that individual? How did this person steer you through the difficulty?

### SISTER FLOWERS

- 1 For nearly a year [after I was raped], I sopped around the house, the Store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible. Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first life line.
- 2 Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat of Black Stamps. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. She was thin without the taut look of wiry people, and her printed voile dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer. She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town.

Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged, but then 3  
no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers to ruffle her dress,  
let alone snag her skin. She didn't encourage familiarity. She wore gloves too.

I don't think I ever saw Mrs. Flowers laugh, but she smiled often. A slow widening 4  
of her thin black lips to show even, small white teeth, then the slow effortless closing.  
When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her. The action was so  
graceful and inclusively benign.

She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained 5  
throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be.

Momma had a strange relationship with her. Most often when she passed on the road 6  
in front of the Store, she spoke to Momma in that soft yet carrying voice, "Good day,  
Mrs. Henderson." Momma responded with "How you, Sister Flowers?"

Mrs. Flowers didn't belong to our church, nor was she Momma's familiar. Why 7  
on earth did she insist on calling her Sister Flowers? Shame made me want to hide  
my face. Mrs. Flowers deserved better than to be called Sister. Then, Momma left  
out the verb. Why not ask, "How *are* you, Mrs. Flowers?" With the unbalanced pas-  
sion of the young, I hated her for showing her ignorance to Mrs. Flowers. It didn't  
occur to me for many years that they were as alike as sisters, separated only by  
formal education.

Although I was upset, neither of the women was in the least shaken by what I 8  
thought an unceremonious greeting. Mrs. Flowers would continue her easy gait up the  
hill to her little bungalow, and Momma kept on shelling peas or doing whatever had  
brought her to the front porch.

Occasionally, though, Mrs. Flowers would drift off the road and down to the Store 9  
and Momma would say to me, "Sister, you go on and play." As she left I would hear  
the beginning of an intimate conversation. Momma persistently using the wrong  
verb, or none at all.

"Brother and Sister Wilcox is sho'ly the meanest—" "Is," Momma? "Is"? Oh, 10  
please, not "is," Momma, for two or more. But they talked, and from the side of the  
building where I waited for the ground to open up and swallow me, I heard the soft-  
voiced Mrs. Flowers and the textured voice of my grandmother merging and melting.  
They were interrupted from time to time by giggles that must have come from  
Mrs. Flowers (Momma never giggled in her life). Then she was gone.

She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like 11  
women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their  
loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roar-  
ing fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets.  
Women who walked over the "heath" and read morocco-bound books and had two  
last names divided by a hyphen. It would be safe to say that she made me proud to  
be Negro, just by being herself.

She acted just as refined as whitefolks in the movies and books and she was more 12  
beautiful, for none of them could have come near that warm color without looking  
gray by comparison.

It was fortunate that I never saw her in the company of powwhitefolks. For since they 13  
tend to think of their whiteness as an evenizer, I'm certain that I would have had to  
hear her spoken to commonly as Bertha, and my image of her would have been shat-  
tered like the unmendable Humpty-Dumpty.

14 One summer afternoon, sweet-milk fresh in my memory, she stopped at the Store to buy provisions. Another Negro woman of her health and age would have been expected to carry the paper sacks home in one hand, but Momma said, “Sister Flowers, I’ll send Bailey up to your house with these things.”

15 She smiled that slow dragging smile, “Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I’d prefer Marguerite, though.” My name was beautiful when she said it. “I’ve been meaning to talk to her, anyway.” They gave each other age-group looks.

16 Momma said, “Well, that’s all right then. Sister, go and change your dress. You going to Sister Flowers’s.”

17 The chifforobe was a maze. What on earth did one put on to go to Mrs. Flowers’s house? I knew I shouldn’t put on a Sunday dress. It might be sacrilegious. Certainly not a house dress, since I was already wearing a fresh one. I chose a school dress, naturally. It was formal without suggesting that going to Mrs. Flowers’s house was equivalent to attending church.

18 I trusted myself back into the Store.

19 “Now, don’t you look nice.” I had chosen the right thing, for once . . .

20 There was a little path beside the rocky road, and Mrs. Flowers walked in front swinging her arms and picking her way over the stones.

21 She said, without turning her head, to me, “I hear you’re doing very good school work, Marguerite, but that it’s all written. The teachers report that they have trouble getting you to talk in class.” We passed the triangular farm on our left and the path widened to allow us to walk together. I hung back in the separate unasked and unanswerable questions.

22 “Come and walk along with me, Marguerite.” I couldn’t have refused even if I wanted to. She pronounced my name so nicely. Or more correctly, she spoke each word with such clarity that I was certain a foreigner who didn’t understand English could have understood her.

23 “Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.” That was a totally new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it.

24 “Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That’s good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.”

25 I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic.

26 She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read them, I must read them aloud. She suggested that I try to make a sentence sound in as many different ways as possible.

27 “I’ll accept no excuse if you return a book to me that has been badly handled.” My imagination boggled at the punishment I would deserve if in fact I did abuse a book of Mrs. Flowers’s. Death would be too kind and brief.

28 The odors in the house surprised me. Somehow I had never connected Mrs. Flowers with food or eating or any other common experience of common people. There must have been an outhouse, too, but my mind never recorded it.

29 The sweet scent of vanilla had met us as she opened the door.

30 “I made tea cookies this morning. You see, I had planned to invite you for cookies and lemonade so we could have this little chat. The lemonade is in the icebox.”

It followed that Mrs. Flowers would have ice on an ordinary day, when most families in our town bought ice late on Saturdays only a few times during the summer to be used in the wooden ice-cream freezers. 31

She took the bags from me and disappeared through the kitchen door. I looked around the room that I had never in my wildest fantasies imagined I would see. Browned photographs leered or threatened from the walls and the white, freshly done curtains pushed against themselves and against the wind. I wanted to gobble up the room entire and take it to Bailey, who would help me analyze and enjoy it. 32

“Have a seat, Marguerite. Over there by the table.” She carried a platter covered with a tea towel. Although she warned that she hadn’t tried her hand at baking sweets for some time, I was certain that like everything else about her the cookies would be perfect. 33

They were flat round wafers, slightly browned on the edges and butter-yellow in the center. With the cold lemonade they were sufficient for childhood’s lifelong diet. Remembering my manners, I took nice little lady-like bites off the edges. She said she had made them expressly for me and that she had a few in the kitchen that I could take home to my brother. So I jammed one whole cake in my mouth and the rough crumbs scratched the insides of my jaws, and if I hadn’t had to swallow, it would have been a dream come true. 34

As I ate she began the first of what we later called “my lessons in living.” She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations. 35

When I finished the cookies she brushed off the table and brought a thick, small book from the bookcase. I had read *A Tale of Two Cities* and found it up to my standards as a romantic novel. She opened the first page and I heard poetry for the first time in my life. 36

“It was the best of times and the worst of times . . .” Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew from listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn’t really heard, heard to understand, a single word. 37

“How do you like that?” 38

It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor was still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak. 39

I said, “Yes, ma’am.” It was the least I could do, but it was the most also. 40

“There’s one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite.” 41

I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the enchantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes but its aura remains. To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood for a cup of mead with Beowulf<sup>1</sup> or a hot cup of tea and milk with *Oliver Twist*.<sup>2</sup> When I said aloud, “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done . . .”<sup>3</sup> tears of love filled my eyes at my selflessness. 42

- 43 On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came  
along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the Store.
- 44 I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's  
grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.
- 45 Childhood's logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I didn't  
question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention, nor did it occur to me  
that Momma might have asked her to give me a little talking to. All I cared about was  
that she had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me* from her favorite book. It was  
enough to prove that she liked me.

