

***Grab-and-Go Writing Activity:  
Writing More Descriptive, Specific Sentences***  
*Maria A.N. Judnick*  
*Department of English and Comparative Literature*  
*San José State University*

**Timeframe:** 20 minutes

**Materials needed (including preparation):**

- Text for the students to read and consider—“Snow” by Lee Martin is useful due to the simple yet evocative sentences in this short essay, but other descriptive, specific passages would work just as well.
- Whiteboard markers or chalk to make the chart and have students write sample sentences on the board
- Sample sentences handout (pulled from various grammar textbooks) for students to choose from to edit/improve by emulating the same techniques used in the model passage
- A sample student paragraph from a current essay students are writing so the class can learn to edit their own work

**Objectives:** After the activity, students will be able to

- identify and describe what makes a sentence, paragraph, or passage descriptive.
- be able to imitate and discuss how to use these same ideas in their own work.

**Introduction:** [2 minutes]

“How often have you gotten a comment from a peer editor or from a teacher asking you to be more specific? Do you ever think that your writing seems a bit vague? It can be a struggle to figure out how much detail or description in a sentence is too much or not enough. How do you know how to describe something well? Today, we’re going to look at a very short piece and see how the writer Lee Martin has found a good balance between description and brevity in this essay that tells an entire story in just four paragraphs. Let’s take a look.”

As you are speaking, pass out the reading handout.

**Procedures:** [12-15 minutes]

**Step 1 [5 minutes]:** Students will first read the passage silently to themselves, highlighting words that seem “descriptive” to them. After reading the passage again aloud, discuss impressions of the piece.

Drawing a chart (such as the one modeled below) on the board may spark a great discussion.

Key Words/Phrases	Why are they important?

While focusing on a few key words in the chart to help the class understand Martin’s description, here are some sample questions to ask: What’s the image evoked by the author using a Chevrolet pickup instead of some other model, like a sports car? Without the author specifically telling us, how can we guess that this story took place in a different time period?

Briefly discuss how these paragraphs can engage readers so quickly. Do you think Martin is “showing” or “telling” things to the reader? Why?

[Time permitting, consider asking other potential discussion questions. What sentence first helped you figure out the underlying meaning of the passage? What image or idea stood out to you the most and why? What sensory details is the author using in his descriptions? Are these sentences elaborate? How would you describe Martin’s style?]

**Step 2 [7 minutes]:** Students are then given the handout with short, bland sentences and asked to take those same descriptive types of elements that Lee Martin used and edit/update/augment at least five of these examples. [Some students may choose to write a whole short paragraph based on one of the examples, and that’s an acceptable alternative.]

**Step 3 [3 minutes]:** Once students have finished editing their examples, they will share with a partner, and some students will be asked to share with the whole class by writing their sentences on the board. Classmates will be asked to comment on the improvements and changes made to the sentences.

### **Closure/Evaluation: [2-3 minutes]**

Ask the students if they will ever use “nice” or “cool” or other vague words again in an essay.

Pass around a handout with a sample student paragraph that requires further description. (Generally, this exercise is paired with a “Review” essay prompt, so I’ve selected a paragraph evaluating a particular product.) Students will edit several sentences for homework.

### **Activity Analysis:**

This activity can be useful at the beginning of the semester or school year to help students begin to experiment with their writing. Students can learn that a few well-chosen details can be more effective than relying on the thesaurus to come up with a “better” synonym. It is also helpful to remind students that using language that “shows” ideas rather than directly stating a concept is more interesting to the reader. Students tend not to have considered the connotations of common words and how they can create images in their minds. An additional follow-up exercise later in the unit is to have them learn how to edit overly wordy sentences to strike some balance in their work.

For some classes, time is a factor in this activity. Some students struggle to edit five sentences in just seven minutes, so I occasionally offer just to edit two or three examples. Other classes can read the passage quite quickly and might benefit from additional examples.

## Writing More Descriptive Sentences: Model

**Directions:** Read this short creative non-fiction piece and underline/highlight any of the descriptive words and phrases of this essay that stand out to you.

