



1 Describe what you see: Use 3 kinds of descriptive language

1) Naming: Identify objects in the composition (e.g., nose, tree, and other content). But don't stop there! Move into detailing (see #2).

2) Detailing: Describe sensory input—for example:
- colors, shapes, lines, textures, and other visual elements;
- contrast, repetition, space, dominance, and other visual principles.

For more info, see [“Visual Elements & Principles” PPT](#) and [YouTube Visual Literacy Elements & Principles](#).

3) Comparing: “Comparisons” (metaphors, similes, etc.) conjure a sea of imagery in very few words. For example, if I say “Her eyes were two deep rivers,” this is comparison brings mind everything you associate with rivers: perhaps mysterious creatures swimming under a surface, perhaps currents that could sweep you away (etc.). In a couple of words, you have

EXAMPLE:

Before: This composition has a tree with a lot of leaves.

Problem: (This sentence only “names” content.)

After: Jagged leaves and Spanish moss hang from a twisted black tree.

Solution: (This sentence details shape, line, and color of the objects named.)

2 Interpret what you describe

Before: ~~I think~~ the mood of this film is depressing. (Avoid first person; describe.)

After: The dimly lit rooms and overcast skies evoke a depressing mood.

Before: The man in the painting ~~is~~ happy. (We can't know thoughts and feelings.)

After: The man's brightly colored face suggests a happy character.

Before: ~~There is~~ water at the bottom of the abstract painting. (Avoid “there is;” describe)

After: Thick blue lines at the bottom of the painting allude to water.

Before: ~~You might think that~~ this abstract painting is about war. (Avoid “you;” describe)

After: The clashing lines and colors of this painting seem to express conflict. The artist's military history might suggest the theme is war.

Helpful Verbs

Seems	Communicates
Appears	Conveys
Suggests	Connotes
Implies	Embodies
Represents	Manifests
Evokes	Points to
Alludes to	Hints
References	Intimates
Expresses	Conjures
Indicates	Signifies
Depicts	Resonates with
Projects	Complements

Helpful Nouns

Impressions Elements Principles

Image	Mood	Line	Unity
Composition	Tone	Shape	Dissonance
Medium	Feeling	Scale	Contrast
Technique	Sense	Light	Repetition
Form	Perception	Space	Direction
Content	Impression	Color	Alignment
Frame	Gestalt	Value	Symmetry
Focal Point	Motif	Pattern	Asymmetry
Gestalt		Texture	Informal Symmetry
Figure		Volume	Anomaly
Background		Perspective	Variety
Border		Motion	

Helpful Adjectives

Abstract	Diagonal	Jubilant	Rugged
Adjacent	Disjointed	Leathery	Sardonic
Ambiguous	Dissonant	Light	Satirical
Ambitious	Distorted	Linear	Saturated
Amorphous	Divergent	Manic	Seamless
Angular	Dominant	Massive	Secondary
Animated	Dramatic	Masterful	Shallow
Anomalous	Dull	Meandering	Shiny
Asymmetrical	Dusty	Meticulous,	Short
Austere	Elegant	Middle ground,	Simulated
Balanced	Elongated	Monochromatic	Skilled
Blurred	Elusive	Moving	Smooth
Bold	Energetic	Multicolored	Soft
Brash	Enigmatic	Muted	Sordid
Bright	Fine	Nebulous	Soothing
Broken	Flat	Negative	Sticky
Calm	Flowing	Nonobjective	Straight
Captivating	Frenetic	Obsessive	Subdued
Celebratory	Furry	Ominous	Subtle
Chaotic	Fuzzy	Opaque	Symmetrical
Clear	Garish	Open	Tertiary
Closed	Geometric	Organic	Thick
Coarse	Glowing	Pale	Thin
Cold	Goopy	Patterned	Thought-provoking
Complementary	Grayed	Positive	Three-dimensional
Convergent	Grim	Powerful	Tinted
Contemplative	Harmonic	Prickly	Translucent
Contrasting	Harsh	Proficient	Transparent
Controlled	Heavy	Primary	Two-dimensional
Cool	Horizontal	Professional	Uneven
Curvilinear	Illusory	Provocative	Unified
Curved	Imaginative	Radial	Vertical
Dark	Implied	Radiant	Vibrant
Deep	Interrupted	Rectilinear	Vivid
Delicate	Isolated	Rhythmic	Warm
Dense	Jagged	Rigid	Wet

Includes words from [DescriptiveWords.org](https://www.DescriptiveWords.org)