

How to Improve Your Prose:

Descriptive Details

All writers worth their salt use descriptive details to make their narratives convincing and to enliven them with sharp, vivid pictures. In "A Street of Bugles," Anne Tyler employs a range of techniques to bring to life the small ship-building town of Balton. Through her use of vivid detail, seamlessly woven into the narrative, Tyler enables readers to experience the setting, which is crucial to our understanding of the story.

Often, Tyler ends her sentences with precise details, as if to put the finishing touch on an image. For example, to her account of Sammy's reverie about the townspeople parading by, Tyler adds a specific detail to complete the picture, and to give it added meaning:

... their pace was stately, and they wore triumphant reds and purples that swept the ground as they walked past.

In this case, Tyler attaches that final image with the simplest of techniques—the connective *and* plus an independent clause, which creates a compound sentence.

Later, as Sammy talks with the children on his walk to the boyard, Tyler uses a different method to round out the scene:

He took the cap from Porter's head and put it on his own, pulling the visor down over his eyes so that he wouldn't have to squint against the glare of the water.

Here, instead of using an independent clause, the author compresses the finishing image into a participial phrase—"pulling" plus the remainder of the sentence—which refers to Sammy and depicts his final action.

Tyler uses a similar technique in her portrait of Sammy's mother in the kitchen:

His mother poured him a cup of coffee

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and sat down opposite him, her hands clasping the table edge and her whole face strained toward him.

In this case, Tyler uses an absolute phrase (actually, two of them). The difference between this device and the participial phrase is that the words the participles ("clasping" and "strained") refer to ("hands" and "face," respectively) are inside the phrase itself, next to the participles which modify them.

Tyler also renders scenes by concluding her sentences with prepositional phrases, as we note in her depiction of the harbor.

Below his window and down the slope lay Balton Harbor, with the Balton shipyards and the little town of Balton cuddled neatly around the black water.

Through her use of the simple preposition ("with"), its two objects ("shipyards" and "town"), and other related words, the author establishes a vital element of the setting.

Tyler also uses the adjective clause—a dependent clause beginning with "who," "which," "that," or "where"—to enhance or complete an image:

He put on his blue coveralls, which were stained with grease from probably every boat in Balton Harbor, and splashed cold water on his face.

With the "which clause," the writer provides the coveralls' finishing touch, a detail that lends specificity and truth to the picture she is creating.

Exercise A: For each of the following sentences from "A Street of Bugles," note which of the five descriptive techniques outlined above Tyler used:

1. He was a small man, gray and wrinkled, wearing mechanic's coveralls exactly like Sammy's.

technique: _____

2. Porter drew in his breath with a little whistle, and the other children echoed him.

technique: _____

3. Anyone who didn't know these things about her could have told it from her eyes, which seemed to be asking the same question over and over, and from her hands, which kept reaching out and touching people.

technique: _____

Exercise B: Combine the following pairs of sentences into one by using the recommended device(s) to express the final descriptive image.

1. Tom moved swiftly down the hall. He jostled other students and banged into lockers on his way to the confrontation. (*participial phrase*)

2. The old printer irritated Sue's already-shaky nerves. It made scratching sounds that made her think of rat's feet. (*adjective clause or prepositional phrase*)

3. We relaxed, enjoying the serenity of the anchored rowboat. The waves gently bumped the craft's underside. (*compound sentence or absolute phrase*)

—DAN LOOSE