
UNIT 19 DESCRIPTIVE COMPOSITION - 1

DESCRIBING PERSONS

Structure

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INTRODUCTION TO UNITS 19-21

Descriptive writing is an important type of composition. Very often you have to describe

- a person,
- a place or scene,
- an object,
- the working of a machine,
- the general conditions at a place,
- how common things are made or repaired,
- the operation of scientific instruments, and
- how we make use of public facilities.

In Units 19-21 we shall help you to describe all these in some detail. For this, you have to observe the people and the things around you very carefully. You will notice features like *size, shape, colour, smell, sound, dress, habits*, the expression of *feelings* and *movements*. And then you have to present a *clear and concrete picture* with words. The better your stock of words, the better will be your description. We cannot teach you all the words and phrases used in descriptions, but shall help you to use some of the important ones. You will then be able to recognize other descriptive words and phrases in the writings of others—in books, magazines, and newspapers. Then you can use them in your own writings and conversations.

19.0 OBJECTIVES

In Unit 19, we shall help you to describe

- a person, and
- his habits.

You will learn to use some adjectives to describe a person's build, his face, expressions, dress, and character.

You will also learn to use verbs that describe a person's activities and general manner, which make up his habits.

We shall give you some passages to show how we can describe persons and their habits. We shall also set exercises to make sure that you understand the descriptive words and phrases, and know how to use them properly.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Every day in your life, you have to describe persons, as you have to talk about them in various situations. While talking, or writing a letter or a report, there will be occasions when you need to give some descriptions of people. Here are some situations in which you may have to describe persons and their habits.

- i) You are talking to somebody about a relative or a friend of yours whom he does not know. You have to say what this person looks like and what his habits are.
- ii) You saw a thief running away with some valuables from your house. You have to write a report to the police about it. You must describe what this man looked like and what he was wearing.
- iii) Someone in your family has got lost. Full details of this person must be given to the police and to 'Doordarshan'.
- iv) You are applying for a job or a passport. You have to fill in a form giving particulars like height, the colour of your eyes, the colour of your hair, etc.
- v) You are telling someone about a person whom you like or dislike. You have to talk about some of his habits.

All the situations referred to above will require different kinds of description.

19.2 SIZE, BUILD AND AGE

When you first see a person, you notice his size. You get a rough idea of his

- height,
- weight,
- build, and
- age.

Read this passage:

Shekhar is a tall man. He is more than six feet in height and generally walks with a stoop. He looks very skinny. Although he is about thirty years old, he looks much older. It seems as if he worked very hard, but got very little to eat.

Glossary

stoop/stu:p/: a habitual position with the shoulders bent or rounded

skinny/ˈskɪnɪ/: thin; without much flesh.

In the passage above, the words and phrases that describe Shekhar are:

tall (height)
more than six feet in height
walks with a stoop (posture)
very skinny (build)
about thirty years old (age)

Notice the expressions which tell us what he looks like:

very skinny
much older
as if he worked very hard

Also notice that we use the simple present tense in the description: *is, walks, looks, seems*. We also use the simple past tense in such descriptions.

| | | |
|---------|----------------|---------------|
| Age | Early twenties | Late thirties |
| Weight | | |
| Build | | |
| Posture | | |
| Height | | |

You may compare your answer with that given by us at the end of the unit.

19.3 EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Read the following conversation. You will find that a candidate is answering questions about himself in front of the Interview Board. He is giving details about his age, height, weight, education, present job, and work experience.

- Member of the Board : Mr. Ahmed, what is your date of birth?
Mr. Ahmed : It is the 5th of April, 1960.
Member : What is your height?
Ahmed : About 170 cms., Sir.
Member : Your weight?
Ahmed : About 68 kg.
Member : What are your educational qualifications?
Ahmed : I have a B.E. from the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi.
Member : Where are you working at present?
Ahmed : At the National Textile Mills in Bombay.
Member : What is the nature of your work there?
Ahmed : I am an electrical engineer, sir.
Member : How long have you been working there?
Ahmed : For more than 5 years.
Member : Are you married?
Ahmed : Yes, sir.
Member : How many children have you got?
Ahmed : Two. A son and a daughter.
Member : That's an ideal family. What are your interests?
What do you usually do in your spare time?
Ahmed : I listen to Indian classical music and read books.
Member : That will do.

