

# Rhetorical Strategies

## Description and Narration

In any writing you do, you must determine who your audience is, what your purpose is, what the situation is, and what voice you will use to meet the challenges established. In order to write well, you will need to consider the best possible organizational plan to communicate clearly. In exposition, there are several useful rhetorical strategies, including description and narration, profiles or memoirs, process analysis, definition, illustration/exemplification, comparison/contrast, classification/division, and causal analysis.

In the following pages these rhetorical strategies will be discussed as separate units. Each will be presented as a means to an end, but in actual writing situations, you will find that you must use multiple strategies. In almost any essay you write, your purpose will be served by paying attention to specific details in order to describe, by exemplifying and illustrating any generalizations you make, by keeping in mind that all writing is an on-going process, and by keeping cause-effect relationships clear. You may need to develop each paragraph using one or the other of the rhetorical strategies while your overall purpose calls for a broader organizational plan.

You will find that your understanding of these rhetorical strategies, sometimes called modes, will assist you in developing your ideas clearly, whether for an essay, an essay exam, or some other purpose. Your thesis, in any case, will be determined by the situation, your audience, and your particular purpose.

### DESCRIPTION

In nearly every essay-writing situation, we use description, especially in providing vivid examples. When we describe, we try to recreate for the audience the sensations we may have felt in a similar situation. The basis of any good description is, of course, close observation and a careful consideration of the audience and purpose. Remember the last time you were asked where you had parked your car and you had to rely on description to explain exactly what your car looked like and generally how to get there? Unless you observe the details, explaining anything clearly for your audience is difficult.

### Implementation

Description is used in almost any rhetorical mode. It is often not an end in itself. It clarifies your point in narration, explains in comparison and classification, makes definition interesting, and creates strong emotional appeals in persuasive writing.

### Strategy

In addition to observing closely, choosing the right word is an essential feature of any writing experience. When we use any word in context, we must take several different things into consideration, including the degree of specificity and the nuances of the words. Beginning any discussion with a generalization or an abstraction is entirely possible. However, leaving the subject

at that level does not create a very clear image or impression for the audience. In order to write evocatively, the writer must aim toward the specific rather than the general and the concrete rather than the abstract. Introducing an abstraction like *loyalty* is a beginning; however, describing the black and white terrier named Scotty sleeping on his master's grave in the cemetery night after night becomes more specific. Certain techniques help create vivid writing.

### ***Attention To Diction***

Every writer understands the differences between denotation and connotation. Denotation is the dictionary definition of a particular word. If you look up *mother* in the dictionary, you find it means “female parent”—no real surprise. The connotational value of a word, however, includes the associations our experience brings to that word. For some, the connotations of mother bring images of hot dogs, SUVs, and apple pie while for others it connotes a busy, organized woman with a briefcase. Connotations can be positive, neutral, or negative as well. If we refer to a person as obstinate or principled, we mean that person has a tendency to stick tenaciously to convictions. A person with conviction might also be called stubborn or, in some contexts, pig headed: in each case the connotations become progressively more negative. Our choices of words indicate how we want the reader to understand what we mean. Using the wrong word in certain contexts communicates something to the reader that we never meant! Suppose you were writing about water pollution, for instance, and you found yourself repeating “pure” over and over again in the conclusion. You might open your thesaurus to find another word to vary the way you present your summation of evidence. Among the synonyms, you will find “chaste.” Now, chaste does mean purity in some contexts, but it would give your reader an unusual perception of water! Diction—your choice of the right word in the right place—makes a major difference in how your audience understands your point.

### ***Comparisons***

Communicating means putting yourself in the place of the audience well enough for you to figure out what the audience knows and to fill the gaps so you can get your point across. One way to do so is to use literal comparisons. That is, by comparing an unfamiliar thing to a familiar one, one the audience understands, you can clarify the unfamiliar. The literal comparison usually requires finding likenesses in two things that are basically similar in nature. Have you ever eaten fried alligator? What does it taste like? Chicken? Your answer is an example of a literal comparison: two things of like nature (sources of protein) compared in order to make the unfamiliar more familiar.

