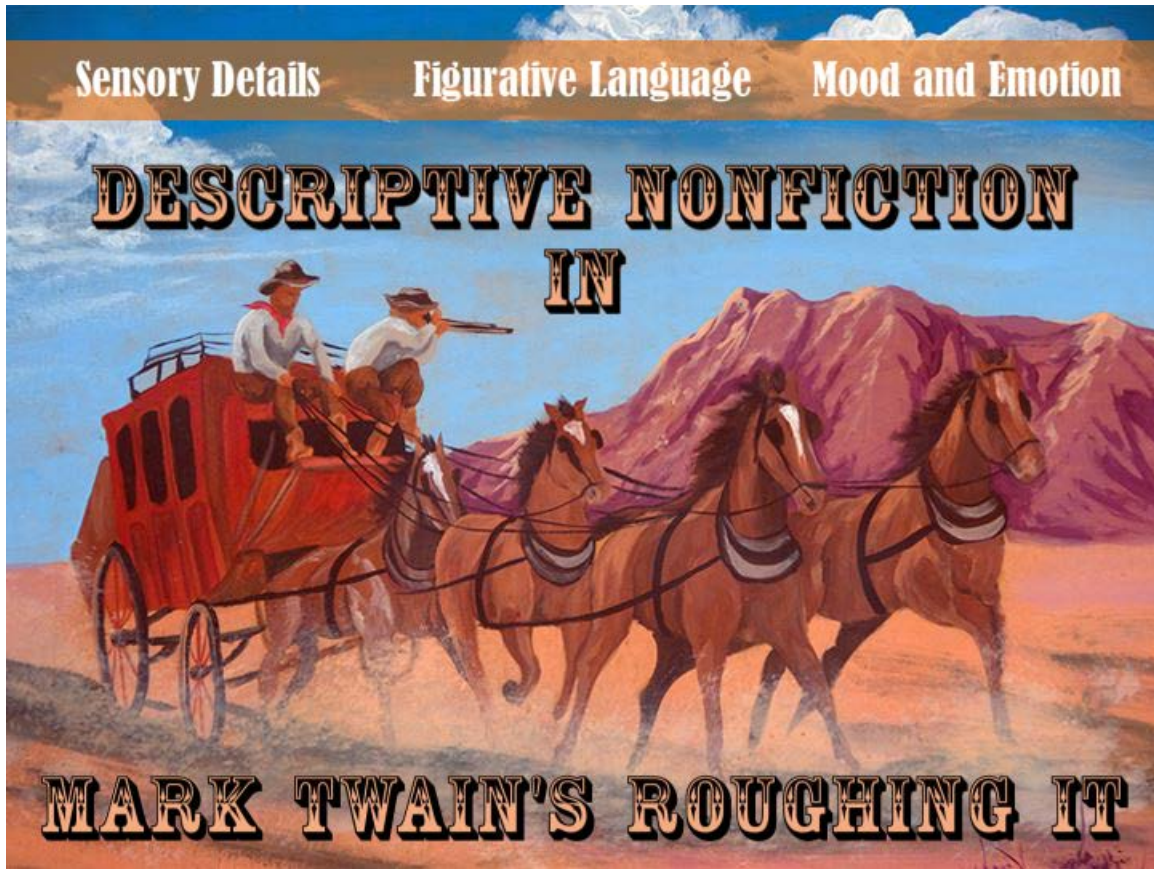


Module 9: Nonfiction

Topic 2 Content: Descriptive Nonfiction in Mark Twain's *Roughing It*

Introduction



Descriptive writing relies on the use of sensory details and precise word choice to paint vivid pictures in the reader's mind. Writers incorporate description by tapping into the five senses, employing figurative language, and establishing a mood to convey emotion. Sometimes, a description may even utilize all three of these techniques in the same passage. Take a moment to explore three techniques for creating descriptive writing by examining passages from Mark Twain's semi-autobiographical book titled *Roughing It*. Click the tabs above to learn more.

Module 9: Nonfiction

Topic 2 Content: Descriptive Nonfiction in Mark Twain's *Roughing It*

Sensory Details

Sensory Details

One of the easiest techniques for incorporating description in your writing is to evoke one or more of the five senses. By including sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes, you can use language to paint a vivid picture and add a realistic feel to the scene. Perhaps your readers cannot literally see, hear, smell, touch, or taste your birthday cake, but they can in their imagination if you tap into their five senses.

In this excerpt from *Roughing It*, Twain describes the experience of riding a stagecoach in his journey to the western territories. Observe how he evokes the feeling of excitement in the sight of curtains and clothes flapping in the breeze, the physical sensation of motion within the traveling stagecoach, and the sounds that form the "soundtrack" of the journey.

The stage whirled along at a spanking gait, the breeze flapping curtains and suspended coats in a most exhilarating way; the cradle swayed and swung luxuriously, the pattering of the horses' hoofs, the cracking of the driver's whip, and his "Hi-yi! g'lang!" were music.

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Figurative Language

Figurative Language

You can create vivid imagery in your descriptive writing by employing figurative language devices. For example, metaphors and analogies draw comparisons to things or ideas with which readers are already familiar, giving them more avenues to make a meaningful connection to what you are describing.

Likewise, personification can paint a more vivid picture of how things look or move, often evoking familiar emotions. For instance, consider how ocean waves look when they "caress" the shore as softly as a mother's hand versus ocean waves that crash upon rocks like an axeman chopping a tree.

In this excerpt from *Roughing It*, Twain describes the speech of a man named Mr. Street. Notice how Twain compares Mr. Street's language to the delightful flowing water of a summer brook.

But he was calm. His conversation with those gentlemen flowed on as sweetly and peacefully and musically as any summer brook.

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Mood and Emotion

Mood and Emotion

The mood in a literary piece refers to the overall feeling that the words create. By establishing a mood in your writing, your description can feel more realistic and vivid to your readers. Think about what emotions you want to evoke in your reader, and then choose words carefully to detail the setting, events, or characters of your writing. For example, a *glare* conveys feelings of anger, whereas a *gaze* feels soothing and calm.

In this excerpt from *Roughing It*, Twain describes a morning during which he traveled in a stagecoach to the frontiers of the West. Riding in the stagecoach packed with bags of mail for hours on end did not succeed in breaking his spirit and thirst for adventure. Take a look at how Twain uses precise word choice to set up the mood of this scene.

It was now just dawn; and as we stretched our cramped legs full length on the mail sacks, and gazed out through the windows across the wide wastes of greensward clad in cool, powdery mist, to where there was an expectant look in the eastern horizon, our perfect enjoyment took the form of a tranquil and contented ecstasy.

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