Detail

Introduction

Detail is what makes writing come alive. Detail includes facts, observations, reasons, examples, and incidents that a writer uses to develop a subject. Specific details create a clear mental picture for the reader by focusing on particulars rather than abstractions. In other words, instead of saying, "I had a great time at the party," good writers will fill their papers with the *specifics* of what made the party fun. "A great time" means different things to different people. Was the music great? The food? The company? Were there games? Was there dancing? Swimming? Was your best friend there, or did you like it because you met new and interesting people? You get the idea. Detail helps the reader understand what you're writing about exactly as you want him/her to.

Detail also helps to focus the reader's attention on important ideas and shapes the reader's understanding of a topic. For example, let's say you took a trip to the beach and wanted to describe what you saw there. You can't describe everything—that would make a boring and rambling essay. Instead, you have to decide your focus. You could focus on the animals you saw at the beach (birds, crabs and other shellfish, fish); you could focus on the people you saw at the beach; you could focus on the terrible sunburn you got while you were there. Your focus also includes the attitude you want to convey. Maybe your attitude is that the beach is a place of peace and relaxation, or maybe you want to express your discomfort with the heat, sand, crowds, and sunburn. You decide. And once you decide, you select the details that support, develop, and enliven your focus and attitude. If you do it like the experts, the detail you select will guide your reader into the experience in just the way you want. You get to choose how your reader "sees" your experiences!

Detail also shapes the reader's understanding and view of a topic. The writer can emphasize a point by focusing the reader's attention on a thought or reason through detail. For example, if you are writing a paper about pets and decide to focus on the benefits of pet ownership, you need to fill your paper with specific details about these benefits. Don't tell your reader that pets are loyal and comforting. Instead, show details of how a specific dog saved a child's life; create a picture of your lonely grandmother being comforted by a purring cat. Detail allows the reader to participate as an equal partner in the "world" the writer has created and to follow the writer's ideas in the way the writer intends.

Getting Started with Detail

- Take a few minutes to practice before you begin the Detail Lessons. Think of a shopping trip to your favorite mall. Think about everything you might look at in that mall.

- Now make a list of the details you might focus on during a shopping trip to the mall.

Detail

Read and think:

I used to like going to have my hair cut. I liked the mirrors in the room and all the smells of lotions and shampoos. I liked to sit there—young and fresh and pretty—and see what the women were having done, to make themselves look younger and prettier. I liked the way my mother's hairdresser teased me about boyfriends and dances. Not anymore, though. Somebody held the door open so my mother could wheel me in, and a few people who had met me came around to say how sorry they were.

Cynthia Voigt, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*

Talk about it:

1. Which details support the attitude that the narrator used to like having her hair cut? Underline those details and talk about their effectiveness.

2. Which detail changes the direction of the passage? Note that the narrator's reason for not liking haircuts anymore is not explained. Nevertheless, you know what has happened. What effect does that have on you, the reader?

Now you try it:

Write a paragraph using details to capture the reasons why you like a particular sport. Don't explain why you like the sport. Instead, use details to show the reader what you like about the sport. If you want to experiment, try shifting the focus of your paragraph as Voigt does in her paragraph.