<sup>1</sup>The hero of an Old English epic poem dating from the eighth century (editors' note).

<sup>2</sup>The main character in Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (1837) (editors' note).

<sup>3</sup>The last words of Sydney Carton, the selfless hero of Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) (editors' note).

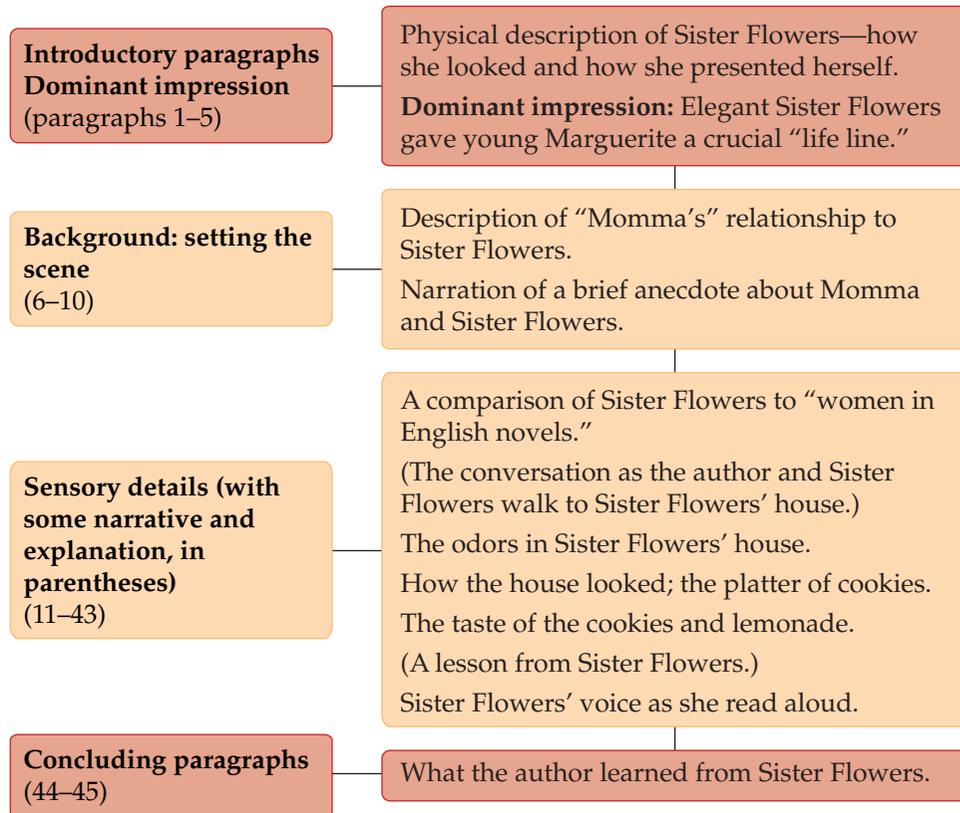
### Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis (or dominant impression)? Locate the sentence(s) in which Angelou states her main idea. If she doesn't state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.
2. Angelou states that Mrs. Flowers "has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be" (5). What does Angelou admire about Mrs. Flowers?
3. Why is young Angelou so ashamed of Momma when Mrs. Flowers is around? How do Momma and Mrs. Flowers behave with each other?
4. What are the "lessons in living" that Angelou receives from Mrs. Flowers during their first visit? How do you think these lessons might have subsequently influenced Angelou?
5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *taut* (paragraph 2), *voile* (2), *benign* (4), *unceremonious* (8), *gait* (8), *moors* (11), *incessantly* (11), *scones* (11), *crumpets* (11), *heath* (11), *chifforobe* (17), *sacrilegious* (17), *infuse* (24), *couched* (35), and *aura* (42).

### Questions About the Writer's Craft

1. **The pattern.** Reread the essay, focusing on the descriptive passages first of Mrs. Flowers and then of Angelou's visit to Mrs. Flowers's house. To what senses does Angelou appeal in these passages? What method of organization (see page 156) does she use to order these sensory details?

**FIGURE 10.2**  
**Essay Structure Diagram: “Sister Flowers” by Maya Angelou**



- To enrich the description of her eventful encounter with Mrs. Flowers, Angelou draws upon figures of speech (see pages 130–131 and 157). Consider, for example, the similes in paragraphs 1 and 11. How do these figures of speech contribute to the essay’s dominant impression?
- Other patterns.** Because Angelou’s description has a strong *narrative* component, it isn’t surprising that there’s a considerable amount of dialog in the selection. For example, in paragraphs 7 and 10, Angelou quotes Momma’s incorrect grammar. She then provides an imagined conversation in which the young Angelou scolds Momma and corrects her speech. What do these imagined scoldings of Momma reveal about young Angelou? How do they relate to Mrs. Flowers’s subsequent “lessons in life”?
- Although it’s not the focus of this selection, the issue of race remains in the background of Angelou’s portrait of Mrs. Flowers. Where in the selection does

Angelou imply that race was a fact of life in her town? How does this specter of racism help Angelou underscore the significance of her encounter with Mrs. Flowers?

### Writing Assignments Using Description as a Pattern of Development

1. At one time or another, just about all of us have met someone who taught us to see ourselves more clearly and helped us understand what we wanted from life. Write an essay describing such a person. Focus on the individual's personal qualities, as a way of depicting the role he or she played in your life. Be sure not to limit yourself to an objective description. Subjective description, filled with lively language and figures of speech, will serve you well as you provide a portrait of this special person.
2. Thrilled by the spectacle of Mrs. Flowers's interesting home, Angelou says she wanted to "gobble up the room entire" and share it with her brother. Write an essay describing in detail a place that vividly survives in your memory. You may describe a setting that you visited only once or a familiar setting that holds a special place in your heart. Before you write, list the qualities and sensory impressions you associate with this special place; then refine the list so that all details support your dominant impression. You may want to read Gordon Parks's "Flavio's Home" (page 182) to see how another writer evokes the qualities of an unforgettable place.



### Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development

3. When the young Angelou discovers, thanks to Mrs. Flowers, the thrill of acceptance, she experiences a kind of *epiphany*—a moment of enlightenment. Write an essay about an event in your life that represented a kind of epiphany. You might write about a positive discovery, such as when you realized you had a special talent for something, or about a negative discovery, such as when you realized that a beloved family member had a serious flaw. To make the point that the moment was a turning point in your life, start by *describing* what kind of person you were before the discovery. Then *narrate* the actual incident, using vivid details and dialogue to make the event come alive. End by discussing the importance of this epiphany in your life. For additional accounts of personal epiphanies, read Audre Lorde's "The Fourth of July" (page 208), Charmie Gholson's "Charity Display?" (page 220), and Beth Johnson's "Bombs Bursting in Air" (page 252).
4. Think of an activity that engages you completely, one that provides—as reading does for Angelou—an opportunity for growth and expansion. Possibilities



include reading, writing, playing an instrument, doing crafts, dancing, hiking, playing a sport, cooking, or traveling. Write an essay in which you *argue* the merits of your chosen pastime. Assume that some of your readers are highly skeptical. To win them over, you'll need to provide convincing *examples* that demonstrate the pleasure and benefits you have discovered in the activity.

### Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point

5. Write an essay about a time when someone threw you a much-needed “life line” at a challenging time. Review your pre-reading journal entry, selecting *one* time when a person’s encouragement and support made a great difference in your life. Be sure to describe the challenge you faced before recounting the specific details of the person’s help. Dialog and descriptive details will help you re-create the power of the experience.

## DAVID HELVARG

David Helvarg is a journalist and environmental activist. Born in 1951, he started his career as a freelance journalist and then became a war correspondent. Today he writes primarily about politics, AIDS, and marine life. Helvarg is also the founder and president of Blue Frontier Campaign, a marine conservation lobbying group that was inspired by his book about the world’s oceans, *Blue Frontier*. Helvarg’s lobbying on environmental issues grows out of his experiences covering war, political conflict, and marine biology. This article is excerpted from the September/October 2005 issue of *Multinational Monitor*, a magazine that examines multinational corporations and also covers issues relating to the environment and development.

### Pre-Reading Journal Entry

Although humans have shaped the environment in many ways, we are still at the mercy of nature at times. Recall a hurricane, tornado, thunderstorm, wind-storm, mudslide, earthquake, volcanic eruption, tsunami, drought, flood, or other natural event that affected you and your community. What was the event? What was the experience like? Use your journal to answer these questions.

## THE STORM THIS TIME

### Urban Floodplain

I arrive in Baton Rouge with a planeload of relief workers, FEMA functionaries and 1 crew cut contractors, all working their cell phones and BlackBerries. After renting a car and making my way through the daily traffic jam (Baton Rouge’s population has

exploded since the storm) I head south on Interstate 10, tuning into the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans, a consortium of local stations playing 24/7 information and call-in reports on Katrina's aftermath.

2 A police spokesperson assures listeners there are still 20 to 30 roadblocks around New Orleans and 11,000 guardsmen in the city. The mayor wants to open the city back up to residents but the approach of Hurricane Rita has forced him to postpone his plan.

3 Around the New Orleans airport in Jefferson Parish, I begin to see box stores, warehouses and motels with their roofs ripped off or caved in, downed trees and broken street signs, house roofs covered in blue tarps and high-rises with glass windows popped out like broken eyes. I hit a traffic jam and follow an SUV across the median strip to an exit where I stop to take a picture of a small office complex with its second story front and roof gone. Rain-soaked cardboard boxes fill the exposed floor above a CPA's office. I talk to a carpet-store owner removing samples. He helps me locate where we are on a map. I get a call from a contact at the New Orleans Aquarium. They lost most of their fish when the pumps failed but managed to evacuate the penguins and sea otters to Monterey. I get on a wide boulevard that leads to a roadblock where a police officer checks my press identification. "This is only for emergency vehicles, but go ahead," she says.

4 I drive into Lakeview, one of the large sections of the city that sat underwater for two weeks and will likely have to be bulldozed. It reminds me of war zones I've been in after heavy street fighting. There are trees and power poles down, electric lines hanging, metal sheets and street signs on mud-caked pavement, smashed cars, boats on sidewalks and torn-open houses, all colored in sepia tones of gray and brown. Unable to drive far in the debris chocked streets, I get out of my car, half expecting the sweet, rotting smell of death. Instead, I'm confronted with an equally noxious odor. It's what I'll come to think of as the smell of a dead city, like dried cow pies and mold with a stinging chemical aftertaste. Fine yellow dust starts rising up from under my boots and infiltrating the car. I retreat. The I-10 exit is barricaded, forcing me north again. I do a U-turn at a major roadblock and get chased down by some angry cops. I explain that I'm just following another cop's helpful directions and soon find myself speeding along a near-empty freeway bridge approaching downtown.

5 The rusted ruined roof of the Superdome inspires me to choose an exit and, after getting turned around at a friendly National Guard checkpoint, I'm soon in the deserted streets of the central business district, checking out the rubble piles and empty highrises. A big wind-damaged 'Doubletree' hotel sign reads D UL EE. The French Quarter is still intact with even a few bars open for soldiers, FBI agents and fire fighters. On Canal Street, it looks like a Woodstock for first responders with Red Cross and media satellite trucks, tents and RVs pulled up on the central streetcar median by the Sheraton. Red-bereted troops from the 82nd Airborne cruise by in open-sided trucks, M-4s at the ready in case the undead should appear at sunset. Uptown, some boats lie in the middle of the street, along with cars crushed by a falling wall and a pharmacy trashed by looters. Further on are the smashed homes and muddied boulevards and still-flooded underpasses and cemeteries, abandoned cars and broken levees of an eerily hollow city.

6 In the coming days, I'll travel across this new urban landscape, tracing the brown floodwater line that marks tens of thousands of homes, schools, offices, banks, churches, grocery stores and other ruined structures, including the main sewage plant. I'll cross paths with animal rescue crews, military patrols, utility crews from New York



New Orleans house showing flood line and searcher's graffiti. The zero indicates that no bodies were found in the house. (© David Helvarg)

and Pennsylvania, and body recovery search teams with K-9 dogs using orange spray paint to mark the doors of still unexamined buildings, writing the date and adding a zero for no bodies or numbers where bodies have been found . . . .

