

DESCRIPTION: WRITTEN SPATIAL ASSOCIATIONS

- The most common spatial association involves the relationship of objects from left to right, behind, above and below.
- Description also involves the recording of first-hand observations.
- When writing descriptive paragraphs, you must put into words what you have seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or felt. You must use your senses and emotions. Description teaches honesty because it makes us stay close to what we've observed. You must become aware of what is real and what is truly there.

There are two types of description: Concrete (objective) and Abstract/Impressionistic (subjective).

- **Concrete descriptions** present pictures through words or people, places, or things, as we using our senses perceive them.
- **Abstract/Impressionistic description** deals with the presentation of abstractions – imaginings or emotions – that which is imagined or felt.

When you write either type of description, you should write about that which you have observed repeatedly or intensely.

Of both types of description, Elizabeth McMahan writes:

Most authorities on writing suggest that you can organize descriptions spatially—top to bottom, left to right, near to far, etc. This is true. You can describe your cat from nose to tail. But where do you include the texture of the fur, the stripes or spots, the color of the paws? And what about the meow? And the various ways the cat moves? Good description involves working a number of details into some spatial arrangement.

What you need to do first is look, really *look* at what you plan to describe. Or, if you're writing from memory, choose something that you once observed carefully enough to allow you to recount the exact shapes, the lights and shades, the textures, maybe even the sounds and smells. But don't include everything, or you may overwhelm your readers. Select the details that will best let your readers perceive what you're describing. Then search your mind for the precise words that will convey that impression.

Notice how Mark Twain does both in this childhood memory from his *Autobiography*:

I can see the farm yet with perfect clearness. I can see all its belongings, all its detail: the family room of the house with a "trundle" bed in one corner and a spinning-wheel in another, a wheel whose rising and falling wail, heard from a distance, was the mournfulest of all sounds to me and made me homesick and low-spirited and filled my atmosphere with the wandering spirits of the dead; the vast fireplace, piled high on winter nights with flaming hickory logs from whose ends a sugary sap bubbled out but did not go to waste, for we scraped it off and

ate it; the lazy cat spread out on the rough hearthstones; the drowsy dogs braced against the jambs and blinking; my aunt in one chimney corner, knitting; my uncle in the other, smoking his corn-cob pipe; the slick and carpetless oak floor faintly mirroring the dancing flame-tongues and freckled with black indentations where fire-coals had popped out and died a leisurely death; half a dozen children romping in the background twilight. . . .

A contemporary master of description, Annie Dillard, allows us both to see and hear the ocean through her selection of details and choice of words in this brief passage from her article "Innocence in the Galápagos," in *Harper's* magazine (May 1975):

The white beach was a havoc of lava boulders black as clinkers, sleek with spray, and lambent as brass in the sinking sun. To our left a dozen sea lions were bodysurfing in the long green combers that rise, translucent, half a mile offshore. When the combers broke, the shoreline boulders rolled. I could feel the roar in the rough rock on which I sat; I could hear the grate inside each long back sweeping sea, the rumble of a rolled million rocks muffled in splashes and the seethe before the next wave's heave.

Most of us won't match this quality of description, but we can try and might eventually achieve it. Remember to observe carefully, select telling details, and search for the exact words.