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## **Sense of Place: A Descriptive Writing Unit**

### Abstract:

In this unit designed for middle school, students will deepen their understanding of sense of place through description. They will look closely at the world around them, see things they have not seen before, use all of their senses to enrich their experience, notice specific details that capture a place's essence, and recognize the feeling or mood a place evokes. They will describe topics that are near and dear to them – nature, their surroundings, themselves, where they come from, and their favorite place – thereby increasing their motivation to write. By progressing from very short poems (haiku) to longer poems and eventually to prose, students will have repeated opportunities to practice incorporating new descriptive techniques into their writing (i.e., imagery, sensory language, specific detail, and mood). Moreover, by examining samples of professional writing throughout the unit, students will see exemplary description in action and be able to emulate these models in their own work.

### Duration:

This unit is designed to last six days. Each lesson is intended for a single class period, though some may require additional writing time either in school or at home.

Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- look closely at an object from multiple perspectives
- discover new things about their surroundings
- identify key components of haiku
- write haiku which include vivid images of nature
- practice using all five of their senses
- write a poem that includes rich sensory detail
- identify and analyze the use of interesting specifics in writing
- reflect on important memories from their childhood and family histories
- write a poem that includes powerful specific details
- identify mood in writing
- recognize components of effective description
- reflect on a place that is meaningful to them
- incorporate multiple descriptive writing techniques (imagery, sensory language, specific detail, and mood) into a single piece of writing
- revise and edit their writing and that of their peers
- prepare a final, polished description

## OUTLINE

|          |                             |   |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Lesson 1 | Really Seeing               | In this lesson, through a study of a painting and a “treasure hunt” of the schoolyard, students will practice looking closely at the world around them, examining things multiple times, and noticing specific details.   |
| Lesson 2 | Imagery Through Haiku       | In this lesson, after reading sample haiku and then spending time outdoors making observations, students will create their own haiku including vivid images of nature.  |
| Lesson 3 | Sensory Language Poem       | In this lesson, after activating their five senses and studying John Haines’ poem “The Long Rain,” students will explore the schoolyard and write their own poems about place including rich sensory detail.  |
| Lesson 4 | “Where I’m From” Poem       | In this lesson, students will read George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From” and, after brainstorming specific details about their childhood and family history, create their own poems based on Lyon’s model.   |
| Lesson 5 | Favorite Place Description  | In this lesson, after examining samples of descriptive writing, students will take everything they have learned about good description – from looking closely, using imagery, including sensory language, incorporating powerful specifics, and evoking mood – into a final prose piece about their favorite place. |
| Lesson 6 | Preparing the Final Product | In this lesson, students will share and self and peer edit their favorite place pieces to create a final, polished draft.   |

## LESSON 1: REALLY SEEING

### Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- look closely at an object from multiple perspectives
- discover new things about their surroundings

### Materials:

- a computer connected to a projector, or a poster of a nature painting (Monet's *Water Lilies*, for example)
- copies of the "Schoolyard Treasure Hunt" (Appendix A)

### Lesson Plan:

1. Give the students a few minutes to describe in writing what they see in the painting (either projected from a computer or on a poster). Have a few volunteers share. Then ask them to describe it again, in a number of different ways: from top to bottom, from left to right, from foreground to background, in terms of color, and in terms of texture. Again, ask volunteers to share. Note that the students all found something new to write even after they thought they'd finished describing the painting the first time. Lead into a discussion about how one really needs to look closely and in many different ways to see something fully.
2. Ask the students to briefly describe the schoolyard. Have a few volunteers share. Then provide them with the "Schoolyard Treasure Hunt" (Appendix A), and have them go outside and work with partners to find the items on the list. Upon returning to the classroom, have the students write a new description of the schoolyard based upon their discoveries. Discuss what they saw that they hadn't seen before.

