

Writing effective descriptions

Remember to plan – think of some ideas before you start writing your description.

Think about what can be:

seen	touched	heard	tasted	felt
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Time and setting of the description and how any characters depicted feel about the situation are also important.

Look at the extract below from Franz Kafka's story 'Metamorphosis' and underline wherever Kafka has used one of the five senses or mentioned time, setting or feelings:

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

...

Gregor then turned to look out the window at the weather. Drops of rain could be heard hitting the pane, which made him feel quite sad. "How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense", he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position. However hard he threw himself onto his left, he always rolled back to where he was. He must have tried it a hundred times, shut his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at the floundering legs, and only stopped when he began to feel a mild, dull pain there that he had never felt before.

...

He was still hurriedly thinking and through, unable to decide to get out of the bed, when the clock struck quarter to seven. There was a cautious knock at the door near his head. "Gregor", somebody called - it was his mother - "it's quarter to seven. Didn't you want to go somewhere?" That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could hardly be recognised as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the hearer unsure whether he had heard properly or not. Gregor had wanted to give a full answer and explain everything, but in the circumstances contented himself with saying: "Yes, mother, yes, thank-you, I'm getting up now."

Look at the extract below which has already been annotated.

Sight

Sound

Touch or movement

Smell

Taste

Time

Setting

Feelings

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

...

Gregor then turned to look out the window at the dreary weather. Drops of rain could be heard hitting the pane, which made him feel quite sad. "How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense", he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position. However hard he threw himself onto his right, he always rolled back to where he was. He must have tried it a hundred times, shut his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at the floundering legs, and only stopped when he began to feel a mild, dull pain there that he had never felt before.

...

He was still hurriedly thinking all this through, unable to decide to get out of the bed, when the clock struck quarter seven. There was a cautious knock at the door near his head. "Gregor", somebody called - it was his mother - "It's quarter to seven. Didn't you want to go somewhere?" That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could be recognised as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the speaker unsure whether he had heard properly or not. Gregor had wanted to give a full answer and explain everything, but in the circumstances contented himself with saying: "Yes, mother, yes, thank-you, I'm getting up now."

Notice how much of Kafka's writing is describing the senses, feelings, time or setting – he does not vaguely tell the reader that, 'Gregor woke up and had turned into a beetle and screamed at how horrid he felt and wondered what he would do next ...' as it would not seem anywhere near as grotesque as the description he gives us of Gregor becoming, 'horrible vermin' with his belly, 'divided into sections' and his, 'many legs' waving about 'helplessly'.

Now imagine you have to write the following:

Describe a nightmare world

You know now from reading the extract from 'Metamorphosis' that the nightmare world does not have to be futuristic. It can be that you describe being stuck somewhere such as in an animal's body; inside a computer; inside a shop etc. It could be that you describe a nightmarish vision of today.

Remember to have a strong, effective opening sentence and start as if the place exists or you are there. You are not doing this if you begin, 'I am going to describe a nightmare world by telling you about the day I woke up as a beetle'.

Focus on small details like Kafka does rather than writing vaguely about a, 'horrible place that isn't very nice.'

Look at the following opening lines and see if any of these appeal to you. Continue the description of the nightmare world using one of them:

1. When I woke up ...
2. I looked around bewildered ...
3. There's nothing so frightening as the unknown so imagine everyone's horror when ...
4. There's a noise I can't identify and it's dark so I can't see either. I reach my arm out wondering if my alarm clock is malfunctioning but I can't find it and instead ...
5. The cars were lined up, one behind the other, each spluttering fumes which could be seen rising into the air. Every now and again the vehicles would move forward, no more than three feet. Because of the fumes the air above was yellowish; the cloud sat about six feet above the cars in a thick layer like dirty cotton wool so dense it wasn't possible for sunlight to penetrate it.