

Detail

Read and think:

He was an old man. His black, heavily wrinkled face was surrounded by a halo of crinkly white hair and whiskers that seemed to separate his head from the layers of dirty coats piled on his smallish frame. His pants were bagged to the knee, where they were met with rags that went down to the old shoes. The rags were held on with strings, and there was a rope around his middle.

Walter Dean Myers, "The Treasure of Lemon Brown," *Face to Face: A Collection of Stories by Celebrated Soviet and American Writers*

Talk about it:

1. Underline all of the vivid details in the passage. How do the details help you understand the focus of the passage?
2. There are several contrasting details in the passage, details that give two completely different pictures of the man. For example, the passage says the man is wearing *layers of dirty coats*, which makes him sound padded and heavy; but he is also described as having a *smallish frame*, which makes him seem frail. Identify other contrasting details in the passage, and discuss what these contrasts add to the overall effect of the description.

Now you try it:

Using Walter Dean Myers' paragraph as a model, write a similar paragraph about an old cat. Use lots of vivid detail.

Imagery

Read and think:

He had bathed regularly in the lake, but not with soap and he thought how wonderful it would be to wash his hair. Thick with grime and smoke dirt, frizzed with wind and sun, matted with fish and foolbird grease, his hair had grown and stuck and tangled and grown until it was a clumped mess on his head.

Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*

Talk about it:

1. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between figurative language (like metaphors and similes) and imagery. That's because a lot of figurative language contains imagery. For example, we could describe someone's hair as limp and stringy, like overcooked spaghetti. This is a visual image—it makes you “see” the hair. But it is also figurative (hair is compared to overcooked spaghetti). Read Paulsen's paragraph again. Is the imagery figurative or not? Explain your answer.
2. What does the imagery in this passage reveal about the character's attitude toward his dirty hair?

Now you try it:

Write a paragraph describing a really messy room. Use lots of detail in your paragraph. Do *not* use any figurative language.

Syntax

Read and think:

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length, a single dim ray, like the thread of a spider, shot from out the crevice and full upon the vulture eye.

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” *The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Writings*

Talk about it:

1. Look carefully at the first sentence. There are several groups of words called **phrases** (*very patiently, without hearing him lie down, a very, very little*) that interrupt the flow of the sentence. Why do you think Poe wrote the sentence like this?
2. Look at the second sentence. What is the purpose of the dashes? How do these dashes, and the words they set off, involve the reader in the action of the passage?

Now you try it:

Write a sentence about doing your homework. Try to imitate the way Poe uses phrases to slow down the way you read the sentence. Use at least one dash.

When I _____

Tone

Read and think:

The haunted house was half in the shadows of the clump of elms in which it stood. The elms were almost bare now, and the ground around the house was yellow with damp leaves. The late afternoon light had a greenish cast which the blank windows reflected in a sinister way. An unhinged shutter thumped. Something else creaked.

Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*

Talk about it:

1. What is the tone of the passage? How does L'Engle use diction, detail, and imagery to create the tone?
2. Would the tone of the passage change if we deleted the words *haunted* and *sinister*? Explain.

Now you try it:

Rewrite L'Engle's paragraph with a different tone. Describe a lovely, warm house in summer. Use diction, detail, and imagery to create your tone.