Description

What does it look like? Or remind you of? What does it sound like? Or smell like? Does it have a taste? If so, what kind? What does it feel like to the touch? Does it evoke a comparison? A mood?

Of all the elements that go into the structure of a piece of creative writing, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, nothing is more important than the use of description. Why description? Because this is what brings something to life, gives it immediacy and dimension, places it in just the right perspective for the reader, adds that factor of imagery that is so vital for the reader to accept and understand a particular point of your piece.

Description in essence, is the sensory bridge between the writer and his reader. It doesn’t matter whether you are dealing with something animate or inanimate. If it’s important for your reader, then lay it out there for him in a way that leaves no doubt in his mind as to what it is, or how it is.

Good description is written so that if something is familiar in a reader’s frame of reference he subconsciously says: “Sure—that’s just the way it is!” And he says it with a note of appreciation. You’ve brought it right to him. If it isn’t something in the reader’s realm of familiarity it should be written for another effect. He says, subconsciously: “Oh, so that’s the way it is...”. (You can almost note the difference in his subconscious tone of interpretation. And he’s appreciating your art either way.)

You’ve got to realize that the transference of a thought or an idea to a printed page is stripped of all the physical aids the viewer gets from television or the movies. Only your written words can do the job. All right—what are you working with? A scene? A person? A bit of action? A combination of these? You want to tell it like it is, right? This puts a priority, first of all on your power of observation. And it is a power. A power tool, as it were. And don’t be lazy in exercising this power. If you’re actually viewing the thing you’re describing, take a good long look at it. Sop up everything about it for every possible facet and effect that will help you make a better whole. Do a mental 360-degree turn around it. Do the same thing if you’re reaching into your recall, and find yourself forced to describe something from memory and your experience with it.

If you don’t observe, you can’t describe.

Let’s go back, now, to where we came in. The senses. The best description appeals to the sensory perceptions of the reader. But not necessarily all of them at once, of course. You’ve got sight, sound, touch, hearing, and feeling. Some writers say there is a sixth sense that is not the extra sensory perception we hear about. The writer’s sixth sense is what is sometimes referred to as visceral. “Make ‘em feel it in the gut,” is the way they put it. In other words, the emotional impact.

In any event, your reader must see or hear, etc. through your eyes and your ears. Learn to be choosy and inventive about these sensory appeals and seek to combine them effectively.
Let's check into a few examples. A cop is patrolling a lonely beat on a bitterly cold night. How could you bring this to life if you had to do it in a paragraph? Certainly you're not going to say "the cop walked down the cold street," because that doesn't invest it with reality and imagery. Here's how one writer did it:

It was piercingly cold as the cop walked down the dark street, his shoulders hunched protectively, yet in no way protecting, against the penetrating chill that was whipped against and through him by the keening wind. Above, a few stars flickered with frosty uncertainty, and under his feet the packed snow alternately crunched and squealed as it does when pressed in frigid temperature. Some where, the wind lifted the lid of a garbage can and the angry metallic clang as it hit the curb cut through the thin air as though it were right alongside him instead of a block away. He blew out his breath in short, curling bursts of white vapor and beat his nightstick smartly against his thigh as though to break up what surely seemed to be congealed blood in his veins. It would be one of those long nights that had no apparent interest in coming to an end...

The whole adds up to a sense of loneliness, a sense of isolation, an attitude of duty in an environment of numbing hardship. The reader is now in empathy with the mood the writer wanted to build.

Let's examine this, now, for sensory appeal. You can see the hunched shoulders; feel the chill that was brought by the keening wind which you can hear. Just as you can hear the crunch-