Glossary

educational / ,edjv'keɪʃənəl /: related to education

qualification / ,kwɒlɪfɪ'keɪʃən /: a proof that one has passed examinations and gained a certain degree of knowledge

graduate / 'grædʒuət /: one who has completed a university degree course

nature / 'neɪtʃə /: type.

electrical engineer /ɪ'lektɹɪkəl endʒɪ'nɪə /: an engineer who designs, installs and maintains electrical equipment

ideal / aɪ'diəl /: perfect

interests / 'ɪntərəsts /: activities and subjects to which one gives time and attention

classical music / 'klæsɪkəl' mju:zɪk /: music composed with serious artistic intentions and having an attraction that lasts over a long period of time

Note: 'Hair' is never used in the plural when it refers to the hair on one's head. But we do say 'hairs on the body'. One's hair can be 'grey'; we do not say 'white'. The complexion or the colour of one's skin can be 'fair' or 'dark'; we do not usually say 'white' or 'black'.

Note the phrase 'seemed to be deep in thought'. We use *seems to/seemed to* in order to describe what we feel about a person. We may also use the phrases *looks as if/looked as if*. e.g., He looks as if he was very tired.

19.5 GESTURES AND GAIT

You can say a few words about a person's gestures—the way he moves his hands, eyebrows, etc. while talking. You can also say something about his gait—that is, the way he walks.

Read this passage:

Mary is an intelligent girl and looks more so because she wears spectacles. In class, she listens to her teacher with great interest. Her hair is parted in the middle and there are two plaits on the back. She walks with a limp because her leg was injured in an accident. When she talks, she wants to say everything at the same time. So she stammers and keeps moving her hands wildly.

Glossary

parted/'pɑ:tɪd/: separated along a line

plaits/plaits/: twisted strands of hair forming one rope-like length

limp/lɪmp/: a way of walking with one foot dragging unevenly

stammers/'stæməz/: speaks with pauses and repeated sounds

wildly/'waɪldli/: in a manner that shows lack of control

The passage above gives us details about Mary's face, her gestures and gait.

Self-check Exercise 4

Match words in Column A with those in Column B. e.g., medium height.

| A | B |
|----------|------------|
| medium | eyebrows |
| sunken | hair |
| knitted | nose |
| grey | skin |
| hooked | cheeks |
| wrinkled | height |
| dark | gait |
| middle | complexion |
| limping | age |
| lanky | person |

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19.6 HABITS

So far you have seen how we describe a person's outer appearance. You have learnt to give details about one's size, build, age, facial features and expression, gait, and gestures.

Now we can include other details in our descriptions. For example, we can talk about a person's habits. The following facts give us an idea of one's habits:

- i) his daily activities—at home and in the office,
- ii) the way he generally dresses, and
- iii) his nature, likes and dislikes, and general attitude to life.

Read the following passage:

Kailas Babur was spotlessly neat in his dress on all occasions, though his supply of clothes was sorely limited. Every day he used to air his shirts and vests and coats and trousers carefully, and put them out in the sun, along with his bed-quilt, his pillow-case, and the small carpet on which he always sat. After airing them he would shake them, and brush them, and put them on the rock. His little bits of furniture made his small room decent, and hinted that there was more in reserve if needed. Very often, for want of a servant, he would shut up his house for a while. Then he would iron out his shirts and linen with his own hands, and do other little menial tasks. After this he would open his door and receive his friends again.

(From Rabindra Nath Tagore: 'Babus of Nayanjore')

Glossary

spotlessly/'spɒtləsli/: without any stain

sorely limited/'sɔ:lɪ'li:mɪtɪd/: very small in quantity

quilt/kwɪlt/: a cover for a bed, made of two pieces of cloth with soft, warm material between them

airing/'eəriŋ/: drying (clothes) by putting them in a place that has plenty of dry air

reserve/rɪ'zɜ:v/: store

menial/'mi:nəl/: not interesting, not seeming important

The passage above describes Kailas Babu's habits:

dress : spotlessly neat

general

activities : used to air his shirts, vests, coats and trousers;
would shake them and brush them;
would shut up his house and iron out his shirts and linen;
do other little menial tasks;
open his door and receive his friends.

When general or habitual activities relating to the past are described as in the passage above, we use the auxiliaries *used to* and *would* before the infinitive (the simple) form of the verb.

e.g. used to air his shirts.....
would shake them.....
would iron out his shirts.....
would open his door.....

For habitual actions in the present, the simple present tense is used.