## LESSON 2: IMAGERY THROUGH HAIKU

### Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- identify key components of haiku
- write haiku which include vivid images of nature

### Materials:

- copies of the “Haiku” handout (Appendix B)

### Lesson Plan:

1. Hand out “Haiku” (Appendix B) and have a few volunteers read the sample haiku. Ask the students, “What do you notice? What do the poems have in common? What makes a haiku a haiku?” Brainstorm a list of ideas. (They should include: 3 lines, no rhyme, 5-7-5 syllable count, and about nature.) Explain the term imagery and tell students that their goal in writing haiku will be to create a strong image (a picture using words) of nature.
2. Have students spend time outside making observations and drafting haiku. Upon returning to the classroom, have them edit their haiku to come closer to the 5-7-5 syllable count and then ask for volunteers to share what they have written. If there is time, have students pick their favorite haiku, write it neatly on white paper, and begin to illustrate it.

### LESSON 3: SENSORY LANGUAGE POEM

#### Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- practice using all five of their senses
- write a poem that includes rich sensory detail

#### Materials:

- copies of the John Haines' poem "The Long Rain" (Appendix C)

#### Lesson Plan:

1. Ask students to name the five senses. Then, have them work in pairs to "awaken their senses". One student should close his or her eyes while the other names specific things to imagine based upon each sense (for example, for smell, a student might say "fresh baked cookies; for sound, "tapping pencils", etc.). After doing all five senses, have the partners switch roles so that the one who gave instructions on what to imagine is now receiving instructions instead.
2. Hand out copies of "The Long Rain" (Appendix C) and ask volunteers to read it out loud. Discuss which senses are used in the poem, as well as the specific details that are included.
3. Have students once again go outside and find a quiet place to sit. Ask them to draft a poem describing their surroundings, incorporating as many senses as possible. Emphasize that lines can be very short and straightforward, as in Haines' poem. Upon returning to the classroom, give students time to edit their poems and opportunities to share what they wrote.

## LESSON 4: "WHERE I'M FROM" POEM

### Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- identify and analyze the use of interesting specifics in writing
- reflect on important memories from their childhood and family history
- write a poem that includes powerful specific details

### Materials:

- copies of the George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" (Appendix D)
- a computer connected to a projector
- copies of "Where I'm From Brainstorm" handout (Appendix E)

### Lesson Plan:

1. Hand out "Where I'm From" (Appendix D) and have students read and discuss the poem. Ask students to identify interesting specific details in the poem and try to figure out what Lyon was trying to communicate using these details. Talk about the power of specifics in writing.
2. Share the video poem based on "Where I'm From" created by student Julia Daniel from Tamalpais High School, found at <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>.
3. Have students brainstorm specific details about their childhood and family histories using the "Where I'm From Brainstorm" (Appendix E) and then use these details to draft their own "Where I'm From" poems. If there is time, give opportunities for sharing.

## LESSON 5: FAVORITE PLACE DESCRIPTION

### Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- identify mood in writing
- recognize components of effective description
- reflect on a place that is meaningful to them
- incorporate multiple descriptive writing techniques (imagery, sensory language, specific detail, and mood) into a single piece of writing

### Materials:

- copies of “Model Place Descriptions” handout (Appendix F)
- copies of “Favorite Place Assignment” handout (Appendix G)
- copies of “Favorite Place Brainstorm” handout (Appendix H)

### Lesson Plan:

1. Ask students to discuss their favorite places. Share many different ideas of favorite places (vacation house on the Cape, standing on the pitcher’s mound, one’s bedroom, etc).
2. Hand out “Model Place Descriptions” (Appendix F) and have students read them out loud. Ask them to then go back and reread each paragraph, underlining strong description, looking especially for imagery, sensory language, and specific detail. Share and discuss their findings.
3. Explain the idea of mood in writing and ask students, working with their partners, to try to determine the mood of each paragraph. Discuss which specific details or uses of language contributed to the mood.
4. Hand out “Favorite Place Assignment” (Appendix G) and have students read it aloud. Then, have students start to brainstorm material for their descriptive pieces using the “Favorite Place Brainstorm” (Appendix H). If there is time, students may begin drafting; otherwise, the writing of the piece may be done during subsequent class periods or at home.