### Life After Katrina

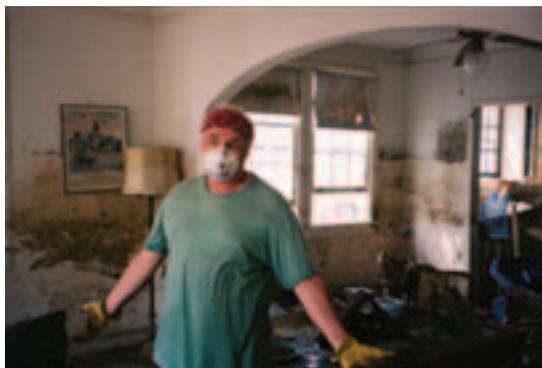
I put up with an AP colleague in the less damaged Algiers Point section of the city just across the Mississippi from where the helicopter assault ship Iwo Jima and Carnival Cruise Line ship Ecstasy are being used to house city employees and relief workers. Blackhawk helicopters fly overhead at sunset while a Red Cross truck down the street offers hot food to the handful of residents still here.

Back in Lakeview, I encounter Bob Chick. Bob snuck past the checkpoints to see if he can salvage anything from his green Cajun Cottage near where the 17th Street floodwall breached.

He hasn't had much luck, "just some tools that might be OK," he says. "I left all my photos on top of a chest of drawers thinking the water wouldn't get that high. They say if you have more than five inches of water in your house for five days it's a loss. We had eight feet for two weeks." He's found one of his cats dead but thinks the other two might have escaped. He invites me to look inside. From the door it's a jumble of furniture, including a sofa, table, twisted carpet, lamps and wooden pieces all covered in black and gray gunk, reeking of mold and rotted cat food. I try not to breathe too deeply. "I had a collection of Jazz Fest T shirts going back to '79 but they're gone." He's wearing a mask, rubber boots and gloves, but still manages to give an expressive shrug of resignation when I take his picture. "I lived in this house 16 years. We'd have been fine if the levee hadn't broke. We'd be moving back right now." . . .

### A Disappeared Town

I catch a ride along the west bank of the Mississippi in Plaquemines Parish south of New Orleans with deputy Sheriff Ken Harvey. This is where towns of several thousand, like Empire and Buras, got washed away and some oil tank farms ruptured. Where the



Bob Chick examines his flood-ruined house in the Lakeview section of New Orleans. (© David Helvarg)

road's cut by water, we drive up on the eroded levee and keep going. There are boats on the land, and houses in the water or washed onto the road or turned into wood-piles. At one point where the levee broke and the water poured through, there's nothing but a field where Diamond, an unincorporated town of about 300 including many trailer-park residents, stood. Those folks never seem to catch a break.

11 I take a picture of an antebellum white mansion in the water along with a floating pickup, a larger truck hanging off a tree, a semi-trailer cab under the bottom of an uplifted house, a speedboat through a picture window, the Buras water tower collapsed next to a wrecked store, shrimp boats on the levee, on the road and in the bushes with military patrols passing by. We stop and stare in awe at a 200-foot barge tossed atop the levee like a bath toy on a tub rim.

12 Approaching the Empire Bridge, I note the white church facing north towards us is still intact and suggest that's a hopeful sign. "It used to face the road," Ken points out. . . .

13 Unfortunately, as I drive east through Mississippi and Alabama I find most of [the] coastal trees and wetlands festooned with plastic like Tibetan prayer flags (as if monks were praying over dead turtles and seabirds). In Biloxi, along with smashed casinos, historic homes and neighborhoods, I find miles of beachfront covered in plastic buckets and insulation, mattresses, furniture, chunks of drywall and Styrofoam pellets that the seabirds are eyeing as potential snack food. I wave down a truck marked "Department of Natural Resources," but the guys inside are from Indiana.

14 I feel like an eco-geek being more concerned about the gulls and wetlands than the lost revenue from the casinos that everyone else seems to be obsessing on. The waterside wing of the new Hard Rock Casino is now a smashed tangle of twisted girders and concrete. I pull over by an 8,000 ton, 600-foot-long casino barge that was pushed half a mile by the storm, landing on Beach Drive. Somewhere underneath its barnacle-encrusted black hull is a historic mansion. Nearby, the Grand Casino barge has taken out much of the stately facade of the six story yellow brick Biloxi Yacht Club before grounding next to it. Another barge landed on the Holiday Inn, where more than 25 people may have been trying to ride out the hurricane. No one's been able to do a body-recovery there yet.

Because Southern Baptist and other religious conservatives objected to ‘land-based’ gambling in Mississippi, much of Biloxi’s wetlands were torn up to make way for these floating casinos. 15

I talk with Phil Sturgeon, a Harrah’s security agent hanging out with some cops from Winter Park, Florida. He’s in jeans and a gray shirt with a toothbrush and pen sticking out the pocket. He tells me the storm surge crested at about 35 feet, at least five feet higher than Camille in ’69. 16

In Waveland, I drive over twisted railroad tracks where the eye of Katrina passed into neighborhoods of jagged wooden debris. A middle-aged couple is trying to clear the drive to the lot where their home once stood. A surfboard leans up against one of the live oaks that seem to have fared better than the houses in between them. 17

“Are you an adjuster?” the woman asks. 18

“No, a reporter.” 19

“Good, because we don’t like adjusters. Nationwide was not on our side.” 20

Apparently they’ve been offered \$1,700 on their \$422,000 home. 21

“At least you’ve got your surfboard,” I tell John, her husband, “Oh, that’s not my surfboard,” he grins, pointing around. “And that’s not my boat, and that’s not my Corvette (buried to its hood in the rubble), and that’s not our roof. We think it might belong to the house at the end of the street.” . . . 22

## Starting Again

I’m back in New Orleans on Canal Street, where the Salvation Army offers me cold water, a baloney sandwich (I decline) and a fruit cocktail. It’s been a long day with the Army Corps of Engineers, who’ve leased helicopters that are dropping 3,000 and 7,000 pound sandbags on the latest breach in the Industrial Canal which has reflooded the Lower Ninth Ward. I enter the Sheraton after getting cleared by muscular Blackwater Security guys in tan and khaki tee shirts and shorts with Glocks on their hips. Another one sits by the elevators checking room IDs. I wonder if being a professional mercenary is good training for concierge duty. I sit by the Pelican bar in the lobby looking out the big three-story glass window at the media RVs and SUVs on the street—feeling as if I’ve been in this hotel before in various war zones and Third World capitals like Managua, Tegucigalpa, and Suva. 23

The Gulf region is now very much like a war zone, only with fewer deaths (about 1,200 bodies recovered at the time of my visit) and far more extensive damage. It also offers many of the same ironies and bizarre moments. Unity Radio announces that if you’re going to tonight’s Louisiana State University football game in Baton Rouge you can return after curfew provided you show your game stubs to the deputies at the roadblocks. 24

Three years ago I made a decision. I’d lost a key person in my life and was trying to decide what to do next. I was considering either going back to war reporting, as George Bush was clearly planning a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq, or turning from journalism to ocean advocacy . . . . Finally, I decided that while we’ll probably always have wars, we may not always have living reefs, wild fish or protective coastal wetlands. 25

What we know we are going to have are more environmental disasters like the Hurricane Season of ’05 linked to fossil-fuel-fired climate change and bad coastal policies driven by saltwater special interests. 26

Still, destruction on a biblical scale also offers Noah-like opportunities for restoration after the flood. There are practical solutions to the dangers we confront, along 27

with models of how to live safely by the sea. Things can be done right in terms of building wisely along the coasts, and advancing social and environmental equity. But it will take a new wave of citizen activism to avoid repetition of old mistakes, with even more dire consequences.

### Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Helvarg states his main idea. If he doesn't state his thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.
2. Helvarg uses headings to divide his essay into sections. What is the subject of the section entitled "Urban Floodplain"? How does this section frame the remainder of the essay?
3. Most of the details in Helvarg's essay focus on the destruction caused by the hurricane and the recovery effort. However, he does give a description of an activity that shows life going on as normal. What is it? Why does Helvarg include this description?
4. Some words are so new they are not yet in dictionaries. Helvarg uses such a word when he describes himself as an "eco-geek" in paragraph 14. Given the context, and the meanings of the root *eco* and the word *geek*, how would you define this word?
5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *consortium* (paragraph 1), *infiltrating* (4), *Woodstock* (5), *salvage* (8), *ruptured* (10), *antebellum* (11), *festooned* (13), *storm surge* (16), *adjuster* (18), and *mercenary* (23).

### Questions About the Writer's Craft

1. **The pattern.** How does Helvarg organize his points in this essay? What transitional words and phrases does he use to keep the reader oriented as his essay progresses?
2. Most of the description in this essay focuses on visual details, but Helvarg also describes some other sensations. Find the passages in which Helvarg describes something other than the sights of the post-Katrina landscape, and evaluate their vividness. What do these passages contribute to the essay?
3. In paragraphs 4 and 24, to what does Helvarg compare the post-Katrina Gulf Coast? How does this analogy help the reader envision the destruction? How does it help express the dominant impression of the essay?
4. Helvarg took the photographs that accompany this essay. Compare the photograph of the marked door on page 176 with the author's description of it in paragraph 6. Does this photograph add to the description in the essay, or is the author's description so vivid that the photograph is unnecessary? Now

compare the photograph of Bob Chick on page 177 with the author’s description of him in paragraph 9. Does this photograph add to the description of Bob in the essay, or is the author’s description so vivid that the photograph is unnecessary? If you were writing this essay, would you include the photographs? If so, how would they affect the way you wrote the essay?

### Writing Assignments Using Description as a Pattern of Development



1. One reason Helvarg’s essay has such an impact is that destruction of the normal Gulf Coast environment was sudden as well as devastating. Not all environmental destruction is so dramatic, however. Find something in your own environment—your home, neighborhood, city, or region—that has been damaged or destroyed by gradual overuse or neglect. For example, your home may have a shabby room, or part of your yard may be overgrown. Or your neighborhood may have a rundown playground or park, or roads full of potholes, or an abandoned building. Select a location that has been neglected or overused, and write an essay in which you describe this damaged environment. Gordon Parks’s descriptions of Brazilian *favelas* in “Flavio’s Home” (page 182) might provide additional inspiration for your own writing.
2. Although severe weather, like Hurricane Katrina, provides good subject matter for description, so does more common, less destructive weather. Think of a day on which the weather was important to you but turned out badly. For example, you might have planned an outdoor event and it rained, or you might have scheduled a trip and it snowed, or you might have worn great new clothes and been too hot or too cold. Write an essay in which you describe this uncooperative weather. Use sensory details and figures of speech to convey your feelings about this day.

### Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development



3. In “The Storm This Time,” the environmental devastation was caused by a natural event. However, much destruction of the environment is caused by people rather than by weather or other natural disasters. Select a place you know that has changed for the worse through human use. For example, you might choose an industrial site, a polluted river or lake, or a park. *Compare* and *contrast* the place as it once was and as it is now. Provide vivid *descriptions* of how the place has changed.



4. The Gulf Coast has a lot of experience with hurricanes; Katrina was just the most destructive one in recent years. Other areas are prone to other



types of natural disasters. Research the destructive weather and other natural events that your area typically experiences. Good places to start are the websites of the Federal Emergency Management Agency ([www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ([www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov)). Then write an essay in which you *classify* the natural disasters that occur in your area and *describe* each type, giving specific *examples* where possible.

### Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point



- Review your pre-reading journal entry about the natural disaster or event that you experienced. Write an essay in which you *describe* its aftermath. How did it *affect* you and others in your community? How did the event change your attitude toward nature? How did it *affect* the way you prepare for future natural emergencies? For another account of a life-changing series of events, see Beth Johnson's "Bombs Bursting in Air" (page 252).

## GORDON PARKS

The son of deeply religious tenant farmers, Gordon Parks (1912–2006) grew up in Kansas knowing both the comforts of familial love and the torments of poverty and racism. A series of odd jobs when he was a teenager gave Parks the means to buy his first camera. So evocative were his photographic studies that both *Life* and *Vogue* brought him on staff, the first black photographer to be hired by the two magazines. Parks's prodigious creativity found expression in filmmaking (*Shaft* in 1971), musical composition (both classical and jazz), fiction, nonfiction, and poetry (titles include *The Learning Tree*, *A Choice of Weapons*, *To Smile in Autumn*, *Arias in Silence*, *Glimpses Toward Infinity*, *A Star for Noon*, and *The Sun Stalker*, published, respectively, in 1986, 1987, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2003). In the following essay, taken from his 1990 autobiography, *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks tells the story behind one of his most memorable photographic works—that of a twelve-year-old boy and his family, living in the slums of Rio de Janeiro.

### Pre-Reading Journal Entry

The problem of poverty has provoked a wide array of proposed solutions. One controversial proposal argues that the government should pay poor women financial incentives to use birth control. What do you think of this proposal? Why is such a policy controversial? Use your journal to explore your thinking on this issue.

## FLAVIO'S HOME

I've never lost my fierce grudge against poverty. It is the most savage of all human afflictions, claiming victims who can't mobilize their efforts against it, who often lack strength to digest what little food they scrounge up to survive. It keeps growing, multiplying, spreading like a cancer. In my wanderings I attack it wherever I can—in barrios, slums and favelas.