Add a star to what you think is the **most important sentence** in this short piece.

### **Snow**

**by Lee Martin**

Once, when I was five, a snow storm came overnight and lingered into the morning. We lived on the farm then, and for some reason I can't recall, my mother and father set out up the lane in my father's Chevrolet pickup, leaving me in the care of my grandmother. I dragged a ladder back chair to the front door and stood on it, so I'd be tall enough to look out the glass. I watched the back end of the truck slide a little in the deep snow before finding purchase and going on. My father turned onto the County Line Road, and I was still watching when the truck, nearly to the crossroads, slid into the ditch.

I still remember the sight of my parents walking back up the lane, heads bent against the force of the snow, my mother's scarf tied beneath her chin, the skirt of her dress flapping around her legs, the bill of my father's cap dusted with snow, his cheeks red from the cold.

Although I didn't know it, then, this must have been one of the first times when I sensed that my parents lived inside imperfect bodies. They'd tried to move through space and failed. I didn't know, as I felt the cold they carried back into our home, that this was only one of their many rehearsals for leaving this world.

Now I think of their footprints in the lane, proof that they once walked upon this Earth—those footprints disappearing even as I celebrated my parents' return, all sign of them filling in with snow.

-- from *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*

## Writing More Descriptive Sentences: Editing Exercises

You've read "Snow," a short essay filled with simple, but evocative phrases and images. Now, let's think about how we can incorporate those same ideas/feelings/moods into analytical writing by using adjectives, by "showing" specific details in a sentence, by incorporating similes and metaphors, etc.

**Pick at least five** of the sentences below and make this idea more evocative, fresh, or appealing. How can you help readers imagine what you are trying to describe? Be careful not to over-describe or simply list examples!

<b>Original</b>	<b>Edit</b>
Ex. My day was very busy.	Due to an avalanche of work, I ate lunch at my desk today while catching up on my email.
1. My grandfather is funny.	
2. My mother had a headache.	
3. My friend makes me laugh.	
4. He was nice.	
5. The room was messy.	
6. Her hairstyle is wild.	
7. Our family vacation was a disaster.	
8. Taking tests makes me nervous.	
9. My father is a good man.	
10. Lying is not a good idea.	
11. I was scared.	
12. The twins are completely different from each other.	

13. She saw the car accident from the sidewalk.	
14. She takes things way too seriously.	
15. My dog is lazy.	

## **Writing More Descriptive Sentences: Sample Student Essay**

**Directions:** Here is a sample review essay paragraph from a student outlining a menu option available at a local tea house. Identify sentences that you think could benefit from more specific and descriptive language. Underneath the paragraph, edit a few of these sentences using some of the same techniques we practiced.

As you read this sample, please edit for grammar as well.

### **Sample:**

1. Another famous plate is their toast. 2. I know that hearing the word “toast”, doesn’t sound appealing but their toast is a one of a kind. 3. The toast is special and unique compare to other toast that is made at home or other restaurant. 4 There are varieties of toast that contains with different topping, goodies, and fillings. 5. This toast certainly can make a unhappy person to smile once again. 6. The most popular one is called Macaroon Party. 7. It a cube of toast that have ice cream topping on it, macaroons on it, fruits, whip cream, and all other sort of goodies. 8. It makes you want to say wow and the first sight of it makes you want to stare at the beauty of the toast. 9. The toast gives a sweet taste and the combination of toast, filling, macaroon, and cream goes so well. 10. One plate of these can be shared with four people to eat. 11. The price for these toasts is around eight to ten dollars. 12. The price for a toast seems overboard, but for this toast it show why it is worth the money it deserves.

Sentence #: \_\_\_ Edit: \_\_\_\_\_

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Sentence #: \_\_\_ Edit: \_\_\_\_\_

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Sentence #: \_\_\_ Edit: \_\_\_\_\_

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Be prepared to discuss the following questions in class: Why did you make these changes? What idea/image were you most trying to convey in each sentence? Why?