5
DESCRIPTION
Writing with Your Senses

Because most instructors make much of descriptive writing, this chapter offers an ample choice of illustrations. Students tend to think of descriptive writing as a kind of still-life painting in words: An apple or a banana sits on a table and you write about it. In this chapter we strive to demonstrate that, on the contrary, description can involve the testimony of all the senses. All the writers employ description in fresh and engaging ways.

For our pairing in this chapter, we have chosen Brad Manning’s “Arm Wrestling with My Father” (Manning wrote the essay as a college freshman) and Sarah Vowell’s “Shooting Dad.” Both authors look at their fathers, but otherwise their views (and their descriptions) are quite different. Note that each essay is followed by a “Connections” writing suggestion involving the other.

BRAD MANNING
Arm Wrestling with My Father

Manning’s essay specifically addresses the male experience by exploring how masculine ideals (such as strong, silent, athletic) can affect father-son relations. Most students will have something to say about the general difficulties of parent-child communication, and you may want to extend discussion to how Manning’s personal experience represents larger issues. That men communicate nonverbally and women verbally is a commonly held belief. Ask students whether they agree with this gender generalization. Is it easier, more common, or more acceptable for mothers to talk openly with their daughters than for fathers to do so with their sons? What about for mothers and sons, for fathers and daughters? (For a take on the latter relationship, see Sarah Vowell’s “Shooting Dad,” the essay following this one.) Students may need encouragement to complicate their answers to these questions with specific reasons for their generalizations.