Some words in the passage above indicate *frequency*, that is, how often the activities are repeated.

e.g., on all occasions
every day

Some words indicate *sequence*, or the order in which things follow one another.

e.g., after
then

Self-check Exercise 5

Make ten meaningful sentences by joining the words and phrases given in the columns below:

e.g., John washes his face and gets dressed.

| Words indicating sequence/frequency | Subject | Activity | Time |
|-------------------------------------|------------|---|---|
| Then Sometimes and | John he | is late and is scolded by his boss. works very hard. washes his face and gets dressed. returns home goes to office goes to bed has dinner walks listens to the radio gets up | at 8 p.m. by 7 p.m. at 9 a.m. by 10 p.m. after dinner. for an hour before breakfast. at 6 a.m. |

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After making the sentences, arrange them so that we get a description of John's daily routine. Add the words indicating sequence/frequency only after you have made all the sentences.

You may compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

19.7 DRESS

Read this passage:

He stopped; for there shuffled round the corner, from the roaring Motec Bazar, such a man as Kim, who thought he knew all castes, had never seen. He was nearly six feet high, dressed in fold upon fold of dingy stuff like horse-blanketing, and not one fold of it could Kim refer to any known trade or profession. At his belt hung a long open-work iron pencase and a wooden rosary such as holy men wear. On his head was a gigantic sort of tam-o'-shanter. His face was yellow and wrinkled, like that of Fook Shing, the Chinese bootmaker in the bazar. His eyes turned up at the corners and looked like little slits of onyx.

(From Rudyard Kipling: *Kim*)

Glossary

shuffled/'ʃʌfld/: walked by dragging his feet slowly along

roaring/rɔ:rm/: making a deep loud continuing sound

dingy/'dɪndʒ/: dirty and faded

horse-blanketing/'hɔ:sblæŋkətɪŋ/: thick cloth used for covering horses to protect them from cold

trade/treɪd/: a particular business

profession/prə'feʃn/: a form of employment, especially one that is honourable and is possibly only for an educated person and after training in some special branch of knowledge

open-work: a pattern with spaces in between threads

rosary/'rɔ:zəri/: a string of beads used for counting prayers

gigantic/dʒæ'gæntɪk/: unusually large in size

tam-o-shanter/'tæmə'ʃæntə/: a tight-fitting flat topped hat

wrinkled/'rɪŋkld/: formed into folds

slit/slɪt/: a narrow opening

onyx/'ɒnɪks/: a type of precious stone having bands of various colours in it

From the passage above what details do we get about the person described?

- | | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| his manner of walking | : | he shuffled |
| his height | : | nearly six feet high |
| his dress | : | fold upon fold of dingy stuff like horse-blanketing At his belt hung an iron pencase and a wooden rosary. He wore a large hat. |
| his facial features | : | yellow complexion; wrinkled skin; eyes turned up at the corners. |
| his trade or profession | : | it was difficult to say. |

To make the details concrete and clear, the objects to be described are compared to other things.

Examples:

the cloth worn by the man was 'like horse-blanketing', which is usually thick and coarse.

the wooden rosary was 'such as holy men wear'.

his complexion was 'like that of Fook Shing, the Chinese bootmaker'.

his eyes looked like 'slits of onyx', that is, they shone through narrow openings.

Note: When we compare one thing with another in the way shown above, using the word *like* or *as*, we call it a *simile*.

Self-check Exercise 6

Read the following passage:

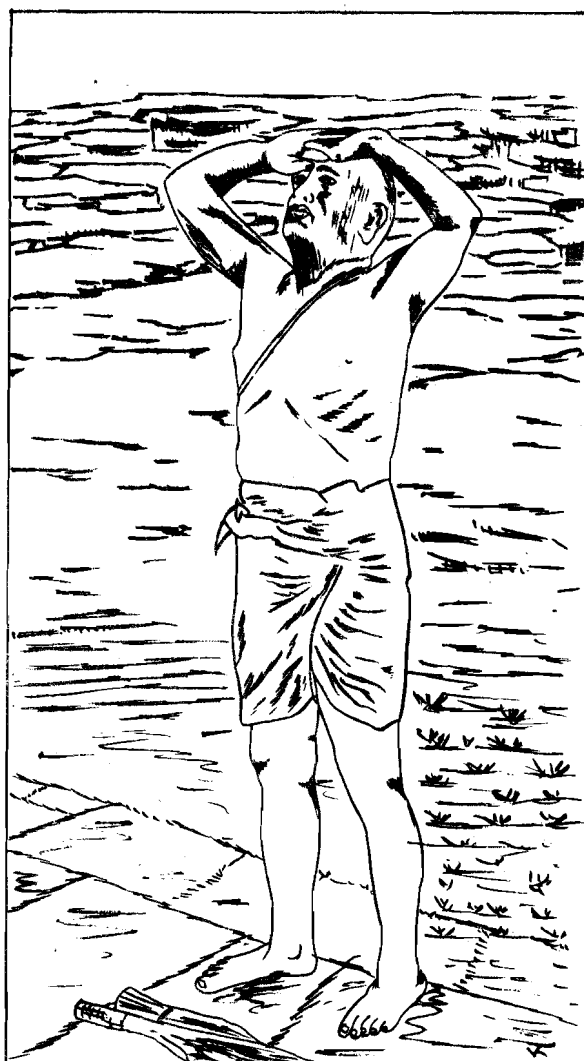
The Noanama are a handsome people; tallish and well-built with the heavy chest and shoulders of men accustomed to rowing; their dark hair in a bowl-like fringe around the head; light-skinned, narrow-nosed and high-cheekboned, mongoloid in appearance with penetrating dark eyes. The women are often beautiful, with long flowing black hair and wearing no more than a cloth about their waist. Sometimes they put 'bija', a red dye, on their faces, and flowers in their hair. For ceremonies they cover their bodies with blue 'jagua' dye in a series of designs. But it is the men, especially the unmarried boys, who dress up for special occasions with magnificent silver pendants, strings of blue, orange, red and white porcelain beads which come from Panama, and are an indication of wealth—so many that they can scarcely move their heads from side to side. Finally there is the glistening white shirt, a symbol of status and the only European garment we ever saw them wearing.

You have to fill in details in the appropriate columns of the chart given below. Use your dictionary where necessary. Give just the descriptive words. Some details are already filled in.

| Subject | Height | Build | Facial features and complexion | Hair | Dress and ornaments |
|--------------------|---------|-------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------|
| The Noanama people | tallish | well-built; | handsome; light-skinned; narrow-nosed; | dark; bowl-like fringe | |
| Women | | | | | |

| Subject | Height | Build | Facial features and complexion | Hair | Dress and ornaments |
|----------------|--------|-------|--------------------------------|------|---------------------|
| Unmarried boys | | | | | |

Now look at the picture below. Let's describe the man as fully as we can, using suitable words to describe his size, age, face, clothes and expression. Let's call him Narayana.



Narayana is a well-built man. He has a big chest, and strong arms and legs. His head is half-shaven and his round face is clean-shaven. He is wearing small earrings. The sacred thread falls across his big chest. A dhoti is worn around his waist and thighs. His eyes are turned upwards and his hands are joined on his forehead. He seems to be praying.

Self-check Exercise 7

Look at the next picture.



Give a description of the man in about 10 sentences. Compare your answer with that given by us at the end of the unit. You can call the man by any name.

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19.8 LIKES, DISLIKES AND GENERAL NATURE

We can describe a person's likes, dislikes, food habits and general nature.

Read the following passage:

'Akbar liked to eat different types of fruit, particularly watermelons. He ate very little meat and drank little wine. He was very generous by nature. On every happy occasion, like a victory or a festival, he gave away gifts from the royal coffers. He was God-fearing and tried to be just to all. He loved people who were devoted to their duties and punished those who were idle.'

Glossary

generous/'dʒenərəs/: showing readiness to give money, help, etc.

coffer/'kɒfə/: a large strong chest for holding money

'god-fearing: leading a good and virtuous life

de'voted: spending a great deal of time and effort on (something)

idle/'aɪdl/: not working

Self-check Exercise 8

Fill in this crossword puzzle with the words given below. Use your dictionary where necessary. The clues are given for you.

Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

thrifty

naive

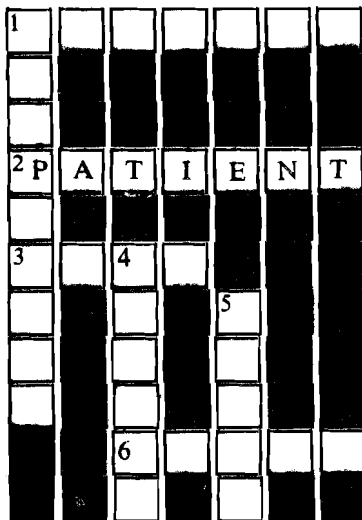
rude

temperate

patient

stoic

daring



Clues Across:

1. Using money and goods wisely (7 letters)
2. Able to wait for something calmly for a long time (7 letters)
3. Not at all polite (4 letters)
6. Having no experience of social rules or behaviour (5 letters)

Clues Down:

1. Showing self-control (9 letters)
4. Very brave (6 letters)
5. A person who shows no feelings of worry when faced with something unpleasant (5 letters).

