

How to describe people well

Are you bored reading (or writing) about the height, eye and hair colour, or clothes of different characters? Why not use one or more of the following tricks when writing your own texts? They all come with examples!



Try using more verbs and less adjectives.

Adjectives are necessary, of course, but verbs add action to your descriptions. You can use verbs either to make your characters do things, or to make their presence livelier. Even if they are not doing much on the page, the reader feels like they are. In our example, Philip Pullman begins with adjectives, but ends with verbs:

“Lord Asriel was a tall man with powerful shoulders, a fierce dark face, and eyes that seemed to flash and glitter with savage laughter. It was a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronize or pity. All his movements were large and perfectly balanced, like those of a wild animal, and when he appeared in a room like this, he seemed a wild animal held in a cage too small for it.” (His Dark Materials)



Imagine your eyes were closed – how would you describe a person?

Like many animals, people depend on their eyes to see the world around them. This is why we sometimes describe people and things only visually. However, descriptions can be much more interesting if you write about a character's smell, the sound of their voice, or the touch of their skin or clothes. In the quote below, Charles Dickens describes Mr. Bounderby through sight, sound and touch:

“He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him... A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty.” (Hard Times)



Humour and comparison can make your descriptions more interesting.

You do not have to tell jokes while you describe people. However, if you use a funny description, people will remember it better and enjoy reading your text more. You can also compare two different people, so the details stand out better. Neil Gaiman does both in the following example:

“There are four simple ways for the observant to tell Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar apart: first, Mr. Vandemar is two and a half heads taller than Mr. Croup; second, Mr. Croup has eyes of a faded china blue, while Mr. Vandemar's eyes are brown; third, while Mr. Vandemar fashioned the rings he wears on his right hand out of the skulls of four ravens, Mr. Croup has no obvious jewelry; fourth, Mr. Croup likes words, while Mr. Vandemar is always hungry. Also, they look nothing alike.” (Neverwhere)

Task:

Choose one or more of the suggestions and describe someone in class without mentioning their name. See if the other students can guess who it is. Don't use more than 100 words.