

4 Brushstroke Tips for More Descriptive Sentences





Readers want a picture – something to see, not just a paragraph to read.

It was winter. Everything was frozen and white with snow. Snow had fallen from the sky for days.



Mossflower lay deep in the grip of midwinter beneath a sky of leaden gray that showed tinges of scarlet and orange on the horizon. A cold blanket of snow draped the landscape, covering the flatlands to the west. Snow was everywhere, filling the ditches, drifting high against the hedgerows, making path invisible, smoothing the contours of the earth in its white embrace.



Tip 1: Painting with Participles

Participle = an -ing verb form

Add a participle to the beginning or end of a sentence.

Okay: The diamond-back water snake attacked its prey.

Better: **Hissing, slithering, and coiling**, the diamond-back water snake attacked its prey.

Even better: **Hissing its forked red tongue and coiling its cold body**, the diamond-back water snake attacked its prey.

Tip 1: Painting with Participles

Participle = an -ing verb form

tingling in her arms / holding onto our shoulders to cross the ice street / pushing up his glasses / beating out sparks / kicking tufts of grass / wiping the tears away with her handkerchief / rubbing his hair / daring all / heading deeper into the cave / sobbing loudly / hearing the animals pursuing her / blocking my path / dragging a fishing hole behind him / curling around the roots of the trees / sinking his teeth into it / snarling and growling / gasping painfully for air / skulking furry forms / starving huskies

Samples from great writers!

Tip 1: Painting with Participles

Your turn! Add a participle or participle phrase to the beginning or end of each sentence below to help make the image complete.

My kitten purred.

She froze.

The clown smiled.

The baby cried.

The Olympic sprinter crossed the finish line.

Tip 2: Zooming In with Absolutes

Absolute = a 2-word combination of
noun + -ing verb

Okay	Better!
The cat climbed the tree.	Claws digging, feet kicking, the cat climbed the tree.
The mountain climber edged along the cliff.	The mountain climber edged along the cliff, hands shaking, feet trembling.

Tip 2: Zooming In with Absolutes

Absolute = a 2-word combination of
noun + -ing verb

fur rising on his back / night bugs dancing over his head / horror flooding her face / sheds, flashing into flame / head resembling a man's / breath coming in jagged gasps / feet crunching on the desert floor / images jumping from one camera to the next / aquarium, bubbling green-blue in the corner / blade, glinting in the sun / worm swaying its blind head to and fro / lips writhing and snarling / jaws clipping together / eyes diabolically gleaming / muscles writhing and knotting like live things under his silky fur / hinge creaking in the wind / tongues of the flame swaying and writing with the gusts of the dying storm

Samples from great writers!

Tip 2: Zooming In with Absolutes

The mummy moved.

The diver jumped.

The kitten yawned.

The coffin opened.

The engine died.

Tip 3: Expanding with Appositives

Appositive = a noun that re-
defines or adds a second image to
a preceding noun.

Okay: The raccoon enjoys eating turtle eggs.

Better: The raccoon, **a scavenger**, enjoys eating turtle eggs.

Best: The raccoon, **a midnight scavenger who roams lake shorelines**, enjoys eating turtle eggs.

Tip 3: Expanding with Appositives

Appositive = a noun that re-defines or adds a second image to a preceding noun.

Zeebo, the garbage collector / twilight world, a world where babies slept / noises, the clangorous din of the Martians / the crash of the falling houses / a roar, a terrifying loud sound / a lone hunter, an individualist / the raptor, a white shadow / a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed / an oath from Perrault—the resounding impact of a club upon a body frame / haughty suspicion, an expression common to Maycomb County.

Samples from great writers!

Tip 3: Expanding with Appositives

Your turn! Fill in an appositive (renaming word or phrase) in each sentence.

The volcano, _____, spewed forth lava and ash.

The old woman, _____, stared blankly.

The river, _____, flowed quietly.

The spider, _____, crawled up my arm.

James, _____, fell asleep in class.

Tip 4: Mixing up the order of adjectives

Instead of the same old adjective + noun form, try something new.

Boring and list-y	Better!
The large, red-eyed, angry bull moose charged the intruder.	The large bull moose, red-eyed and angry , charged the intruder.
Suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came a clear, resonant, and unmistakable sound to my ears.	Suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came a clear sound to my ears, resonant and unmistakable .

Tip 4: Mixing up the order of adjectives

You can do it, too! Rewrite each sentence below by changing up the order of the adjectives:

The old and wrinkled woman smiled upon her grandson.

The tall, dark, and handsome prince could not spell his own name.

The twisted and tormented boxer felt no compassion for his contender.

The tired and hungry cheetah stared at the gazelle