19.9 ACTIVITY

When you see an interesting person for the first time, make a mental note of all aspects of his personality—size, appearance, clothes, etc. Write the details in a diary.

19.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt

- i) how to describe a person—his outward appearance, clothes, etc.
- ii) how to give details about yourself in an application form or at an interview,
- iii) how to describe a person's habits and daily activities, and
- iv) how to describe a person's nature in general.

19.11 KEY WORDS

compo'sition : putting words together for a piece of writing

con dition : the present state of things

de'scribe : say what somebody or something is like

ex'perience : the process of gaining knowledge or skills by doing or seeing things

ex pression : the process of showing one's meaning, feeling, etc. by words, looks and actions

'feature : part of the face

gait : a manner of walking or running

'gesture/'dzest(ə/ : the use of expressive movements

'nature : the physical and mental qualities which belong to a person

,qualifi'cation : training, etc. which equips somebody for a position or a profession

19.12 SUGGESTED READING

Stories by Rabindranath Tagore.

19.13 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Exercise 1

Shekhar *was* a tall man. He *was* more than six feet in height and generally *walked* with a stoop. He *looked* very skinny. Although he *was* about thirty years old, he *looked* much older. It seemed as if he *worked* very hard, but *got* very little to eat.

Exercise 2

| Age | Early twenties | Late thirties |
|---------|-------------------|---------------|
| Weight | 50 kg. | 70 kg. |
| Build | lanky | well-built |
| Posture | hunched shoulders | erect |
| Height | 6 ft. | 6 ft. |

Exercise 3

Specimen Answer

Name : Rahul Trivedi
Date of Birth : 6th September, 1962
Height : 170 cms.
Weight : 70 kg.
Educational Qualifications : i) High school from the U.P. Board of High School Education, 2nd division, 1978.
ii) Bachelor of Arts, Ramjas College, Delhi University, Delhi, 2nd Division, 1982.
Work Experience : Salesman at New Punjab Department Store, Delhi, 1983 to the present.
Married : Yes
Number of children : One
Interests : Cycling; Modern Art.

Exercise 4

medium height
sunken cheeks
knitted eyebrows
grey hair
hooked nose
wrinkled skin
dark complexion
middle age
limping gait
lanky person

Exercise 5

(There are many possibilities. Here are some.)

He is late and is scolded by his boss.
He works very hard.
He washes his face and gets dressed.
He returns home by 7 p.m.
He goes to office at 9 a.m.
He goes to bed by 10 p.m.
He has dinner at 8 p.m.
He walks for an hour before breakfast.
He listens to the radio after dinner.
He gets up at 6 a.m.

John's Daily Routine

John gets up at 6 a.m. He washes his face and gets dressed. Then he walks for an hour before breakfast. He goes to office at 9 a.m. Sometimes he is late and is scolded by his boss. He works very hard and returns home by 7 p.m. He has dinner at 8 p.m. and then he listens to the radio. He goes to bed by 10 p.m.

Exercise 6

| Subject | Height | Build and body | Facial features and complexion | Hair | Dress and Ornaments |
|--------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|---|------------------------|---------------------|
| The Noanama people | tallish | well-built; heavy chest and shoulders | handsome; light-skinned; narrow-nosed; high-cheek-boned; mongoloid; penetrating dark eyes | dark; bowl-like fringe | |

| | | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Women | body covered with blue 'jagua' dye in a series of designs | beautiful; a red dye on the face | long; flowing; black; flowers in the hair | cloth about the waist |
| Unmarried boys | | | | Silver pendants; string of blue, orange, red and white procelain beads; glistening white shirt |

Exercise 7

Ranga Baboo is the headmaster at Government High School, Ranchi. He has worked there for thirty years, and is now in his sixties. He is about 5 ft. 9 inches tall and looks gaunt because of old age. He has grey hair and sunken cheeks. There is a serious expression on his face and his forehead is wrinkled. He wears spectacles and his eyes have an expression of surprise.

Exercise 8

Across: 1. thrifty, 2. patient, 3. rude, 6. naive.
Down: 1. temperate, 4. daring, 5. stoic.