Evaluating and Improving Student Writing
Using Description to Develop Characters, Events, and Experiences in American Literature & Composition
Module Objectives

• Identify student expectations for using description in narrative writing according to the standards
• Explain why and how to effectively use description in narrative writing
• Explore the use of description in authentic mentor texts and student exemplars
## Use of Description in Narrative Writing

**Georgia Standards of Excellence, American Literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>American Literature &amp; Composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELAGSEW3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.</td>
<td>b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, <strong>description</strong>, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters</td>
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Use of Sensory Language in Narrative Writing
Georgia Standards of Excellence, American Literature

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<td>ELAGSEW3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.</td>
<td>d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and <strong>sensory language</strong> to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.</td>
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Skill of Focus
Use of Description

In narratives, good writers use description to help the reader imagine the characters, settings, and events.

Good writers also use description within dialogue, which heightens the effectiveness of this technique.

Using description requires the writer to use the five senses.
Skill of Focus

Use of Description

Ineffective use of description:

*The kids at my new school were friendly.*

Effective use description:

*I stepped into the classroom. I worried that I would not make new friends in my class. After the teacher introduced me, she asked me to tell the class where I was from. “I moved to Georgia from India,” I said. “This is my first time in the United States.” Everyone in the class smiled at me with shining eyes. “Welcome to our class,” a girl in the front row said. “Would you like to sit with me at lunch today?”*
Think…Who are the characters? What is the setting? What is the main event? ....that you need the reader to know.

Describe the characters, setting, and event so readers can create a picture in their mind.

Create unique experiences and events using the five senses.
## Four-Point Holistic Rubric, American Literature & Composition

<table>
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<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| 4     | The student’s response is a well-developed narrative that fully develops a real or imagined experience based on text as a stimulus.  
- Effectively establishes a situation, one or more points of view, and introduces a narrator and/or characters  
- Creates a smooth progression of events  
- Effectively uses multiple narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, pacing, reflection, and plot to develop rich, interesting experiences, events, and/or characters  
- Uses a variety of techniques consistently to sequence events that build on one another  
- Uses precise words and phrases, details, and sensory language consistently to convey a vivid picture of the events  
- Provides a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events  
- Integrates ideas and details from source material effectively  
- Has very few or no errors in usage and/or conventions that interfere with meaning* |
| 3     |  
| 2     |  
| 1     |  
| 0     |  |
## Four-Point Holistic Rubric, American Literature & Composition

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TRAIT</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
<th>AMERICAN LIT. CRITERIA</th>
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</table>
| This trait examines the writer’s ability to effectively develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences based on a text that has been read. | 4 | • Effectively uses multiple narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, pacing, reflection, and plot to develop rich, interesting experiences, events, and/or characters  
• Uses precise words, phrases, details, and sensory language consistently to convey a vivid picture of the events. |
Mentor Text

Analyzing Author’s Use of Description
Mentor Text
The Story of an Hour (Kate Chopin)

- The author uses two characters, Josephine and Richards, to establish the situation and break the news to Louise Mallard that her husband has passed in a tragic accident.
- Mrs. Mallard is portrayed as a weak individual who is suffering mentally.
- The open bedroom window that Mrs. Mallard peers out is symbolic in nature and allows the reader to feel Mrs. Mallard isn’t absolutely upset about the news, but instead sees a future, now without restraint.
- The author uses descriptive language to narrate the idea that Mrs. Mallard now has hope in her future; hope in being independent.
- The conclusion makes a drastic turn when her husband appears, and Mrs. Mallard lets out a piercing cry and passes away. The doctors arrive and proclaim that Mrs. Mallard has died of a heart attack that was brought on by the sudden happiness of seeing her husband alive.
**Mentor Text Analysis**

**The Story of an Hour (Kate Chopin)**

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<th>Use of Sensory Language</th>
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<td>Description...to develop rich, interesting experiences, events, and/or characters</td>
<td>“There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensory language...to convey a vivid picture of the events</td>
<td>“The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.”</td>
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**Use of Description**

- “She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance.”
- “She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will”
- “But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.”

**Use of Sensory Language**

- “There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body”
- “The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.”
- “Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission.”
Milestones Exemplars
Focus on Student Use of Description
Narrative Item and Scoring Samplers

American Literature and Composition

English Language Arts
Item and Scoring Sampler:

Extended Constructed-Response Narrative Item

2019
American Literature Narrative Item and Scoring Sampler

Stimulus Passage

Excerpt from, “The New Englander”

from *The New Englander*

By Sherwood Anderson

1. The trip west on the railroad train jolted Elsie out of herself. In spite of her detached attitude toward life she became excited. Her mother sat up very straight and stiff in the seat in the sleeping car and her father walked up and down in the aisle. After a night when the younger of the two women did not sleep but lay awake with red burning cheeks and with her thin fingers incessantly picking at the bed clothes in her berth while the train went through towns and cities, crawled up the sides of hills and fell down into forest-clad valleys, she got up and dressed to sit all day looking at a new kind of land. The train ran for a day and through another sleepless night in a flat land where every field was as large as a farm in her own country. Towns appeared and disappeared in a continual procession. The whole land was so unlike anything she had ever known that she began to feel unlike herself. In the valley where she had been born and where she had lived all her days everything had an air of finality. Nothing could be changed. The tiny fields were chained to the earth. They were fixed in their places and surrounded by aged stone walls. The fields like the mountains that looked down at them were as unchangeable as the passing days. She had a feeling they had always been so, would always be so.
Summary of “The New Englander”

- Elsie and her parents are traveling west by train from a small valley town where life seemed unchanging and fixed forever.

