

Changing Focus: Using Digital Imagery for Descriptive Essays

by Arlene Lewis

Most English teachers are well aware that a word processing program is an effective tool for revision, but editing can also be done with paper and pencil. This writing assignment made use of some of the unique features of word processing programs, allowing students to make alterations that could only be accomplished using a computer.

The descriptive essay is a stock feature of most English curricula. Because I wanted my high school juniors to be challenged with more than the usual tasks of describing their bedrooms or their favorite vacation spots, I decided to couple digital photography with their writing. We started by reading descriptive essays to better understand that a descriptive essay, like all essays, has a purpose and a focus. Next, we discussed what kinds of photographs would inspire a rich description. Although we would be staying on school property, it was springtime, so the possibilities were endless. To avoid the entire class wandering about outside searching for the perfect photograph, students completed index cards with brief descriptions of the kinds of scenes or objects they wanted to describe.

For example, some students wanted to take pictures of the parking lot while others preferred the flowering bushes in front of the school. Each card was numbered to correspond to the student's turn using the camera. (If multiple cameras are available, the entire process can be streamlined considerably.) Students knew exactly where they wanted to go and what they wanted to photograph before they ever left the classroom.

Before class, I borrowed a Sony MVC-FD71 digital camera from our school library, making sure that the camera was fully charged by checking the display that appears after the camera is switched on. It indicates the number of minutes of use remaining in the camera. I then inserted a blank 3.5-inch disk into the disk drive of the camera. Using the default setting for standard quality, I could store 25-40 pictures on one disk.

Once the class assembled outside, I demonstrated how to use the camera. One rule that I emphasized was that they must immediately put the strap of the camera around their necks upon receiving the camera. I didn't want any of my students being liable for the expense of repairing or replacing the school camera when it was accidentally dropped. Then I showed them how to use the camera's telephoto and wide-angle features by pressing a button on top of the camera. Digital cameras tend to be very sensitive to any kind of movement by the operator. To steady their grip on the camera, I recommended that once they were focused and ready to take a picture, they breathe in and hold as they **firmly** pressed down the "Record" button. Once the camera display showed the word

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Changing Focus, continued

"Recording," the picture would be in the camera's memory file and they could relax.

Even though students had pre-selected the scenes they wanted to record, there were still some "surprises" outdoors, like the bird that alighted on the flagpole, which gave students a totally new subject for their essays. While students waited for their turns with the camera, they recorded their observations of nature in their journals every five minutes, noting any changes in the scenery. These observations provided descriptive details that could later be used to enhance their essays.

When students returned to the classroom, they began to consider what would be the focal point of their compositions. We discussed the difference between a narrow and broad focus. For example, their essays could have a very narrow focus, such as a single flower on a bush. Still within a narrow focus, they could concentrate on the entire flowering bush. Widening the focus, they could describe the bush as a part of the whole front landscape of the building. Broader yet would be a description of the bush as part of a spring scene in Leesburg, Va. Finally, from the broadest perspective, the bush would be a rather minor detail in the entire panorama of the spring season.

Before going to the computer lab, I copied the files from the digital camera disk to a folder on the shared network drive. Because I knew the exact order of students using the camera from the index cards they filled out, it was easy for me to rename each numbered JPG file with the student's name.

When students entered the lab, they were instructed to go to Microsoft Word and then to "Insert Picture" from the "File" menu. Next, they opened the appropriate folder in the shared network drive and then opened their specific file to see the picture they took. Once students inserted their photographs from the file into a new Word document, they could use the photo editing toolbar to crop their pictures and literally narrow the focus of their compositions. The photograph became just the flower, not the whole bush, if that were the main subject of the description. They could also physically change the focus or perspective of the essay by using the same tool bar to lighten or darken the images. Some students, in fact, omitted all color and presented a rather dismal picture of spring in Leesburg. The use of the toolbar to reconfigure their photographs meant students could "match" the picture to the desired effect and theme of their essays. They typed their descriptive essays just below where they had inserted their pictures. The photographs became an integral part of their essays and students could take pride in two creations, the image and the accompanying text.

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