## LESSON 6: PREPARING THE FINAL PRODUCT

### Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- revise and edit their writing and that of their peers
- prepare a final, polished description

### Materials:

- copies of “Editing Checklist” handout (Appendix I)

### Lesson Plan:

1. Hand out and review the “Editing Checklist” (Appendix H) to remind students of grammar rules. Ask them to then read their pieces silently looking for mistakes. When everyone is done, ask students to read them over a second time, looking specifically for at least one way to make an image more vivid, one sensory detail to add, one specific detail to develop further, and one word to improve.
2. Have students swap descriptions with a partner and read their partner’s paper silently looking for mistakes. Then have them read it over a second time, as they did for their own pieces, looking again for at least one way to make an image more vivid, one sensory detail to add, one specific detail to develop further, and one word to improve. Before handing papers back to their owners, have each student write a positive comment about the description they read.
3. If there is time, have students prepare the final drafts of their descriptions; otherwise, this may be done during subsequent class periods or at home.

**APPENDIX A**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

**SCHOOLYARD TREASURE HUNT**

Working with your partner, try to find each of the following items in our schoolyard. Walk around and look closely. Notice your surroundings. You might be surprised what you see! For every item you find, write a brief description of where it was located (i.e., under the big tree, near the gate, etc.)

A yellow flower

Something dead

Something beautiful

A branch with no leaves

A dandelion

Something red

Animal tracks

An insect

A cloud that looks like something specific

A tree you'd like to climb

A rock

Something purple

APPENDIX B

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

😊 HAIKU 😊

\*\*\*\*\*

Temple bells die out.  
The fragrant blossoms remain.  
A perfect evening.

- Matsuo Basho (1644-1694)

The lightning flashes!  
And slashing through the darkness,  
A night-heron's screech.

- Matsuo Basho (1644-1694)

\*\*\*\*\*

The falling flower  
I saw drift back to the branch  
Was a butterfly.

- Moritake

\*\*\*\*\*

A single leaf falls,  
then suddenly another,  
stolen by the breeze.

- Ransetsu

\*\*\*\*\*

## APPENDIX B CONTINUED

A haiku is a poem of three lines that is often about nature and includes imagery. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the third has five. The lines do not rhyme. Using the process below, try to write your own haikus!

1. Record your observations as you walk outside. These can be in simple note form.
  
2. Try to describe – *in a single sentence* – a scene that you saw. Write your sentence in present tense.
  
3. Check to make sure your sentence includes a clear and vivid image (a picture in your mind). Cross out any words that do not contribute to a clear image and, if necessary, replace them with better words.
  
4. Write out your sentence as a haiku, in three lines.
  
5. Count the syllables. Edit and change words to come as close as possible to the 5, 7, 5 syllable count. If it's not exact, that's okay. Write the finished draft of your haiku in one of the boxes below. When you finish, go back to step #2 and try writing another one!

### FINAL HAIKUS

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1. |  |
| 2. |  |
| 3. |  |
| 4. |  |

APPENDIX C

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

**THE LONG RAIN**

*By John Haines*

Rain falls  
in the quiet woods.

Smoke hangs  
above the evening fire,  
fragrant with pitch.

Alone, deep  
in a willow thicket,  
the olive thrush  
is singing.

