Adding More Spice to the Mix

You can add description by: (1) one of the easiest but most overlooked method is simply to add some descriptive action verbs., (2) including more detailed adjectives and adverbs, (3)some metaphors and similes to make your reader better relate to your ideas and images, and (4) detailed specific examples.

A generalization, for example, like "the conference was a complete success" becomes easier to understand when specific details are added. To each person, the conference might mean something different. If each one of us closed our eyes and pictured a successful conference, we would all probably visualize a variety of scenarios. What if I told everyone to close their eyes and picture this sentence: "Their baby was beautiful." To each one of us, beauty is something a little different. It is easier to picture what the writer specifically means by adding some details. *Their small, delicate six-pound baby was beautiful.* Just by adding only one of the ingredients for description (adjectives), we already have a clearer picture of what their baby looks like and what is beautiful to them.

(1) Verbs are the most important element in a sentence because they identify the action that the subject performs. Verbs that describe specific actions offer the reader a visual image. Usually these are action verbs (any verb you can visualize) like dance, kiss, jog, grow, swarm), whereas linking verbs show a state of being like the forms of to be (am, is, was, were, are, being, been) or the senses (look, smell, taste, sound, feel) as well as seem, appear, become, and the forms of to have and to do). For example, the verbs *race, blaze, buzz,* and *warble* create immediate images and sounds for the reader. However, linking verbs, such as *to be, seem,* or *appear,* do not create images for the reader. Instead, these verbs offer equations or only approximations of actions: for example, he is an engineer, or she seems happy. Therefore, these linking verbs are not as vivid as verbs that describe actions.

Analyze the following paragraph. Pay particular attention to the verbs in this description of the Brooklyn Dodgers written by Roger Kahn, a sportswriter, long after the baseball team left Brooklyn for Los Angeles from Roger Kahn, The Boys of Summer.

> The team grew old. The Dodgers deserted Brooklyn. Wreckers swarmed into Ebbets Field and leveled the stands. Soil that had felt the spikes of Robinson and Reese was washed from the faces of mewling children. The New York *Herald Tribune* writhed, changed its face and collapsed. I covered a team that no longer exists in a demolished ball park for a newspaper that is dead.

(2a) Adjectives are not a central part of the speech as subjects and verbs are. However, adjectives help add details and specifics to the nouns in your sentences that could otherwise be flat and vague.(Remember the above example!)

(2b) Adverbs, which modify or give extra information about verbs, nouns, and other adverbs, are similar to adjectives, can be a little more tricky. While they usually end in -ly like *usually* or *quickly*, there are some exceptions: however, still, moreover, seldom, furthermore, instead, beside, also, never, not, nevertheless, nonetheless, thus, therefore. otherwise, hence, almost, likewise, then, next, indeed, often, henceforth, meanwhile.

(3) Figurative language uses words for more than their literal meanings. They are not merely decorative, however. Figurative language enhances meaning. It makes comparisons and connections that draw on one idea or image to explain another. Metaphors and similes are a two examples of figurative language, and they are a great way to help bring the reader closer to your

experiences.

Metaphor A comparison between otherwise dissimilar things without using the word *like* or *as*. Example: The rush-hour traffic bled out of all the city's major arteries.

Simile A direct comparison between otherwise dissimilar things, using the word *like* or *as*. Example: Langston Hughes said that a deferred dream dries up like a raisin in the sun.

Hyperbole An overstatement or a deliberate exaggeration for emphasis. Example: The poet Andrew Marvell said that praising his love's eyes and forehead could take one hundred years.

A **cliche** is a worn-out expression that has lost its capacity to communicate effectively. Many cliches are similes or metaphors, once clever but now overused and therefore flat: *dead as a doornail, gentle as a lamb, cold as ice, straight as an arrow*. If you have heard a certain expression over and over again, so has your reader. If you cannot think of a way to rephrase a cliche, it is probably best to drop the phrase entirely.

You should be aware that English is full of frequently used word groups that are not cliches (for example, *up and down* and *in and out*). Common patterns are not cliches and need not be avoided.

Take a brief moment to revise these cliches by using the idea in each cliche for a sentence of your own in plain English:

1. The bottom line is that Carl either raises his grade point average or finds himself in hot water.
2. When they were handing our persistence, Carl was first in line.
3. The $64,000 question is, Will Carl make it safe and sound, or will the college drop him like a hot potato?

