

Lesson Plan: Describing people, places, and events in detail

Level	Intermediate / Advanced (B1–C1)
Time	60–90 minutes
Skills	Writing, vocabulary, speaking
Focus	Precise vocabulary; sensory language; show don't tell; replacing vague adjectives

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Use precise, specific vocabulary to describe people, places, and events vividly
- Incorporate sensory language across all five senses
- Apply the 'show, don't tell' principle to make writing more engaging
- Replace vague, overused adjectives with more precise alternatives

TARGET LANGUAGE & EXAMPLES

Describing people

- Physical: build (slim/stocky), complexion, height, distinctive features
- Personality in appearance: stern expression, approachable manner, nervous energy
- Movement: she strode across the room / he shuffled forward / she perched on the edge

Describing places

- Atmosphere: bustling, desolate, serene, oppressive, vibrant, sun-drenched
- Sensory: the smell of damp wood; the distant hum of traffic; harsh fluorescent lighting
- Contrast: while the exterior was imposing, inside it felt surprisingly intimate

Show, don't tell

- TELL: He was nervous. SHOW: He kept checking his phone, tapping his foot on the floor.
- TELL: The café was busy. SHOW: Every table was taken; the air was warm with noise and coffee.
- TELL: She was angry. SHOW: She set down her cup with more force than necessary.

Replacing vague adjectives

- nice → welcoming, charming, refined, elegant, delightful
- big → vast, enormous, sprawling, imposing, towering
- bad → appalling, dire, inadequate, dismal, alarming

Meaning & Nuance

Vague	Precise alternatives	Sensory detail
nice (place)	vibrant, tranquil, atmospheric, characterful	warm lighting, hum of conversation
big (room)	spacious, cavernous, vast, sprawling	echo of footsteps, a distant ceiling
interesting (person)	enigmatic, thought-provoking, captivating	speaks slowly, pauses before answering
bad (smell)	pungent, acrid, musty, stale	hit you as soon as you opened the door

happy (face)	beaming, radiant, exuberant	eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled
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LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-up: Two versions (10 min)

Task: Show two descriptions of the same place: one flat, one vivid.

- 'The café was nice and busy.' vs. 'The café buzzed with the hum of espresso machines...'
- What specifically makes the second version work?

2. Vocabulary building (15 min)

Task: Alternatives to vague adjectives — brainstorm and categorise.

- Sensory language — one for each sense: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste.
- 'Show, don't tell': demonstrate with 3 pairs of sentences.

3. Description writing task (25 min)

Task: Students describe one person, one place, one event.

- At least 4 sentences each. Sensory language in at least one.
- Show, don't tell in at least one.
- Share and peer-review: does it feel vivid and specific?

4. Editing: make it more vivid (20 min)

Task: Students receive a flat paragraph and rewrite it with detail and precision.

- Replace all vague adjectives, add sensory details, show rather than tell.
- Compare original vs. rewritten — read both aloud.

TEACHER NOTES

- 'Show, don't tell' from creative writing is highly productive for language learners — it forces specificity.
- This lesson pairs well with narrative tenses and descriptive writing in IELTS/Cambridge exam preparation.

EXTENSION / HOMEWORK

Choose one or more:

1. Write a 150-word vivid description of a place that is meaningful to you.
2. Rewrite 5 vague sentences using precise vocabulary and sensory detail.
3. Describe a person without naming them — classmates try to guess who it is.