



Writing Center

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Essays: THE DESCRIPTION ESSAY - Example

When you describe someone or something, you give a picture in words to your readers. To make the word picture as vivid and real as possible, you must observe and record specific details that appeal to your readers' senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch). More than any other type of essay, a descriptive paper needs sharp, colorful details. Here is a sentence in which almost none of the senses is used: "In the window was a fan." In contrast, here is a description rich in sense impressions: "The blades of the rusty window fan clattered

and whirled as they blew out a stream of warm, soggy air." Sense impressions here include sight (rusty window fan, whirled), hearing (clattered), and touch (warm, soggy air). The vividness and sharpness provided by the sensory details give us a clear picture of the fan and enable us to share in the writer's experience.

What follows is a description of one place. Note the writer's use of sharp, sensory details.

The Diner at Midnight

I've been in lots of diners, and they've always seemed to be warm, busy, friendly, happy places. That's why, on a recent Monday night, I stopped in a diner for a cup of coffee. I was returning home after an all-day car trip and needed something to help me make the last forty-five miles. A diner at midnight, however, was not the place I had expected. It was different - and lonely.

My Toyota pulled to a halt in front of the dreary gray aluminum building that looked like an old railroad car. A half-lit neon sign sputtered the message, "Fresh baked goods daily," on the surface of the rain-slick parking lot. Only a half-dozen cars and a battered pickup were scattered around the lot. An empty paper coffee cup made a hollow scraping sound as it rolled in small circles on one cement step close to the diner entrance. I pulled hard at the balky glass door, and it banged shut behind me.

The diner was quiet when I entered. As there was no hostess on duty, only the faint odor of stale grease and the dull hum of an empty refrigerated pastry case greeted me. I looked around for a place to sit. The outside walls were lined with empty booths which squatted back to back in their orange vinyl upholstery. On each speckled beige-and-gold table were the usual accessories. The kitchen hid mysteriously behind two swinging metal doors with round windows. I glanced through these windows but could see only a part of the large, apparently

deserted cooking area. Facing the kitchen doors was the counter. I approached the length of Formica and slid onto one of the cracked vinyl seats bolted in soldier-like straight lines in front of it.

The people in the diner seemed as lonely as the place itself. Two men in rumpled work shirts sat at the counter, on stools several feet apart, staring wearily into cups of coffee and smoking cigarettes. Their faces sprouted what looked like daylong stubbles of beard. I figured they were probably shift workers who, for some reason, didn't want to go home. Three stools down from the workers, I spotted a thin young man with a mop of black, curly hair. He was dressed in brown Levi cords with a checked Western-style shirt unbuttoned at the neck. He wore a blank expression as he picked at a plate of limp french fries. I wondered if he had just returned from a disappointing date. At the one occupied booth was a middle-aged couple. They hadn't gotten any food yet. He was staring off into space, idly tapping his spoon against the table, while she drew aimless parallel lines on her paper napkin with a bent dinner fork. Neither said a word to the other.

Finally, a tired-looking waitress approached me with her thick order pad. I ordered the coffee, but I wanted to drink it fast and get out of there. My car, and the solitary miles ahead of me, would be lonely. But they wouldn't be as lonely as that diner at midnight.