Analyzing Writing Strategies: Narration and Detailing

Purpose: Upon completion of this activity, students will be able to identify visual description and details in college-level prose. They will also practice improving the narration and detailing in a writing of their own. This DLA should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete.

Read the following passage, from Axelrod and Cooper’s *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing*:

When you write about remembered events in your life, you write autobiography, a popular genre of writing. Autobiography is so popular because reading as well as writing it leads people to reflect deeply on their own lives. When you reflect on the meaning of experience, you examine the forces within yourself and within society that have shaped you into the person you have become.

When you write about a remembered event, your purpose is to present yourself to readers by telling a story that discloses something significant about your life. Autobiographical writers do not just pour out their memories and feelings. Instead they shape those memories into a compelling story that conveys the meaning and importance of an experience—what can be called its autobiographical significance.

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In addition to the autobiographical significance, remembered event essays also contain all of the following:

- An entertaining story
- Vivid details that make events, people, and places memorable
- Self-presentation, but not unwanted self-disclosure

1. Think about situations in other courses, on the job, and in your life when you might have to write such a paper. Write these below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Courses</th>
<th>On the Job</th>
<th>In my Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ex: narrative paper</em></td>
<td><em>Ex: evaluation</em></td>
<td><em>Ex: personal journal</em></td>
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</table>

2. Now, read the attached essay by Annie Dillard entitled “Handed My Own Life.”
3. Complete the following activity, which also comes from *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing*.

- Visual description—naming objects and detailing their colors, shapes, sizes, and textures—is an important writing strategy in remembered event essays. To see how Dillard uses naming to present scenes and people, skim paragraphs 5-8, underlining the names of objects or people. These are nearly always nouns.
- To see how Dillard uses detailing, put brackets around all of the words and phrases that modify the nouns that name. Detailing helps readers imagine more precisely and concretely the objects and people Dillard presents.

3. Now choose between one of the following activities:

a. If you are currently writing a paper that uses narration and detailing, take this activity plus your draft to meet with an instructor or tutor. Review your answers to this activity with that person. Then, review the narration and details in your draft with that person.

   On the back of this sheet, write down the advice the instructor/tutor gives to you about improving the narration and/or details in your draft.

b. If you are not currently working on a draft, look back to the chart you created in #2 above. Choose one item from the list and write a short narration of a minimum of 400 words. Include description in your narration. Then, take this activity plus your short narrative to meet with an instructor or tutor. Review your answers to this activity with that person. Then, review the narration and details in your narrative with that person.

   On the back of this sheet, write down the advice the instructor/tutor gives to you about improving the narration and/or details in your draft.

**Attach a confirmation sheet or get a signature below:**

Instructor Signature:______________________________ Date:________________________
Annie Dillard, "Handed my own life"

After I read *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams* several times, I longed for a microscope. Everybody needed a microscope. Detectives used microscopes, both for the FBI and at Scotland Yard. Although I usually had to save my tiny allowance for things I wanted, that year for Christmas my parents gave me a microscope kit.

In a dark basement corner, on a white enamel table, I set up the microscope kit. I supplied a chair, a lamp, a batch of jars, a candle, and a pile of library books. The microscope kit supplied a blunt black three-speed microscope, a booklet, a scalpel, a dropper, an ingenious device for cutting thin segments of fragile tissue, a pile of clean slides and cover slips, and a dandy array of corked test tubes.

One of the test tubes contained “hay infusion.” Hay infusion was a wee brown chip of grass blade. You added water to it, and after a week it became a jungle in a drop, full of one-celled animals. This did not work for me. All I saw in the microscope after a week was a wet chip of dried grass, much enlarged.

Another test tube contained “diatomaceous earth.” This was, I believed, an actual pinch of the white cliffs of Dover. On my palm it was an airy, friable chalk. The booklet said it was composed of the siliceous bodies of diatoms-one-celled creatures that lived in, as it were, small glass jewelry boxes with fitted lids. Diatoms, I read, come in a variety of transparent geometrical shapes. Broken and dead and dug out of geological deposits, they made chalk and a fine abrasive used in silver polish and toothpaste. What I saw in the microscope must have been the fine abrasive-grit enlarged. It was years before I saw a recognizable, whole diatom. The kit's diatomaceous earth was a bust.

All that winter I played with the microscope. I prepared slides from things at hand, as the books suggested. I looked at the transparent membrane inside an onion's skin and saw the cells. I looked at a section of cork and saw the cells, and at scrapings from the inside of my cheek, ditto. I looked at my blood and saw not much; I looked at my urine and saw long iridescent crystals, for the drop had dried.

All this was very well, but I wanted to see the wildlife I had read about. I wanted especially to see the famous amoeba, who had eluded me. He was supposed to live in the hay infusion, but I hadn't found him there. He lived outside in warm ponds and streams, too, but I lived in Pittsburgh, and it had been a cold winter.

Finally late that spring I saw an amoeba. The week before, I had gathered puddle water from Frick Park; it had been festering in ajar in the basement. This June night after dinner I figured I had waited long enough. In the basement at my microscope table I spread a scummy drop of Frick Park puddle water on a slide, peeked in, and lo, there was the famous amoeba. He was as blobby and grainy as his picture; I would have known him anywhere.

Before I had watched him at all, I ran upstairs. My parents were still at table, drinking coffee. They, too, could see the famous amoeba. I told them, bursting, that he was all set up, that they should hurry before his water dried. It was the chance of a lifetime.
Father had stretched out his long legs and was tilting back in his chair. Mother sat with her knees crossed, in blue slacks, smoking a Chesterfield. The dessert dishes were still on the table. My sisters were nowhere in evidence. It was a warm evening; the big dining-room windows gave onto blooming rhododendrons.

Mother regarded me warmly. She gave me to understand that she was glad I had found what I had been looking for, but that she and Father were happy to sit with their coffee, and would not be coming down. She did not say, but I understood at once, that they had their pursuits (coffee) and I had mine. She did not say, but I began to understand then, that you do what you do out of your private passion for the thing itself.

I had essentially been handed my own life, in subsequent years my parents would praise my drawings and poems, and supply me with books, art supplies, and sports equipment, and listen to my troubles and enthusiasm, and supervise my hours, and discuss and inform, but they would not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection. My days and nights were my own to plan and fill.

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When I left the dining room that evening and started down the dark basement stairs, I had a life, I sat to my wonderful amoeba, and there he was, rolling his grains more slowly now, extending an arc of his edge for a foot and drawing himself along by that foot, and absorbing it again and rolling on. I gave him some more pond water.

I had hit pay dirt. For all I knew, there was paramecia, too, in that pond water, or daphniae, or stentors, or any of the many other creatures I had read about and never seen: volvox, the spherical algal colony; euglena with its one red eye; the elusive, glassy diatom; hydra, rotifers, water bears, worms. Anything was possible. The sky was the limit.