Introduction to Academic Writing: Chapter 4
Descriptive Paragraphs

Descriptive writing appeals to the senses, so it tells how something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and/or sounds. A good description is a word picture; the reader can imagine the object, place, or person in his or her mind.

A description usually follows a pattern of organization that we call **spatial order**. Spatial order is the arrangement of things in space. As you read the model paragraph, notice how the description moves from the bottom of the stairway to the top. Also notice how the description of the woman moves from far away to near.

The Stairways

When I was two or three years old, I lived in a house that had a strange atmosphere. I do not remember anything about the house except the stairway. It was dark, squeaking, and quite narrow, and its steps were a little high for me to climb up. From the bottom of the stairway, it seemed like an endless climb to the top. Beyond the darkness at the top of the stairway, there was an elegant, middle-aged lady leaning against the wall. I had to pass her every time I went to my room, for my room was the first room beyond the stairs on the second floor. The lady wore a beautiful dress with a quiet pattern and a tinge of blue, and her peaceful eyes stared at me every time I went up the stairs. As I carefully climbed up the last step, her eyes became fixed on me. She didn't talk, nor did she move. She just stood there and watched me clamber up the stairs. One day I touched her, but she did not react. Her face did not change expression, nor did she even blink. She just kept staring at me with her glittering eyes. Later, we moved out of the house, and I never saw her again. Now I know that the lady was a mannequin. My aunt, who lived in the house, used it for her dressmaking class. I did not know my mother. Maybe I imagined that the mannequin standing at the top of the stairs was my mother. The stairway with the strange atmosphere has an important place in my earliest memories.

Questions on the Model

1. What does the writer say about the atmosphere of the house in the first sentence?
2. How does the writer describe the stairway? Underline the words that describe it.
3. When the writer first describes the woman, is he looking up at her or down at her? What does he describe about her first? What does he describe last?

It does not usually matter whether the spatial organization is left to right, right to left, near to far, far to near, outside to inside, inside to outside, top to bottom, or bottom to top. It is only helpful to use some kind of spatial order when you write a description.

Spatial Order Signals	
at the top of	next to
in the center	between
on the left	behind
in front of	in back of
in the front of	in the back of
inside	across

Topic Sentence of Descriptive Paragraphs

The topic sentence of a descriptive paragraph should name the topic. The controlling idea should give the overall impression of the place you are describing. In the model paragraph, the topic is the house that the writer lived in as a child. The controlling idea is that it had a strange atmosphere. Each of the following sentences also states a topic and a controlling idea.

<u>My bedroom at home</u> is <u>my refuge from the outside world</u>.
<u>The campus of our school</u> is <u>like a small city</u>.
<u>The cafeteria at lunchtime</u> is <u>the school's social centre</u>.

Work with a classmate, a small group, or the whole class. Read the following topic sentences for descriptive paragraphs. Then discuss with your partner or group some possible details to describe the place. Next, decide on the best kind of spatial order to use in the description: right to left, left to right, top to bottom, far to near, outside to inside, and so on. Finally, write your details in spatial order on the lines.

1. After my sister spends two hours getting ready to go out, her room looks as if it had been hit by a magnitude 8.5 earthquake.

a. From the doorway, you see nothing but a mountain of clothes all over the floor.

b.…………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………

c.…………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………

2. The park near my house is full of activity on a sunny weekend afternoon.

a.…………………………………………………………………
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b.…………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………

c.…………………………………………………………………
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