Catacumba was the name of the favela<sup>1</sup> where I found Flavio da Silva. It was wickedly hot. The noon sun baked the mud-rot of the wet mountainside. Garbage and human excrement clogged the open sewers snaking down the slopes. José Gallo, a *Life* reporter, and I rested in the shade of a jacaranda tree halfway up Rio de Janeiro's most infamous deathtrap. Below and above us were a maze of shacks, but in the distance alongside the beach stood the gleaming white homes of the rich.

Breathing hard, balancing a tin of water on his head, a small boy climbed toward us. He was miserably thin, naked but for filthy denim shorts. His legs resembled sticks covered with skin and screwed into his feet. Death was all over him, in his sunken eyes, cheeks and jaundiced coloring. He stopped for breath, coughing, his chest heaving as water slopped over his bony shoulders. Then jerking sideways like a mechanical toy, he smiled a smile I will never forget. Turning, he went on up the mountainside.

The detailed *Life* assignment in my back pocket was to find an impoverished father with a family, to examine his earnings, political leanings, religion, friends, dreams and frustrations. I had been sent to do an essay on poverty. This frail boy bent under his load said more to me about poverty than a dozen poor fathers. I touched Gallo, and we got up and followed the boy to where he entered a shack near the top of the mountainside. It was a leaning crumpled place of old plankings with a rusted tin roof. From inside we heard the babblings of several children. José knocked. The door opened and the boy stood smiling with a bawling naked baby in his arms.

Still smiling, he whacked the baby's rump, invited us in and offered us a box to sit on. The only other recognizable furniture was a sagging bed and a broken baby's crib. Flavio was twelve, and with Gallo acting as interpreter, he introduced his younger brothers and sisters: "Mario, the bad one; Baptista, the good one; Albia, Isabel and the baby Zacarias." Two other girls burst into the shack, screaming and pounding on one another. Flavio jumped in and parted them. "Shut up, you two." He pointed at the older girl. "That's Maria, the nasty one." She spit in his face. He smacked her and pointed to the smaller sister. "That's Luzia. She thinks she's pretty."

Having finished the introductions, he went to build a fire under the stove—a rusted, bent top of an old gas range resting on several bricks. Beneath it was a piece of tin that caught the hot coals. The shack was about six by ten feet. Its grimy walls were a patchwork of misshapen boards with large gaps between them, revealing other shacks below stilted against the slopes. The floor, rotting under layers of grease and dirt, caught shafts of light slanting down through spaces in the roof. A large hole in the far corner served as a toilet. Beneath that hole was the sloping mountainside. Pockets of poverty in New York's Harlem, on Chicago's south side, in Puerto Rico's infamous El Fungito seemed pale by comparison. None of them had prepared me for this one in the favela of Catacumba.

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<sup>1</sup>Slums on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, inhabited by seven hundred thousand people (editors' note).

- 7 Flavio washed rice in a large dishpan, then washed Zacarias's feet in the same water. But even that dirty water wasn't to be wasted. He tossed in a chunk of lye soap and ordered each child to wash up. When they were finished he splashed the water over the dirty floor, and, dropping to his knees, he scrubbed the planks until the black suds sank in. Just before sundown he put beans on the stove to warm, then left, saying he would be back shortly. "Don't let them burn," he cautioned Maria. "If they do and Poppa beats me, you'll get it later." Maria, happy to get at the licking spoon, switched over and began to stir the beans. Then slyly she dipped out a spoonful and swallowed them. Luzia eyed her. "I see you. I'm going to tell on you for stealing our supper."
- 8 Maria's eyes flashed anger. "You do and I'll beat you, you little bitch." Luzia threw a stick at Maria and fled out the door. Zacarias dropped off to sleep. Mario, the bad one, slouched in a corner and sucked his thumb. Isabel and Albia sat on the floor clinging to each other with a strange tenderness. Isabel held onto Albia's hair and Albia clutched at Isabel's neck. They appeared frozen in an act of quiet violence.
- 9 Flavio returned with wood, dumped it beside the stove and sat down to rest for a few minutes, then went down the mountain for more water. It was dark when he finally came back, his body sagging from exhaustion. No longer smiling, he suddenly had the look of an old man and by now we could see that he kept the family going. In the closed torment of that pitiful shack, he was waging a hopeless battle against starvation. The da Silva children were living in a coffin.
- 10 When at last the parents came in, Gallo and I seemed to be part of the family. Flavio had already told them we were there. "Gordunn Americano!" Luzia said, pointing at me. José, the father, viewed us with skepticism. Nair, his pregnant wife, seemed tired beyond speaking. Hardly acknowledging our presence, she picked up Zacarias, placed him on her shoulder and gently patted his behind. Flavio scurried about like a frightened rat, his silence plainly expressing the fear he held of his father. Impatiently, José da Silva waited for Flavio to serve dinner. He sat in the center of the bed with his legs crossed beneath him, frowning, waiting. There were only three tin plates. Flavio filled them with black beans and rice, then placed them before his father. José da Silva tasted them, chewed for several moments, then nodded his approval for the others to start. Only he and Nair had spoons; the children ate with their fingers. Flavio ate off the top of a coffee can. Afraid to offer us food, he edged his rice and beans toward us, gesturing for us to take some. We refused. He smiled, knowing we understood.
- 11 Later, when we got down to the difficult business of obtaining permission from José da Silva to photograph his family, he hemmed and hawed, wallowing in the pleasant authority of the decision maker. He finally gave in, but his manner told us that he expected something in return. As we were saying good night Flavio began to cough violently. For a few moments his lungs seemed to be tearing apart. I wanted to get away as quickly as possible. It was cowardly of me, but the bluish cast of his skin beneath the sweat, the choking and spitting were suddenly unbearable.
- 12 Gallo and I moved cautiously down through the darkness trying not to appear as strangers. The Catacumba was no place for strangers after sundown. Desperate criminals hid out there. To hunt them out, the police came in packs, but only in daylight. Gallo cautioned me. "If you get caught up here after dark it's best to stay at the da Silvas' until morning." As we drove toward the city the large white buildings of the rich loomed up. The world behind us seemed like a bad dream. I had already decided to get the boy Flavio to a doctor, and as quickly as possible.
- 13 The plush lobby of my hotel on the Copacabana waterfront was crammed with people in formal attire. With the stink of the favela in my clothes, I hurried to the

elevator hoping no passengers would be aboard. But as the door was closing a beautiful girl in a white lace gown stepped in. I moved as far away as possible. Her escort entered behind her, swept her into his arms and they indulged in a kiss that lasted until they exited on the next floor. Neither of them seemed to realize that I was there. The room I returned to seemed to be oversized; the da Silva shack would have fitted into one corner of it. The steak dinner I had would have fed the da Silvas for three days.