Another kind of comparison used in description is the figurative comparison. Figures of speech usually compare two things of essentially unlike nature. Common figures of speech include some of the following:

**simile:** a comparison of two essentially unlike things using words that make the comparison clear (“like,” “as,” “resembles,” “than,” and similar words). When you say that a certain child eats like a horse, you are using a simile to indicate a single aspect of the two subjects where the qualities of one make the qualities of the other vivid or interesting by comparison.

**metaphor:** a comparison of two essentially unlike things not using words that emphasize the comparison. The metaphor is a more implicit comparison. When we say a person turns beet red or is a mad dog when he is angry, we are using metaphor.

**personification:** a comparison of two essentially unlike things in which inanimate objects are

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given human or animal characteristics, abstractions are given qualities of humans or animals, animals are given human characteristics, and so forth. People who give their cars a name are personifying. If your car coughs and dies, you have given it (a machine with internal problems) human characteristics.

**synecdoche:** a comparison of two unlike things, in this case a part with the whole. If a farmer hires extra help during harvest, he may say he hires four hands. He actually hires four people with eight hands, but the essential aspect of his help is their ability to work with their hands, of course. In class it does not take you long to figure out which students are quick to catch on or which students have come to class well prepared. You may call those students “brains” to indicate their essential characteristics. You do not mean that they sit in the back of the class in a beaker.

### *Rhetorical Devices*

Closely allied to figurative language, these devices are often included in descriptions. They are often examples of verbal irony, a discrepancy between what we say and what we mean.

**hyperbole:** a deliberate exaggeration for a particular effect. Anyone who lives in Texas understands the basic focus of hyperbole (pronounced hi per’ bo le, not “hyper bowl”—which sounds like a game played between two champion teams who have had too much sugar). When we say a mountain of dirty dishes is in the sink, we are using hyperbole. No matter where you park on campus, your car is 7000 miles from any class you have—truth or hyperbole?

**understatement:** a deliberate undercutting or downplaying of importance to create a particular effect. If the rain begins unexpectedly during class, catching you unprepared, and if it rains forty days and forty nights in an hour and a half (hyperbole), and if your car is 7000 miles from any shelter near a parking lot, and some character wanders past you in a yellow slicker, an umbrella, and hip boots and says, “Damp out, isn’t it?” he is understating the situation.

**paradox:** an apparent contradiction that proves to be true upon reflection. Wordsworth’s statement that the “child is father of the man” seems backwards but says something about the relative understanding of the two generations. *Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* would seem to operate upon the same paradox. An *oxymoron* is a paradox in which the seeming contradiction is contained within a single phrase. The usual examples are “jumbo shrimp” and “sophomore” (“wise fool”). Some more literary references to “darkness visible,” a “terrible beauty,” and “wintry fever” also fit the definition.

### *Imagery*

Imagery appeals to the senses. Obviously you must describe sensory impressions if you are to involve the reader in the point you are trying to make. The five kinds of sensory appeals include visual imagery (appeals to the way things look), tactile imagery (the way things feel), auditory/aural imagery (the way things sound), gustatory imagery (the way things taste), and olfactory imagery (the way things smell). In English there are more words to describe the way things look than to describe any other single image. Usually, the first three kinds of images are used more often in expository writing, but every once in a while, you may be called upon to use all the senses to vivify your writing. While you may start a discussion by saying that something looks good or that it sounds great, you really have not told the audience anything to expand understanding. You must use specific adjectives to create particular images to evoke corresponding sensations in the audience, to recreate for them the same sensations that you as the writer experienced.