Now take a look at the following paragraph by Alfred Kazin from his essay called "Supper Time in a Jewish Kitchen" and try to find the verbs, metaphors, similes, and other forms of description:

Ripeness filled our kitchen even at supper time. The room was so wild with light, it made me tremble; I could not believe my eyes. In the sink a great sandy pile of radishes, lettuces, tomatoes, cucumbers and scallions broke upon their stark greens and reds the harshness of the world's monotony. The window shade by the sewing machine was drawn, its tab baking in the sun. Through the screen came the chant of the score being called up from the last baseball game below. Our front door was open, to let in air; you could hear the boys on the roof scuffing their shoes against the gravel. Then, my father home to the smell of paint in the hall, we sat down to chopped cucumbers floating in the ice-cold borscht, radishes, tomatoes and lettuce in sour cream, a mound of corn just out of the pot steaming on the table, the butter slowly melting in a cracked blue soup plate— breathing hard against the heat, we sat down together at last.

A narrative paragraph purpose is to tell a story, used for action and to push the story forward. It should answer the six questions (or as much of these as possible). A descriptive paragraph (see Adding Spices To The Mix xerox) is used to add ambiance, or set a mood helps paint a picture. Your job is to do both, to combine the two ingredients into one savory dish like pasta and sauce.

Descriptive: The young man's height made him stand out in the crowd, towering over his fellow commuters as they slipped in and out of the train. As if ashamed of his height, he stooped at the shoulders, and cradled the last inch of cigarette in his giant hands.

Narrative: The young man slid into the smoking corner of the station and begged a fellow commuter for a light. He sat, brooding, watching each and every person who walked past with a baleful glare. He cradled the last of his cigarette in his hands, took a final puff and tossed the butt to the ground. Pausing only to grind it into the floor, he took off, gaze intent on a middle-aged man who had passed moments earlier.

Remember: Think of the story you are telling as a mini-movie. The readers can only see what you tell them to see. Engage the five senses, make the most of metaphors and similes as well as allusions while steering clear of clichés and hyperboles. One easy way to liven up your narrative is to add active verbs (tell specific actions) rather than passive. For instance, instead of saying, "The captain was really angry," try using a more interesting verb. You might say, "The captain seethed with rage." A thesaurus is a great tool for expanding vocabulary.

Subway Station (excerpt from Talents and Geniuses by Gilbert Highet

Standing in a subway station, I began to appreciate the place— almost to enjoy it. First of all, I looked at the lighting: a row of meager electric 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 ceiling: 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 was 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 object in the whole place— ran out of darkness into darkness about 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 barrel grating in the roof. As I looked up toward the sunlight, I could see more debris sifting slowly downward, and making an abominable pattern in the slanting beam of dirt-laden sunlight. I was going on to relish more features of this unique scene: such as the advertisement posters on the walls— here a text from the Bible, there a half-naked girl, here a woman wearing a hat consisting of a hen sitting on a nest full of eggs, and there a pair of girl's legs walking up the keys of a cash register— all scribbled over with unknown names and well-known obscenities written with black crayon and red lipstick; but then my train came in at last, I boarded it, took my seat and began to read. The experience was over for the time.

1. What did the author enjoy at first?
2. State the topic sentence.
3. Was the speaker's reaction positive or negative? What would your reaction be?
4. Specifically what makes the paragraph effective? What does not?
5. What was the only "clean object in the whole place"?
6. Look up hyperbole on the internet. Write the example you find and tell me the site you found this on. What do you think is an example of that in this paragraph?

Descriptive Elements

The ability to describe something convincingly will serve a writer well in any kind of essay situation. The most important thing to remember is that **your job as writer is to show, not tell.** If you say that the tree is beautiful, your readers are put on the defensive: "Wait a minute," they think. "We'll be the judge of that! Show us a beautiful tree and we'll believe." Do not rely, then, on adjectives that attempt to characterize a thing's attributes. *Lovely, exciting, interesting* – these are all useful adjectives in casual speech or when we're pointing to something that is lovely, etc., but in careful writing they don't do much for us; in fact, they sound hollow.

Let nouns and verbs do the work of description for you. With nouns, your readers will see; with verbs, they will feel. In the following paragraph, taken from George Orwell's famous anti-imperialist essay, "Shooting an Elephant," see how the act of shooting the elephant delivers immense emotional impact. What adjectives would you expect to find in a paragraph about an elephant? big? grey? loud? enormous? Do you find them here? Watch the verbs, instead. Notice, too, another truth about description: when time is fleeting, slow down the prose. See how long the few seconds of the shooting can take in this paragraph.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick–one never does when a shot goes home–but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time–it might have been five seconds, I dare say–he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.