

# Writing A Descriptive Essay

## About A Person

### Elements of a Character Sketch

1. The subject: The subject may be real or imaginary. There should be some **outstanding quality, feature, accomplishment, or trait** that will make the subject interesting to the reader.
2. The Point of View: You may write from **your own point of view**, or if you have an active imagination, write from a **fictional point of view**, e.g., that of a close friend, a son or daughter or even a pet dog. You may also write from the **third person point of view**, or you may assume a "personae", i.e., a voice other than your own.
3. The Method:
  - a. let the characters reveal themselves
  - b. let other characters shed light on the main character
  - c. show the way the writers themselves perceive the characters
  - d. describe a setting in which the character appears
  - e. give the character a name that will reveal something to the reader
  - f. relate the character to a symbolic object or action
  - g. present a series of scenes that reveals some change in the character.

## Sample Descriptive Essay About A Person

Shhh! Here Comes the Librarian

Over the years that I knew her, I gained an uncommon respect for the librarian at our high school. In one word she could be described as "eccentric", but only because she refused to accept the stereotypical notion of what the term "librarian" had come to mean. The students thought she was just plain weird, but those who took the time to know her realized she was a person searching for a comfortable identity.

At first glance, she could indeed be a formidable figure to behold. Her hair was most often in disarray simply as a result of her compulsion to go everywhere in tenth speed. Not only was her gait a marvel, but her purpose was also a wonder. She always gave one the impression she had a mission, and, at that express moment, had been called forth to duty. When classes would commence, she would proudly stride off to her room, as if a group of novice missionaries awaited her divine intervention.

Her habit of dress, however, was not in the least missionary-like. In fact, the students used to kid her about getting a summer job as a highway flagman. The brighter the colors, the more she became entranced by their iridescence. As she flashed through the library, students became hushed as if a bolt of lightning had struck. In the morning, her emerald greens and hot pinks were eye-openers for the rest of us when she walked through the staff room door.

Characteristically, her first words were a singsongy "Good Morning!" whereupon everyone would look up waiting for the next outpouring. She had an unconscionable taste for polysyllabic words – the more syllables the better. She used them with such flair, they looked good on her; and we could only smile, nod and try to make a witty rejoinder. Too often, we would be unfamiliar with the words, so she would again march off to another venue with the assurance that she had stymied the lot of us.

Though she spoke precisely, as you might expect of one in her position, her voice was always at peak volume. A favourite response of the librarian's aide was, "You shrieked, madame?" In fact, students could audit her classes in the hallways, or on a clear day, even in the lunchroom.

Similarly, her other ways did not resemble those of a librarian. She was easily flustered – not at all cool and composed like some of her predecessors. One particular day nearing the Christmas holiday, a very well-established physics teacher on staff kissed her full on the lips in front of almost all her colleagues. She went into a rage and made it clear that another such liberty would be inexcusable. Later that day, some mischievous students, who had gained access to the crawl space above the library, lowered a rubber chicken into her office, suspended a rope decorated with mistletoe. By the end of the day, her patience was severely tried and so it was no surprise to any of us when she polkaed too exuberantly at the staff party and knocked over the Christmas tree. What would have been embarrassing for many others was often summarily dealt with by "The

Happy Booker," the pseudonym she was not unhappy to have bestowed upon her.

When our colorful librarian moved away to a new lifestyle, a chic hairdo and trendy clothes, we felt cheated when a very acceptable, but normal lady came to take her place. Who would wake us up every morning with the word for the day? Whose voice would be ringing through the halls even after the last bell had rung? Would she realize she had taken a part of us away with her? Most importantly, would she realize the legacy she left behind?

3. Deciding on a Method:

a. Letting characters reveal themselves

i) their own actions, words, and thoughts may reveal the kind of persons they are

ii) the reader may be told quite specifically what minor characters are like. Then the writer describes the main character's reactions to other characters, and thus reveals much about the main character.

b) Letting other characters shed light on main character

i) they give the reader an idea of what the character is like by what they **say** to and about the main character as well as what they **think about** and how they **react** to the main character.

c) Showing the way the writers themselves perceive the characters

i) they may describe the appearance of the character

ii) they may make interpretive comments about the thoughts, words, actions, and reactions of the main character

iii) they may compare the main character with other characters

## Roughing Out Your Character Sketch

1. Selecting a Subject: After you have chosen an interesting subject to write about, select a **dominant impression**, the important, meaningful and striking aspects.

If your dominant impression is too blunt, restate it in a more subtle manner.

e.g., Blunt Statement:

The most outstanding aspect of Milton Foster's personality is his stinginess.

More Subtle Statement:

Milton Foster smiled happily as he realized that the homeroom teacher was not going to ask him for a contribution to the class Christmas fund after all. He felt the change in his pocket and thought how pleasant it was not to have to part with a penny.

2. Choosing a Point of View: A fictional point of view affords such advantages as:
  - a. it enables you to report details which an outside observer could not know.

e.g., A politician might make comments in front of her cat that she would not make in public!

- b. It enables you to include judgements, explanations, emotions, attitudes and reactions to the character.
- c. It enables you to experiment with a style completely

different from your own.

e.g., If you wrote from the point of view of the politician's cat, you are faced with the question, "How would a cat express itself?"

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING A CHARACTER SKETCH**

1. Observe as many aspects of a given character as possible.
2. Taking into account the audience who will read the character sketch, decide which aspects of the character to emphasize and which to ignore.
3. From the material selected, decide on a dominant impression and try to put it into words.
4. Choose the appropriate point of view. Is the character described by someone who is intimately acquainted with that person or by someone who has only limited knowledge and insight?
5. Write down the description, interpretation, dialogue, and action that seem to support the dominant impression.
6. Compare the material written down with the dominant impression you decided to focus on.
7. If necessary, revise either the dominant impression or the material.

Just as in other kinds of writing, a character sketch has a beginning, middle, and an ending. You may wish to begin your sketch by showing your subject engaged in a significant action. Fill in the descriptive details that will make the sketch come alive for the reader. One technique is to indicate your dominant impression indirectly. Choose the most appropriate method for supporting your dominant impression and for revealing or developing your character. Be sure the setting is appropriate for your subject. If you have decided to use conversation to reveal character, write it, read it, and rewrite it. Sometimes reading a dialogue out loud helps you to spot any artificial notes. Provide transitions to make your sketch move along quickly and smoothly. One interesting way to end a character sketch is to have the subject perform an action that symbolizes or reinforces the dominant impression that was the focus of the sketch.

Source: West, Bailey, Wood, *Developing Writing Skills*, Prentice-Hall Canada, 1981.