## APPENDIX D

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

### **WHERE I'M FROM**

*By George Ella Lyon*

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.)  
I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.  
I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger,  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments--  
snapped before I budded --  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

**APPENDIX E**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

**WHERE I'M FROM BRAINSTORM**

Before writing your own "Where I'm From" poem, you must first take a trip down memory lane to reflect on your childhood and family. Rather than list dates and addresses, try to come up with a specific detail for each category below that captures the essence of a time and place, and best reflects your family history, who you were as a child, and who you are today. The blank spaces are designed to allow you to pick your own topics.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Where you grew up                                   |  |
| Your parents' personalities/jobs                    |  |
| Memories with siblings and/or friends               |  |
| Favorite food when you were young                   |  |
| Favorite book and/or tv show when you were young    |  |
| Favorite activity when you were young               |  |
| Family traditions you remember from childhood       |  |
| Words you remember hearing as a child               |  |
| Where your ancestors came from                      |  |
| An object that was meaningful to you as a child     |  |
| Important memories from childhood                   |  |
| What was happening in the world when you were young |  |
| Injuries you endured when you were young            |  |
|   |  |
|   |  |
|   |  |

## APPENDIX F

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

### **MODEL PLACE DESCRIPTIONS**

In each of the following paragraphs (the first written by a student, the rest by professional writers), the author uses precise descriptive details to evoke a distinctive mood as well as to convey a memorable picture.

#### **1) The Laundry Room**

The windows at either end of the laundry room were open, but no breeze washed through to carry off the stale odors of fabric softener, detergent, and bleach. In the small ponds of soapy water that stained the concrete floor were stray balls of multicolored lint and fuzz. Along the left wall of the room stood ten rasping dryers, their round windows offering glimpses of jumping socks, underwear, and fatigues. Down the center of the room were a dozen washing machines, set back to back in two rows. Some were chugging like steamboats; others were whining and whistling and dribbling suds. Two stood forlorn and empty, their lids flung open, with crudely drawn signs that said "Broke!" A long shelf partially covered in blue paper ran the length of the wall, interrupted only by a locked door. Alone, at the far end of the shelf, sat one empty laundry basket and an open box of Tide. Above the shelf at the other end was a small bulletin board decorated with yellowed business cards and torn slips of paper: scrawled requests for rides, reward offers for lost dogs, and phone numbers without names or explanations. On and on the machines hummed and wheezed, gurgled and gushed, washed, rinsed, and spun.

#### **2) Mabel's Lunch\***

Mabel's Lunch stood along one wall of a wide room, once a pool hall, with the empty cue racks along the back side. Beneath the racks were wire-back chairs, one of them piled with magazines, and between every third or fourth chair a brass spittoon. Near the center of the room, revolving slowly as if the idle air was water, a large propeller fan suspended from the pressed tin ceiling. It made a humming sound, like a telephone pole, or an idle, throbbing locomotive, and although the switch cord vibrated it was cluttered with flies. At the back of the room, on the lunch side, an oblong square was cut in the wall and a large woman with a soft, round face peered through at us. After wiping her hands, she placed her heavy arms, as if they tired her, on the shelf.

\* Adapted from a paragraph in *The World in the Attic*, by Wright Morris (Scribner's, 1949).

## APPENDIX F CONTINUED

### **3) Subway Station\***

Standing in the subway station, I began to appreciate the place--almost to enjoy it. First of all, I looked at the lighting: a row of meager light bulbs, unscreened, yellow, and coated with filth, stretched toward the black mouth of the tunnel, as though it were a bolt hole in an abandoned coal mine. Then I lingered, with zest, on the walls and ceilings: lavatory tiles which had been white about fifty years ago, and were now encrusted with soot, coated with the remains of a dirty liquid which might be either atmospheric humidity mingled with smog or the result of a perfunctory attempt to clean them with cold water; and, above them, gloomy vaulting from which dingy paint was peeling off like scabs from an old wound, sick black paint leaving a leprous white undersurface. Beneath my feet, the floor a nauseating dark brown with black stains upon it which might be stale oil or dry chewing gum or some worse defilement: it looked like the hallway of a condemned slum building. Then my eye traveled to the tracks, where two lines of glittering steel--the only positively clean objects in the whole place--ran out of darkness into darkness above an unspeakable mass of congealed oil, puddles of dubious liquid, and a mishmash of old cigarette packets, mutilated and filthy newspapers, and the debris that filtered down from the street above through a barred grating in the roof.

