Description—Painting a Visual Image

Learning the Skill

Which of the following two sentences gives you a better visual image?

The desert floor is hot.

The sweltering heat rises slowly from the parched desert floor.

Both sentences are descriptions of the desert. The second sentence, however, is more vivid. The passive verb *is* becomes the active verb *rises*, giving you something to "see." The adverb *slowly* adds to the picture. The adjectives *sweltering* and *parched* give you something to "feel." When you paint a visual image in a speech, people, places, and things seem more real to your listeners.

Follow these guidelines to help you be more descriptive:

• After you have established the main idea of your presentation, support and expand on your idea with details. As a starting point, it may help to visualize in your "mind's eye" the places, people, and objects you are trying to describe.

• Once you have a clear picture of your subject in your mind, think about specific ways to describe what you see. Use *active verbs*, *adverbs*, and *adjectives* to bring the images in your speech to life.

• Use *sensory* details to give your listeners a clear and colorful picture of your subject. Sensory details include any of the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

• Check your descriptive details to make sure they support your main idea about the subject.

Practicing the Skill

Directions: Read the passage below about the Arabian camel. Then answer the questions that follow.

Bedouins, the nomadic desert dwellers of Africa and Asia, have a favorite name for the Arabian, or dromedary, camel. They call it "Ata Allah," or "God's gift." For thousands of years, the Arabian camel has been the main source of transportation, meat, milk, wool, hides, and even shade for millions of desert dwellers.

This gangly beast's ability to carry heavy loads across the harsh desert with little food or water actually accounts for its strange appearance. The camel stands about 6 feet tall at its shoulders, with a single hump rising about 12 inches from its back. The hump contains a store of fatty tissue. During long stretches across the barren desert, when no other food is available, the camel draws its nourishment from its hump. When this happens, the hump can become flabby and small, and may even flop down off the camel's side. It becomes firm again after the camel is able to eat. Because of...
its hump, a camel can last up to 17 days without water and 5 to 7 days without food.

The Arabian camel's legs are long, thin, and powerful. Their legs serve two purposes. First, they enable the camel to carry heavy loads (more than 900 pounds when necessary) for long distances, covering 25 to 100 miles per day. Second, the camel's legs also keep its body high above the sizzling-hot desert floor, which helps to prevent sweating and loss of body fluids. Another way camels keep from sweating is by increasing their own body temperature. They are the only mammal with this ability.

As you can see, the Arabian camel is extremely well designed and equipped for desert travel. It even has a double row of long, curly eyelashes to protect its large eyes from blowing sand, and a nose that it can open and close at will. For the same reason, its small ears are lined with fur. When they walk, they spread their two-toed hooves wide to keep from sinking into the sand.

1. **Describing** In what specific ways does the author describe the Arabian camel? List three examples of concrete details from the passage.

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

2. **Specifying** Which of the following details from the passage is NOT a concrete, descriptive detail?
   
   A. harsh desert  
   B. sizzling-hot desert  
   C. desert travel  
   D. barren desert

3. **Paraphrasing** The author claims that the Arabian camel is well designed for desert travel. In your own descriptive sentence, explain why this is true.

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
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Speaking and Listening Skills Activity  
continued

✔ Applying the Skill

Directions: On the lines below, write a brief description about one of the photographs from the textbook chapter. Include at least five descriptive details. Then, with a partner, take turns reading your descriptions aloud. Tell your partner what you “saw” or felt as you listened to his or her description.

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Assessment Checklist

Assess your description using the checklist below:

☐ Selected main idea to present
☐ Visualized subject to get a clear picture in mind
☐ Focused on using active verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in the description
☐ Used sensory details—sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste—to describe subject
☐ Checked to make sure details were consistent with main idea