- The new flat land seemed strange to Elsie as she watched from the rail car. Elsie was uncomfortable with this strange new land and it made her feel unlike herself.

- On the third evening, Elsie’s mood changed. Her gripped hands seemed to relax, and she stretched out in her berth. Once during the night, there was a commotion when the trainmen had to fix a wheel. She dreamed of the men living in the strange new land – she dreamed they used their hammers to break away her prison doors.

- Now, filled with joy, Elsie was excited as the train progressed west. She dreamed that she was no longer on the train but instead flying alongside the train and she spoke aloud. Her voice broke the silence in the sleeping car, and her parents sat up to listen.
American Literature Narrative Item and Scoring Sampler
Extended Constructed-Response Writing Prompt

In this passage the author describes Elsie’s thoughts and feelings as she travels west from New England to her new home. Imagine that you are Elsie. Write a diary entry in which you describe your thoughts and feelings about the move.

Use details and information from the passage in your answer.
American Literature Narrative Item and Scoring Sampler

Narrative Writer’s Checklist

Be sure to:

- Write a narrative response that develops a real or imagined experience.
- Include a problem, situation, or observation and its significance.
- Establish one or more points of view.
- Introduce a narrator and/or characters.
- Organize events so that they progress smoothly.
  - Use a variety of techniques consistently to sequence the events to build toward a particular tone and outcome.
- Use dialogue, description, pacing, reflection, and/or multiple plot lines to:
  - develop events.
  - develop characters.
  - develop experiences.
- Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to create a vivid picture of the events, setting, and/or characters.
- Include a conclusion that reflects on what has been resolved, experienced, or observed in your narrative.
- Use ideas and/or details from the passage(s) to inform your narrative.
- Check your work for correct usage, grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.
Dear Diary,

My anxiety toward this grand move had begun to flee. Every day I spend on this train, I become less worried about leaving the farm in New England and more excited to see my new home in the west. The first night on the train was filled with fear. Mother and I were both acting uptight. I was afraid that this would be the way things would remain even after we arrived in the west. However, after an additional night’s thought on the move, I realized the west might not be a curse, but a blessing. This journey may give me a better hope for the future. There are things happening in the west and new experiences that I can have. On the farm, I knew that I had one path to follow, and I’ve realized that path might not be what I want from life. Once I understood that this train and its crew have freed me from the tedious life of farming, I had a whole new perspective. I began to notice the towns and cities that we passed. I stopped picking at bed clothes, a nervous habit that I’ve always had. My excitement motivated me to think aloud. In the midst of silence, I can’t help but to express myself. “New hope,” I mumbled to my self, “The west is going to make things better for all of us”. “Yes dear,” my father said quietly, whilst laying up in his berth, “the move is going to make things better for all of us.” It was a rather odd feeling to break the long-lasting silence, but despite this, I mumbled on. I hope it doesn’t bother my parents, but I can’t help it. I feel so much excitement. I know my father made the right decision. I don’t know when we will arrive or where exactly we are headed, but I do know that life will not be the same, and that’s a good thing.

-Elsie

• Use of description and/or sensory language is highlighted in blue.
The student effectively uses...

**Use of Description**

- Description...to develop rich, interesting experiences, events, and/or characters
- Sensory language...to convey a vivid picture of the events

- “freed me from the tedious life of farming”
- “might not be a curse, but a blessing.”
- “I’ve realized that path might not be what I want from life”
- “a nervous habit that I’ve always had”
- “but I do know that life will not be the same, and that’s a good thing”

**Use of Sensory Language**

- “In the midst of silence”
- “my father said quietly, whilst laying up in his berth”
- “break the long-lasting silence”
- “I mumbled on”
American Literature Narrative Item and Scoring Sampler
Student Response

Wow… So me, my mom, and dad are moving from New England moving west. I really don't want to leave all my friends and miscellaneous things i love so much behind. This is going to be such a drastic transition in my life but, i kind of like the idea of moving. This will result in me having to make some adjustment but that could all be for the better. Maybe this new place could open up a dozen more oppritunities for me then New England can plus i could use a change of scenery. So now at this point my feelings are actually pretty excited about moving.

• Use of description and/or sensory language is highlighted in blue.
The student attempts to use...

**Use of Description**
- “such a drastic transition in my life”
- “that could all be for the better”
- “could open up a dozen more opportunities”
- “my feelings are actually pretty excited”

**Use of Sensory Language**
- “miscellaneous things”

Description...to develop experiences, events, and/or characters

Words or phrases to convey a picture of the events
Conclusion

• Standards W3b and W3d specify that students use description and sensory language to develop experiences, events, and characters.

• The primary purpose of using description in narratives is to help the reader imagine the characters, settings, and events within a story.

• In narratives, good writers use description and sensory details to answer three important questions: who are the characters, what is the setting, and what is the main event?

• Use of description and sensory details, or sensory language, are both criteria evident in the Georgia Milestones narrative writing rubric across grade levels and courses.
Additional Support
Resources & Professional Learning
Georgia Milestones Assessment System

Resources

• Assessment Guides

• Study Guides
  ➢ Comprehensive Writing Unit inclusive of Narrative Writing

• Item & Scoring Samplers
  ➢ Stand-alone Narrative Sampler

• Writing Rubrics

• Writer’s Checklists
  ➢ Narrative Genre
English Language Arts Curriculum & Instruction

Resource

Narrative Writing Professional Learning

Participants will explore resources for both interpreting and teaching the narrative writing standard.

Presenters: English Language Arts Team, Georgia Department of Education - Curriculum and Instruction

The learning can be accessed at GeorgiaStandards.org.