\* Adapted from a paragraph in *Talents and Geniuses*, by Gilbert Highet (Oxford UP, 1957).

### **4) The Kitchen\***

The kitchen held our lives together. My mother worked in it all day long, we ate in it almost all meals except the Passover seder, I did my homework and first writing at the kitchen table, and in winter I often had a bed made up for me on three kitchen chairs near the stove. On the wall just over the table hung a long horizontal mirror that sloped to a ship's prow at each end and was lined in cherry wood. It took up the whole wall, and drew every object in the kitchen to itself. The walls were a fiercely stippled whitewash, so often rewhitened by my father in slack seasons that the paint looked as if it had been squeezed and cracked into the walls. A large electric bulb hung down the center of the kitchen at the end of a chain that had been hooked into the ceiling; the old gas ring and key still jutted out of the wall like antlers. In the corner next to the toilet was the sink at which we washed, and the square tub in which my mother did our clothes. Above it, tacked to the shelf on which were pleasantly ranged square, blue-bordered white sugar and spice jars, hung calendars from the Public National Bank on Pitkin Avenue and the Minsker Progressive Branch of the Workmen's Circle; receipts for the payment of insurance premiums, and household bills on a spindle; two little boxes engraved with Hebrew letters. One of these was for the poor, the other to buy back the Land of Israel. Each spring a bearded little man would suddenly appear in our kitchen, salute us with a hurried Hebrew blessing, empty the boxes (sometimes with a sidelong look of disdain if they were not full), hurriedly bless us again for remembering our less fortunate Jewish brothers and sisters, and so take his departure until the next spring, after vainly trying to persuade my mother to take still another box. We did occasionally remember to drop coins in the boxes, but this was usually only on the dreaded morning of "midterms" and final examinations, because my mother thought it would bring me luck.

\* Adapted from a paragraph in *A Walker in the City*, by Alfred Kazin (Harvest, 1969).

**APPENDIX G**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

**FAVORITE PLACE ASSIGNMENT**

Think about your favorite place, somewhere you love spending time. Maybe it's a room in your house, a vacation destination, a summer cottage, a park where you love to walk, a store, your bed... or even the pitcher's mound or goalie box where you play! Most importantly, think about a place that is meaningful to you.

You will be writing a detailed description of your favorite place that is at least one page long. You are writing this as a description, not an essay, so you do not need formal paragraphs with topic sentences, reasons, concluding sentences, etc. Just describe the place as if you are painting a picture of it, using imagery, sensory language, specific details, and mood. Close your eyes and imagine this place, or if possible spend some time there. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel there? What specific details stand out? What feeling does the place give you? You must complete a brainstorm before you begin to write, and you will be graded according to the rubric below.

RUBRIC

|                      | Excellent  | Good   | Keep on working!  |
|----------------------|--|--|---|
| Descriptive Elements | Your description creates a vivid image. It evokes a powerful mood and includes rich sensory detail and interesting specifics which capture the essence of a place. Your word choice is precise, varied, and sophisticated.<br>30 | Your description is effective, but could be made even stronger by adding more imagery, more sensory detail, more specifics, and/or more careful word choice.<br>26 | Your description does not create a clear picture in the reader's mind. You need to incorporate much more imagery, sensory detail, and/or specifics.<br>22 |
| Conventions          | There are no mistakes with grammar or spelling.<br>20  | There are few mistakes with grammar or spelling.<br>17   | There are many mistakes with grammar or spelling.<br>15   |

Total: \_\_\_\_\_ / 50

**APPENDIX H**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

**FAVORITE PLACE BRAINSTORM**

**Choosing a Subject**

List 5 possible favorite places in the box below and then consider which would be the most interesting and meaningful to write about. Circle the one you choose.