## Organization

No descriptive passage exists in a vacuum: it is designed to fit your audience and your purpose. Therefore, most descriptions are used within examples to support whatever point you are making. Descriptions usually support a dominant impression you are trying to convey in your discussion and are organized to present the information in the most clearly logical way for your audience: *spatially* or *emphatically*. You may choose to arrange according to where things are in space or how they relate to each other (spatial). You may choose, on the other hand, to arrange your description according to the relative importance of your details (emphatic). No matter what the arrangement, the details you select will communicate your point to the reader. In certain circumstances you may want to present an objective description, trying to be as complete and unbiased in your presentation as possible. In other cases, your dominant impression may be subjective. You will want to involve your audience emotionally in your subject. Although the following passage deals with fiction, the same literary devices can be used in expository writing. Consider the following description from Michael McFarland’s short story “The False Country”:

*The center stripe was the bright line to which the dark world vibrated. It was the flashing middle marker stretching all the way from the horizon of the flat farmland. Far off at its origin was a point that Stephen aimed his car toward. Although it was night, he could see many other dimmer lines—made by the freeway’s painted edge, the ditches, the endless fences, even the horizon, and—above the horizon—the tree line. They all seemed to begin at this central point and they came toward him at different speeds—sadly, slowly. Finally, reaching him, they slipped by until they were no longer in sight but probably converged at some equidistant point behind. The painted lines were the most dramatic, especially the center one. It constantly started up slowly and crept towards him, gathering speed until it flashed under. Finally it gave itself to the roar of the engine. The car seemed almost to be running on this energy like the toy cars he had played with as a boy. He had pushed them along the floor hard, until the momentum gave them life and they whirred off under their own power.*

You will quickly notice the vivid auditory and visual images he creates. Comparison—literal and figurative—and rhetorical devices also contribute to the effect McFarland seeks to convey. At least one comparison appears as he likens the car to “the toy cars he had played with as a boy,” and he personifies the lines as “[creeping] towards him,” moving toward Stephen “sadly, slowly,” examples of alliteration. The fences are called “endless”—a hyperbole, of course. The engine roars and the lines whirl onomatopoeically: the evocative language involves the reader in the description. The dominant impression is subjective. From Stephen’s point of view there is much movement and the lines are the central focus.

## NARRATION

Description is often used in conjunction with narrative. Every time you tell your friends and family about a particular event in your day, you use narration. Any time you tell a story to answer, “What happened?” you use narration. Usually, there is a point to the details you choose to include in your recitation. Your details support a central idea. If the day was horrendous, your details turn into a long whine; if the day was wonderful, your details bolster the effect. A joke, a journal entry, a story, an historical perspective—all require narrative.

## Implementation

Narration may be used any number of ways:

1. as an introductory or concluding technique to gain the reader’s interest and create a vivid beginning or ending for the essay.

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2. as an essay in itself to explain an event, a process, or to make a point.
3. throughout an essay to provide personal examples.

### Strategy

The sequence of events, called plot in fiction, indicates the order in which events happen. You may want to use chronological order to show how events unfold. Begin with the setting and situation and proceed to tell the story from first to last. In the process you will pay attention, again, to logical details necessary to fulfill your purpose. Narrative should usually develop causally: an event should follow any preceding one logically. You may want to present events out of their normal order to emphasize an important effect you are trying to create. Be careful with this kind of development, however. No matter what order you choose, you must describe the beginning, middle, and end to make causal relationships clear. As you present your narrative, you will find that some kind of conflict is intrinsic to your discussion.

**Conflict.** This is, of course, a clash of wills, characters, or forces. It can be internal (within you or the central character you are presenting) or external (between two people or forces). Presenting conflict in an extended narrative creates an essential tension necessary to good narrative writing. Unless there is conflict, there really is not much suspense—or interest—generated in the reader.

**Setting.** For the most part, setting establishes where and when the events take place. It may be used straightforwardly to emphasize your point or it may be used ironically.

**Selection of details.** In a narrative the author chooses details that create the illusion of reality for the reader, verisimilitude. Your selection of details helps you make your point and create vivid impressions for the audience. The point of your story will be emphasized by your handling of setting, sequence, and people or characters.