Billowing clouds blanketed Mount Corcovado as we approached the favela the following morning. Suddenly the sun burst through, silhouetting Cristo Redentor, the towering sculpture of Christ with arms extended, its back turned against the slopes of Catacumba. The square at the entrance to the favela bustled with hundreds of favelados. Long lines waited at the sole water spigot. Others waited at the only toilet on the entire mountain-side. Women, unable to pay for soap, beat dirt from their wash at laundry tubs. Men, burdened with lumber, picks and shovels and tools important to their existence threaded their way through the noisy throngs. Dogs snarled, barked and fought. Woodsmoke mixed with the stench of rotting things. In the mist curling over the higher paths, columns of favelados climbed like ants with wood and water cans on their heads. 14

We came upon Nair bent over her tub of wash. She wiped away sweat with her apron and managed a smile. We asked for her husband and she pointed to a tiny shack off to her right. This was José's store, where he sold kerosene and bleach. He was sitting on a box, dozing. Sensing our presence, he awoke and commenced complaining about his back. "It kills me. The doctors don't help because I have no money. Always talk and a little pink pill that does no good. Ah, what is to become of me?" A woman came to buy bleach. He filled her bottle. She dropped a few coins and as she walked away his eyes stayed on her backside until she was out of sight. Then he was complaining about his back again. 15

"How much do you earn a day?" Gallo asked. 16

"Seventy-five cents. On a good day maybe a dollar." 17

"Why aren't the kids in school?" 18

"I don't have money for the clothes they need to go to school." 19

"Has Flavio seen a doctor?" 20

He pointed to a one-story wooden building. "That's the clinic right there. They're mad because I built my store in front of their place. I won't tear it down so they won't help my kids. Talk, talk, talk and pink pills." We bid him good-bye and started climbing, following mud trails, jutting rock, slime-filled holes and shack after shack propped against the slopes on shaky pilings. We sidestepped a dead cat covered with maggots. I held my breath for an instant, only to inhale the stench of human excrement and garbage. Bare feet and legs with open sores climbed above us—evils of the terrible soil they trod every day, and there were seven hundred thousand or more afflicted people in favelas around Rio alone. Touching me, Gallo pointed to Flavio climbing ahead of us carrying firewood. He stopped to glance at a man descending with a small coffin on his shoulder. A woman and a small child followed him. When I lifted my camera, grumbling erupted from a group of men sharing beer beneath a tree. 21

"They're threatening," Gallo said. "Keep moving. They fear cameras. Think they're evil eyes bringing bad luck." Turning to watch the funeral procession, Flavio caught sight of us and waited. When we took the wood from him he protested, saying he was used to carrying it. He gave in when I hung my camera around his neck. Then, beaming, he climbed on ahead of us. 22

The fog had lifted and in the crisp morning light the shack looked more squalid. Inside the kids seemed even noisier. Flavio smiled and spoke above their racket. "Someday I want 23

to live in a real house on a real street with good pots and pans and a bed with sheets.” He lit the fire to warm leftovers from the night before. Stale rice and beans—for breakfast and supper. No lunch; midday eating was out of the question. Smoke rose and curled up through the ceiling’s cracks. An air current forced it back, filling the place and Flavio’s lungs with fumes. A coughing spasm doubled him up, turned his skin blue under viscous sweat. I handed him a cup of water, but he waved it away. His stomach tightened as he dropped to his knees. His veins throbbed as if they would burst. Frustrated, we could only watch; there was nothing we could do to help. Strangely, none of his brothers or sisters appeared to notice. None of them stopped doing whatever they were doing. Perhaps they had seen it too often. After five interminable minutes it was over, and he got to his feet, smiling as though it had all been a joke. “Maria, it’s time for Zacarias to be washed!”

24 “But there’s rice in the pan!”

25 “Dump it in another pan—and don’t spill water!”

26 Maria picked up Zacarias, who screamed, not wanting to be washed. Irritated, Maria gave him a solid smack on his bare bottom. Flavio stepped over and gave her the same, then a free-for-all started with Flavio, Maria and Mario slinging fists at one another. Mario got one in the eye and fled the shack calling Flavio a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Zacarias wound up on the floor sucking his thumb and escaping his washing. The black bean and rice breakfast helped to get things back to normal. Now it was time to get Flavio to the doctor.

27 The clinic was crowded with patients—mothers and children covered with open sores, a paralytic teenager, a man with an ear in a state of decay, an aged blind couple holding hands in doubled darkness. Throughout the place came wailings of hunger and hurt. Flavio sat nervously between Gallo and me. “What will the doctor do to me?” he kept asking.

28 “We’ll see. We’ll wait and see.”

29 In all, there were over fifty people. Finally, after two hours, it was Flavio’s turn and he broke out in a sweat, though he smiled at the nurse as he passed through the door to the doctor’s office. The nurse ignored it; in this place of misery, smiles were unexpected.

30 The doctor, a large, beady-eyed man with a crew cut, had an air of impatience. Hardly acknowledging our presence, he began to examine the frightened Flavio. “Open your mouth. Say ‘Ah.’ Jump up and down. Breathe out. Take off those pants. Bend over. Stand up. Cough. Cough louder. Louder.” He did it all with such cold efficiency. Then he spoke to us in English so Flavio wouldn’t understand. “This little chap has just about had it.” My heart sank. Flavio was smiling, happy to be over with the examination. He was handed a bottle of cough medicine and a small box of pink pills, then asked to step outside and wait.

31 “This the da Silva kid?”

32 “Yes.”

33 “What’s your interest in him?”

34 “We want to help in some way.”

35 “I’m afraid you’re too late. He’s wasted with bronchial asthma, malnutrition and, I suspect, tuberculosis. His heart, lungs and teeth are all bad.” He paused and wearily rubbed his forehead. “All that at the ripe old age of twelve. And these hills are packed with other kids just as bad off. Last year ten thousand died from dysentery alone. But what can we do? You saw what’s waiting outside. It’s like this every day. There’s hardly enough money to buy aspirin. A few wealthy people who care help keep us going.” He was quiet for a moment. “Maybe the right climate, the right diet, and constant medical care might . . .” He stopped and shook his head. “Naw. That poor lad’s finished. He might last another year—maybe not.” We thanked him and left.

36 “What did he say?” Flavio asked as we scaled the hill.

- 37 “Everything’s going to be all right, Flav. There’s nothing to worry about.”  
 38 It had clouded over again by the time we reached the top. The rain swept in, clearing the mountain of Corcovado. The huge Christ figure loomed up again with clouds swirling around it. And to it I said a quick prayer for the boy walking beside us. He smiled as if he had read my thoughts. “Papa says ‘El Cristo’ has turned his back on the favela.”  
 39 “You’re going to be all right, Flavio.”  
 40 “I’m not scared of death. It’s my brothers and sisters I worry about. What would they do?”  
 41 “You’ll be all right, Flavio.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Parks’s photo-essay on Flavio generated an unprecedented response from *Life* readers. Indeed, they sent so much money to the da Silvas that the family was able to leave the *favela* for better living conditions. Parks brought Flavio to the United States for medical treatment, and the boy’s health was restored. However, Flavio’s story didn’t have an unqualified happy ending. Although he overcame his illness and later married and had a family, Flavio continuously fantasized about returning to the United States, convinced that only by returning to America could he improve his life. His obsession eventually eroded the promise of his life in Brazil (editors’ note).

### Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection’s thesis (or dominant impression)? Locate the sentence(s) in which Parks states his main idea. If he doesn’t state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.
2. What is Flavio’s family like? Why does Flavio have so much responsibility in the household?
3. What are some of the distinctive characteristics of Flavio’s neighborhood and home?
4. What seems to be the basis of Flavio’s fear of giving food to Parks and Gallo? What did Parks and Gallo understand that led them to refuse?
5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *barrios* (paragraph 1), *jacaranda* (2), *jaundiced* (3), and *spigot* (14).

### Questions About the Writer’s Craft

1. **The pattern.** Without stating it explicitly, Parks conveys a dominant impression about Flavio. What is that impression? What details create it?
2. **Other patterns.** When relating how Flavio performs numerous household tasks, Parks describes several *processes*. How do these step-by-step explanations reinforce Parks’s dominant impression of Flavio?
3. Parks provides numerous sensory specifics to depict Flavio’s home. Look closely, for example, at the description in paragraph 6. Which words and

phrases convey strong sensory images? How does Parks use transitions to help the reader move from one sensory image to another?

4. Paragraph 13 includes a scene that occurs in Parks’s hotel. What’s the effect of this scene? What does it contribute to the essay that the most detailed description of the *favela* could not?

### Writing Assignments Using Description as a Pattern of Development



1. Parks paints a wrenching portrait of a person who remains vibrant and hopeful even though he is suffering greatly—from physical illness, poverty, overwork, and worry. Write a description about someone you know who has shown courage or other positive qualities during a time of personal trouble. Include, as Parks does, plentiful details about the person’s appearance and behavior so that you don’t have to state directly what you admire about the person. Maya Angelou’s “Sister Flowers” (page 167) shows how one writer conveys the special quality of an admirable individual.
2. Parks presents an unforgettable description of the *favela* and the living conditions there. Write an essay about a region, city, neighborhood, or building that also projects an overwhelming negative feeling. Include only those details that convey your dominant impression, and provide—as Parks does—vivid sensory language to convey your attitude toward your subject.

### Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development



3. The doctor reports that a few wealthy people contribute to the clinic, but the reader can tell from the scene in Parks’s hotel that most people are insensitive to those less fortunate. Write an essay *describing* a specific situation that you feel reflects people’s tendency to ignore the difficulties of others. Analyze why people distance themselves from the problem; then present specific *steps* that could be taken to sensitize them to the situation. Charmie Gholson’s “Charity Display?” (page 220) and Diane Cole’s “Don’t Just Stand There” (page 333) will provide some perspective on the way people deal with the pain of others.
4. Although Parks celebrates Flavio’s generosity of spirit, the writer also *illustrates* the brutalizing effect of an impoverished environment. Prepare an essay in which you also show that setting, architecture, even furnishings can influence mood and behavior. You may, as Parks does, focus on the corrosive effect of a negative environment, or you may write about the nurturing effect of a positive environment. Either way, provide vivid *descriptive* details of the

environment you're considering. Possible subjects include a park in the middle of a city, a bus terminal, and a college library.

### Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point



5. Write an essay explaining why you think impoverished women should—or should not—be paid financial incentives to practice birth control. To help define your position, review your pre-reading journal entry, and interview classmates, friends, and family members to get their opinions. Consider supplementing this informal research with material gathered in the library and/or on the Internet. Weigh all the evidence carefully before formulating your position.



### ADDITIONAL WRITING TOPICS: DESCRIPTION

#### General Assignments

Write an essay using description to develop one of the following topics. Remember that an effective description focuses on a dominant impression and arranges details in a way that best supports that impression. Your details—vivid and appealing to the senses—should be carefully chosen so that the essay isn't overburdened with material of secondary importance. When writing, keep in mind that varied sentence structure and imaginative figures of speech are ways to make a descriptive piece compelling.

1. A favorite item of clothing
2. A school as a young child might see it
3. A hospital room you have visited or stayed in
4. An individualist's appearance
5. A coffee shop, bus shelter, newsstand, or some other small place
6. A parade or victory celebration
7. A banana, squash, or other fruit or vegetable
8. A particular drawer in a desk or bureau
9. A houseplant
10. A "media event"
11. A dorm room

12. An elderly person
13. An attractive man or woman
14. A prosthetic device or wheelchair
15. A TV, film, or music celebrity
16. A student lounge
17. A once-in-a-lifetime event
18. The inside of something, such as a cave, boat, car, shed, or machine
19. A friend, roommate, or other person you know well
20. An essential gadget or a useless gadget

### Assignments with a Specific Purpose, Audience, and Point of View

#### On Campus

1. For an audience of incoming first-year students, prepare a speech describing registration day at your college. Use specific details to help prepare students for the actual event. Choose an adjective that represents your dominant impression of the experience, and keep that word in mind as you write.
2. Your college has decided to replace an old campus structure (for example, a dorm or dining hall) with a new version. Write a letter of protest to the administration, describing the place so vividly and appealingly that its value and need for preservation are unquestionable.
3. As a staff member of the campus newspaper, you have been asked to write a weekly column of social news and gossip. For your first column, you plan to describe a recent campus event—a dance, party, concert, or other social activity. With a straightforward or tongue-in-cheek tone, describe where the event was held, the appearance of the people who attended, and so on.

#### At Home or in the Community

4. As a subscriber to a community-wide dating service, you've been asked to submit a description of the kind of person you'd like to meet. Describe your ideal date. Focus on specifics about physical appearance, personal habits, character traits, and interests.
5. As a resident of a particular town, you're angered by the appearance of a certain spot and by the activities that take place there. Write a letter to the town council, describing in detail the undesirable nature of this place (an adult bookstore, a bar, a bus station, a neglected park or beach). End with some suggestions about ways to improve the situation.

**On the Job**

6. You've noticed a recurring problem in your workplace and want to bring it to the attention of your boss, who typically is inattentive. Write a letter to your boss describing the problem. Your goal is not to provide solutions, but rather, to provide vivid description—complete with sensory details—so that your boss can no longer deny the problem.

For additional writing, reading, and research resources, go to [www.mycomplab.com](http://www.mycomplab.com) and choose **Nadell/Langan/Comodromos' *The Longman Writer*, 7/e.**