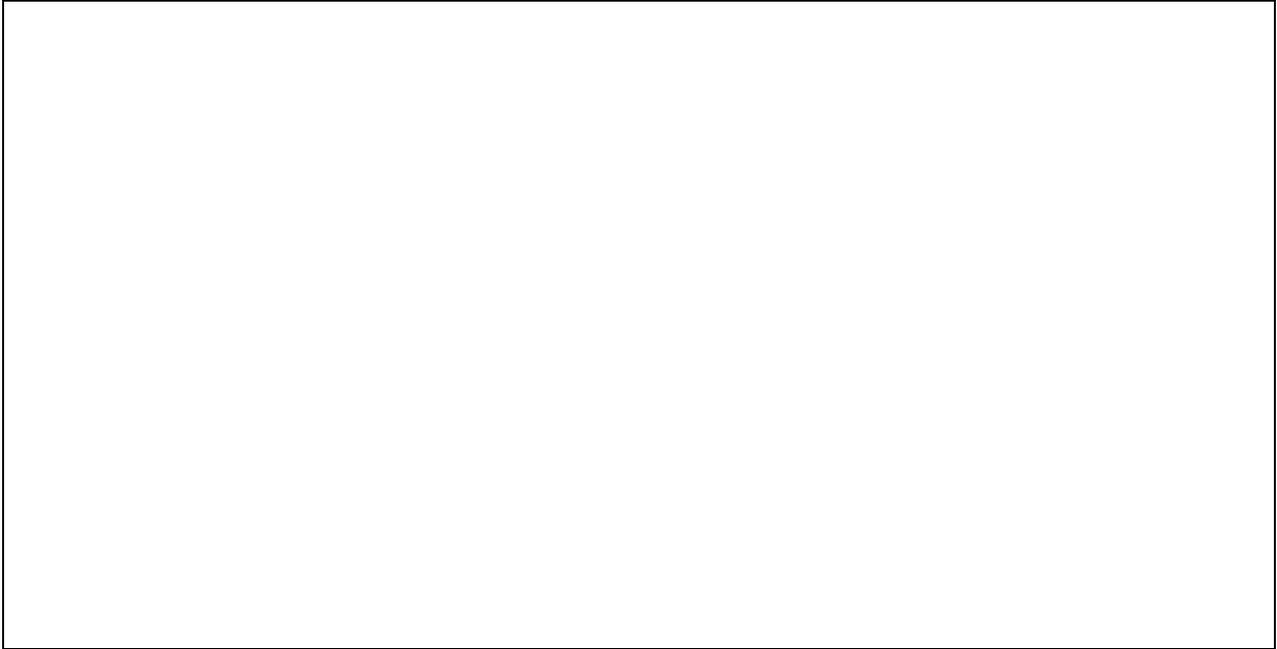
**Deciding on a Mood**

Think about how your favorite place makes you feel. When you are there, are you excited? Relaxed? Happy? Comfortable? Write at least 3 feelings, or moods, below. Your description should evoke these feelings.

