

Writing a Descriptive Essay

“Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” ~Emily Dickinson

How can we follow Emily Dickinson’s advice and tell the truth in a narrative essay, but tell it slant?

In her memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, author Jeanette Winterson offers an example of slant writing when describing her mother on the first page of her book.

[Read Jeanette Winterson’s description of her mother.](#) Mrs. Winterson, and consider the following questions:

- What strikes you about Winterson’s description?
- What does it tell us about her mother?
- What does it tell us about Jeanette and her relationship with her mother?

What are the essential qualities of good descriptive writing? How does Winterson convey this portrait of her mother with such clarity?

- Descriptive writing includes vivid sensory details that create an image in the reader’s mind and appeals (when appropriate) to all of the reader’s senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Descriptive writing also lends language to the feelings the person, place, or thing being describes evokes in the writer.
- Descriptive writing often makes use of figurative language such as analogies, similes, and metaphors to enhance imagery. It should create a picture in the reader’s mind.
- Descriptive writing uses precise language. General adjectives, nouns, and passive verbs weaken the narrative. Use specific adjectives and nouns and strong action verbs to bring your story to life.
- Descriptive writing is organized. Some ways to organize descriptive writing include: chronologically (time), spatially (location), and order of importance. When describing a person, you might begin with a physical description, followed by how that person thinks, feels, or acts.

Writing Prompt: Write a one-page descriptive essay in the style of Jeanette Winterson describing your mother or a mother figure. Consider how you will include sensory detail, figurative language, imagery, precision, and organization in this essay.

- Can be adapted to any relationship you'd like to explore! Describe your first crush, your future self, your best friend, your spouse, yourself at 10. Be creative.