

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING FOR BEGINNERS

by

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'MY SCHOOLROOM'

'It is a big room. It has 4 windows and a door. The windows are not very clean. Over against the wall are some cuboards and there are six lights, rows of desks face the blackboard. There are pictures on the wall.'

ANY TEACHER who in the interests of science has set such a topic for an exercise in descriptive writing will have seen, as he deserved, a close relative of the work I have quoted. Over-precise, yet vague, depersonalised and purposeless, the sentences have no focus or coherence, and each settles on a new object aimless and erratic as a fly, leaving a smudge on the paper. Yet even such a topic as 'My schoolroom' can be brought to life.

It has often and truly been said that in stimulating achievement in English a good personal relationship between teacher and pupil is vital; technique, too, is important, and to none so much as to the good teacher—it can probably do nothing to help the bad. There are several ways of helping the children to improve 'My schoolroom'. One of the best is to enlarge the title and so clarify the aim of the writing, perhaps indicating also the intended reader. Does the title mean 'A list of the contents of my schoolroom'? Then let it be in a useful order, and exact—for the auctioneer or the Council. When this has been started and abandoned as too dull for words, one may ask, 'Is an architect's plan intended?' Then let's have a diagram complete with scale, orientation, a technical note on the heating and lighting, materials, colours—for the builder and decorator. This has some value and need not be scrapped, but does seem to lead straight to the library and to research on architecture—really another topic and intention, which may lack the general interest and liveliness of the more personal composition probably intended by the title.

Children avoid a personal note in their early efforts because they do not know how to direct description to some end other than that of bad photo-

graphy. In a story, the events in sequence provide an acceptable guide, pattern, and conclusion. In a description also, some organising factor is needed, to give unity and purpose to the disparate glimpses of the eye. Feeling, the personal reaction to a scene or situation, is such a factor. Children can be led to this by being asked to imagine their description as, say, part of a letter to a pen-friend abroad. What would he wish to know? Surely what it feels like to be in the schoolroom—not the schoolroom empty; but with something going on, and with a strong centre of interest in the pupils' reactions and feelings, without which the reader cannot project himself into the room to share its atmosphere. They will usually agree that this is a more promising topic than the bare 'My schoolroom'. Who is not interested in his own feelings?

But how to transpose those feelings to the medium of description baffles most children. They resort to labelling and to cliché, and in the confusion, the thing being described vanishes. The aim should be, through the description, to force the feeling irresistibly upon the reader. There is no need to name the feeling at all. This exercise, while tending in children's writing to over-simplify feelings, can be of great help in focussing and ordering material to a given end. A useful device for teaching this is analogous to the game of 'Statues', in which a person is told to 'freeze' in one position, underlining with all his body the one emotion he wishes to convey, but without naming it. The pupils are asked to write down in one sentence their main feeling on considering one of a variety of topics; they are then asked to describe their chosen topic so as to convey that feeling, which they must not mention directly. Then the sentence first written is crossed out, and the description read to the class. The test is, can the class name the feeling intended? An allied exercise was tried with the composition at the head of this article. 'My schoolroom' (the description which heads this article) was written on the blackboard. 'How does it feel to be in your schoolroom?' 'I feel as if I was in prison, sir!' (General acclaim—it does not do to be too serious about one's popularity). 'Well then, write that down first, and then everybody try rewriting "My schoolroom" so as to convince me that that is how you feel. Use the description on the board, as far as you can.' The most interesting product of this effort was that of the writer of the original script, whose revised version was:

It is a big room, but there are lots of us condemned to be in it, and that makes it feel cramped like a cell. It has four windows and a door, but even so you feel there is no way out of it. The windows are dirty and covered with wire netting and the door never opens unless a bell rings. Over against the wall are some cupboards which are locked, but I have seen them open. They have tight rows of books in them,

which must feel a bit like us boys. We sit in rows of desks facing the blackboard, and wait for the wall to open. There are pictures on the wall, but that is behind us.

This is still not a polished piece of writing, but it has undeniable unity of feeling—sufficient in its mock-seriousness to provoke a rearrangement of the pictures! It is easy to invent situations, scenes, faces, which carry a strong and therefore comparatively simple feeling with them; later, more subtle and contradictory emotions can be conjured up than are evoked by Mr. Gradgrind.

Once the ability to get unity through feeling has been realised, it is useful to discuss the technique of focussing—that is, of so ordering and stressing the items in a description that unity is effectively conveyed by guiding the reader's senses in the direction the writer desires. (It is possible to begin with this, if a strongly patterned topic is chosen; but it has the disadvantages of lacking a personal motive, and of leaving the writer very much at the mercy of the topic for interest, arrangement, and unity). In focussing, a more sustained piece of writing than the revised 'My schoolroom' is required, and a better ordered. Children readily grasp the pattern of a simple story, with its build-up to a climax and subsequent quiet close: this can be expressed in a rough graph, and a similar pattern can be used to suggest the form of a descriptive piece selected from a textbook, but with the focal point substituted for the climax. Of course, other patterns may be used; and there are useful analogies in the craft of the cinema cameraman. For younger forms, examples of descriptive passages made up by the teacher as he goes along are preferable to extracts from books. Those extracts found in the typical 'Course of English' suffer from their position, and are usually stale by the time they are used, since children read the readable bits without waiting for teacher to get to them. The teacher's impromptus may be less perfect than a reading from a novel or a textbook, but they are likely to be simpler, and fresher, and have the added advantage that the children can face the problem and follow its solution, seeing how each item in the description fits its fellows as do the incidents in a story. In this way, that haphazard glancing of the eye is avoided, which leads to incoherence in the writings: the writer grasps that it is necessary to describe things in a certain order, if he is to be successful in conveying the desired feeling to the reader. The procedure is: the teacher dictates a descriptive passage, improvising as he goes, with the children writing roughly and quickly; afterwards, the piece is discussed, the children being encouraged to ask of each sentence, 'What does this add to the main scene and feeling?' Sometimes the answer will be 'Nothing', and the sentence can then be omitted or amended. Everybody learns. This is another advantage over the book

extracts! Next, the children describe a scene, and, as is fair, their pieces are criticised as the teacher's had been, with such inquiries as 'What are we meant to feel? Does this sentence make us feel it?' 'What are we meant to look at? Does this sentence guide our eyes towards it?'

If the teacher has been successful, the children will now have grasped that descriptive writing can be personal, that feeling will give it unity, and that proper order will force the reader to sense that unity and feeling. They will have realised that all descriptive writing has a human participant, usually the writer himself, and maybe that his reactions to the scene described are the most intense part of what is conveyed. The description is not made by a camera. But because 'focussing' is more difficult to control in writing than 'feeling' is to express, children find it helpful to describe something in a style closely related to narrative: this helps them to organise their material. Thus, for a title, 'A walk along the shore' is better than 'The sea-shore'. Too much activity in the scene to be described is no help: one is often tempted to set a market scene, or a circus, for a descriptive topic; but in fact such complicated scenes make it hard for the child to find a pattern and focus, although a colourful chaos may sometimes be achieved. In general, a simple subject with one aspect predominant and clear well-defined feeling is best for beginners.