**Including Sensory Details**

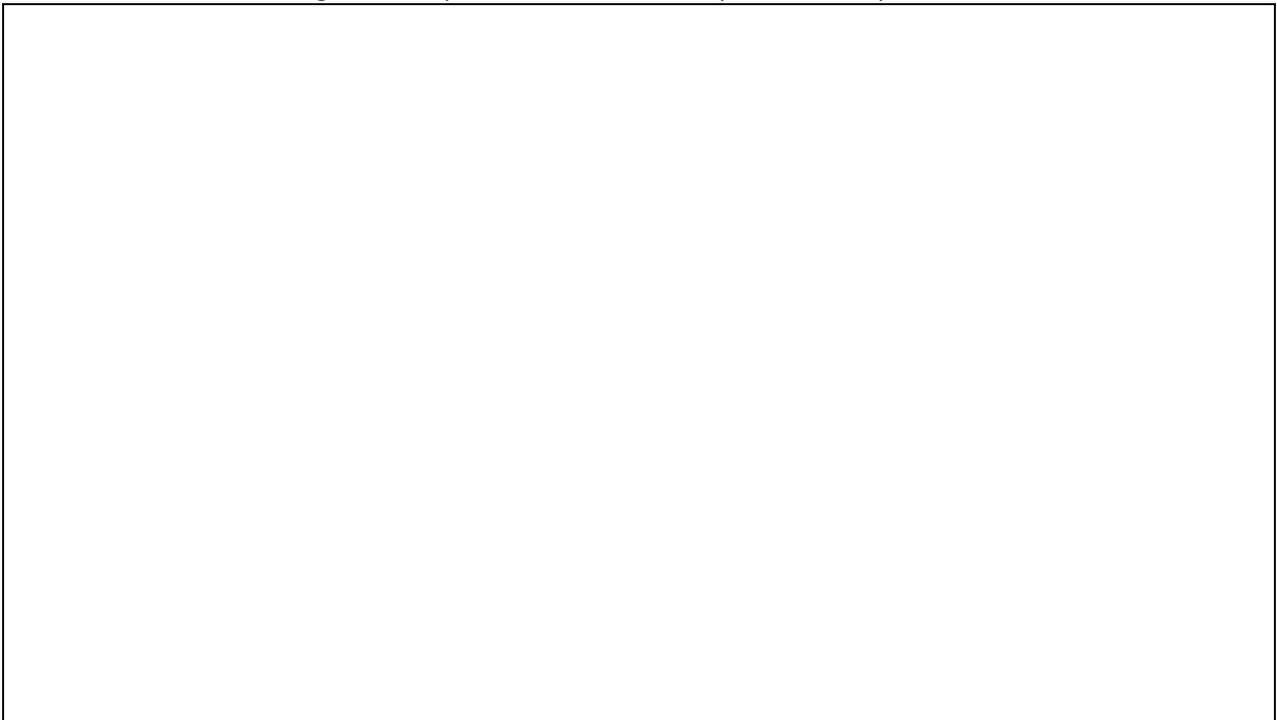
Close your eyes and put yourself inside your favorite place, or if possible, spend some time there. What do you see, hear, smell, feel, and taste? Decide which senses (at least 3) you want to include and brainstorm as many sensory details as you can.

**Including Sensory Details continued**



**Including Specific Details**

In the box below, brainstorm ideas for specific details that you could include in your description. These details should be meaningful and capture the “essence” of your favorite place.



Now, using the best of your brainstorming material, begin to write your first draft! Keep in mind that your diction (word choice) is very important!!

## APPENDIX I

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group \_\_\_\_\_

### EDITING CHECKLIST

**Don't forget to look for these mistakes when you edit!**

\_\_\_\_\_ **1. Capitalization**

Did you begin each sentence with a capital?

Did you capitalize each proper noun?

\_\_\_\_\_ **2. Indentation**

Did you indent the beginning of each paragraph?

\_\_\_\_\_ **3. Punctuation**

Did you place a punctuation mark at the end of each sentence?

Are your commas used correctly?

\_\_\_\_\_ **4. Sentence Structure**

Did you check for run-ons and fragments?

\_\_\_\_\_ **5. Apostrophes**

Did you use apostrophes to show possession (and not plurals)?

\_\_\_\_\_ **6. Spelling**

Did you double-check your spelling?

\_\_\_\_\_ **7. Numbers and Symbols**

Did you write out numbers one through ten?

Did you use words instead of symbols? ("And" instead of "&")

\_\_\_\_\_ **8. Underlining and Quotations**

Did you underline book titles?

Did you punctuate dialogue correctly?

\_\_\_\_\_ **9. Verbs**

Do all the subjects and verbs agree in number?

Are all your verbs in the same tense?



## ELA COMMON CORE STANDARDS MET FOR GRADE 7

### **Writing: Text Types and Purposes**

W.7.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

### **Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing**

W.7.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.7.5. With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.

### **Language: Conventions of Standard English**

L.7.1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

L.7.2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

### **Language: Knowledge of Language**

L.7.3. Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

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