**Characters.** These are the people involved: how you introduce and describe them gives the reader an understanding of your point. They may be described physically or psychologically or both, but the effect is much more vivid if you do not tell the reader how to feel. Instead you need to describe the character in such a way that the reader knows what kind of person he or she is. Mark Twain once said that it is not enough to tell about an old lady who shows up and is unhappy; “bring her on and let her scream” her head off.

**Time.** When you describe, you are probably more interested in spatial relationships, but in narrative the important relationships are most concerned with time. You will use chronological order most of the time to indicate the beginning, middle, and end of the incident, but as a writer you must decide whether to compress time or to emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects. Sometimes, you will want to start *in medias res*, in the midst of the action, to vivify the events and put the reader into the action. No matter which kind of sequence you choose, be particularly careful with verb tenses. In most cases *present tense* makes sense unless you are referring to incidents which occur in the past of the characters.

**Dialogue.** Another way to make your narrative vivid and immediate is to use direct dialogue rather than referring to conversation indirectly. In other words, you must check your handbook for the proper use of quotation marks and punctuation to allow your characters to speak for themselves.

**Point of view.** While you often use third person (“she,” “he”) in academic writing, in personal narrative, especially, you may be told to use first person (“I”) in order to create immediacy and interest. All your choices in any kind of writing are determined by your audience and your

particular purpose, which are essential to the way you present your point. Keep your readers firmly in mind and present significant details in descriptive language tailored to them.

## Organization

Narration, whether used to relate incidents in fiction or sequences in non-fiction, will always move your reader through situations and processes in time. Therefore you must have a clear idea of the progression of events through time that you are going to convey. You might, for example, want to set up a timeline on a sheet of paper with the major events in your sequence placed alongside it. You will also want to be extremely careful with the tenses you use so as not to confuse your reader. While many narratives, such as memoirs, are recalled from the past and require the use of past and past perfect tenses, careful use of the present tense can give immediacy to your narrative. For example, notice the shifts in tense (highlighted in bold) in the following passage from the opening of John Updike's short story, "A&P," which is being retold by Sammy after the event:

*In **walks** these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. **I'm** in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I **don't** see them until they're over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never **seems** to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers **trying** to remember if I **rang** it up or not. I **ring** it up again and the customer **starts** giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I **know** it made her day to trip me up. She **d been watching** cash registers forty years and probably never **seen** a mistake before.*

Sammy begins his story *in medias res* and places us in the checkout stand with him as he watches three girls enter the grocery store. The dramatic use of present tense captures our attention, just as the three girls earlier captured his. He then switches to past tense as he describes the girls and his own frozen attention: he can't remember if he **rang** up the crackers or not. He switches again to present tense as he focuses on the old lady in front of him, and then switches to past perfect in describing her probable previous cash-register-watching activity.

In non-fiction narrative, particularly if you are explaining a process, you must pay close attention to your audience and your purpose. How much can you assume your audience knows? How much detail will be needed to convey the process or events? The following paragraph explains—narrates—the operation of Darwinian natural selection in creating the giraffe's long neck. It was published in *Natural History*, the monthly magazine of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The magazine is written for non-specialists interested in science:

*A Darwinian explanation [of the giraffe's long neck] assumes that the neck length has always varied among the individuals in a giraffe population. In the past, the giraffes with the longest necks reached the highest leaves, which were more abundant, and may have held more nutrients than the lower leaves, but were inaccessible to shorter-necked giraffes. Overall, then, the longest-necked animals were the best-fed members of the population. Better nutrition translated into longer or healthier lives, and so longer-necked giraffes produced more offspring than shorter-necked giraffes. With time, differential rates of survival and reproduction skewed the giraffe population toward animals with elongated necks. The key to the mechanism of Darwinian evolution is natural selection.*

Here the authors, Luis and Monika Espinasa, keep their audience firmly in mind. The diction is simple and straightforward, although they assume their audience will know such words and terms as "nutrients" and "differential rates of survival." They stay in the past tense and include such transitions as "In the past," "Overall, then," and "With time" to move the narrative along.