Writing a Descriptive Essay: Epic Heroes

*“Her [Grendel’s mother’s] body fell / To the floor, lifeless, the sword was* *wet / With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.”* (Beowulf, *lines 643–645*)

In some narrative poetry, such as *Beowulf,* descriptions of the characters are sometimes graphic, but often sparse. Imagine that you are a screenwriter and your job is to describe a character from a narrative poem—such as Hector from the *Iliad,* or Enkidu from *Gilgamesh*—for a scene in a film. You would begin by visualizing your character in context. Then, you would add layers of your own description—for example, the character’s speech, thoughts, feelings, and actions—all to help flesh out the scene for the film treatment. For this workshop you will follow a similar procedure in writing a **descriptive essay** of a character from a narrative poem.

Prewriting

Choose a Character

**Heroes, Monsters, or None of These**   As a start for your descriptive essay, find a narrative poem by looking in your textbook for ideas, by consulting with your teacher or school librarian, or by typing in keywords, such as *narrative poem*, on an Internet search. Choose a poem that interests you, and read it. Next, choose a character from the poem that creates a distinctive impression on you. Major characters—like Beowulf or Grendel in *Beowulf,* Hector in the *Iliad,* or Gilgamesh and Enkidu in*Gilgamesh*—may appear throughout the narrative. Minor characters—such as Hector’s wife—may appear only briefly at an important point in the narrative.

Whether you choose a major or minor character, focus on just one scene or one bit of action that is important to that character, such as the battle between Beowulf and Grendel in *Beowulf* or the race between Hector and Achilles in the *Iliad*. By adding a variety of details to the information in the poem, you will create a fuller description of the character in that scene.

As you add details, however, remember to keep your description of the character in the context—the literary world of the poem. For example, in *Beowulf,* monsters come up from “secret places” (545) to eat men alive. In the world of ancient Troy in Homer’s*Iliad,* Hector is “shackled fast by his deadly fate.” A description of Beowulf or Hector should respect the reality of those worlds for the characters, even though they may be worlds very different from yours.

Consider Audience and Purpose

**Mass Appeal**   Your **audience,** or readers, will be your teacher and classmates. Even so, you may need to include background information to show them why the scene you have chosen is important for the character. Your **purpose** is to expand the exact words and phrases from a narrative poem into a descriptive essay. To do so, take phrases that describe the character, such as “noble Hector” (243), and elaborate on them. Notice the way one student brainstormed about audience and purpose for an essay describing the noble Hector at his worst moment.

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| What do my readers already know about Hector? | They probably know that Hector is one of Homer’s great characters—a Trojan hero who has killed many Greeks—and that he is called “noble.” |
| What do I want them to learn about Hector from my description? | Hector has fears that cause him to act like a coward. His actions in a race for his life, however, prove that he is still “noble.” |

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The **form** of your prose description will be different from the poetic narrative. Nonetheless, you should still incorporate natural, fresh, and vivid language; and you should use complete sentences and paragraphs.

Gather, Evaluate, and Organize Support

**Hit Your Marks**   As you plan your descriptive essay, start with what you already know. Re-read the passage you have chosen, and jot down exact words and phrases from the poem that describe how the character looks, speaks, thinks, acts, and feels. Put the words and phrases within quotation marks and write down the line or page numbers for the words and phrases you use. These specific details from the narrative poem will be the basis of your essay—its skeleton.

**The Full Screen Treatment**   Add muscle and sinew to your essay by adding to the words and phrases you have taken from the poem. You will use **narrative** and **descriptive details** to expand on

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| **•** |  the character’s thoughts, actions, and appearance in the scene |
| **•** |  the sequence of events depicted in the scene—its plot |

**Narrative details** include the character’s **actions** and **reactions** (in other words, movements and gestures), **speech,** and**thoughts and** **feelings**—emotions and responses.

**Descriptive details** include information about **physical** **appearance—**a character’s facial features, clothing, and so on. Add texture by using **sensory details—**the sights, smells, and sounds of a scene. Shade your writing further with **figurative language—**metaphors, similes, or strong images. Elaborating upon narrative details with descriptive details makes for a rich and full description.

Look at the way one student took the exact words of a sentence about Hector from the narrative poem and created a dynamic description. In the scene, Hector doesn’t really want to do battle with Achilles, but knows he must. The student added narrative details first, then elaborated with descriptive details to show how and why Hector “wavers” as he waits for Achilles to appear.

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| **Exact words:** “So he wavered, waiting there” (lines 156–157). |
| **Narrative details:**  | **Descriptive details:** |
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| **1.** | Hector waits and dreams about his wife, Andromache.**(feelings)** |

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| **1.** | Hector’s craggy face softens, and a dreamy look comes over it. **(physical appearance)** He can almost see Andromache at her loom shuttling thegolden threads through the red cloth.**(sensory details)** |

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| **2.** | He thinks about Achilles and becomes angry.**(thoughts, feelings)** |

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| **2.** | Then, he remembers his enemy Achilles, and his eyes harden and his fist curlsaround his spear. **(figurative language)** |

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| **3.** | Hector adjusts the armor he took from his enemy Patroclus. A dog looks for food around his ankles.**(actions)** |

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| **3.** | As a stray dog snuffs for food around his sandals, Hector pulls at the armor he took from his enemy, Patroclus, loosening it from around his huge neck and biceps. **(physical appearance)** |

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**Director’s Cut**Think for a moment about how you want to present your prose description to your readers. Choose an order that is logical and makes sense to you. **Chronological order** organizes an essay by time order. **Order of importance** arranges ideas from least important to most important. **Spatial order** presents descriptive information according to directions—left, right, up, down, behind, before, and so on.

Write Your Thesis Statement

**In Close Up**   Before you begin drafting your essay, read back over your notes. What is your distinctive perspective on your subject—your **thesis?** The thesis statement is a summation of what you think about your character and serves to guide the rest of your descriptive essay, as the following example shows.

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| As Hector readies himself for the approach of Achilles, his appearance, actions, and thoughts and feelings show how even the most noble of all Trojan warriors fears death. |

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| PRACTICE & APPLY 1Use the preceding instruction to select a narrative poem and a character to describe, establish your purpose and tone, and gather and organize narrative and descriptive details. |