

Teaching Students How to Write a Description with Photos

by IVAN CHONG



"You before an exam"

In writing instruction, teachers often struggle with developing engaging and interactive activities given constraints such as large classes and packed teaching schedules. A purposeful and appealing pre-task can energize the writing process and set the context for the subsequent writing task. With this purpose in mind, I designed this activity as a pre-task for teaching students to write descriptions for a photo diary—a diary that includes or is based on photos.

To help students write better descriptions with information about people (who), the environment (where), the time (when), and the activity or events (what)—

as well as feelings associated with the experience—by using descriptive language, I designed this photo activity to prepare students for their writing task: *Write a 400-word photo-diary entry about a memorable experience you had, using at least four photos.* When thinking about how to create an activity that is relevant to both the students and the writing task, I realized that asking students to take photos makes sense because students enjoy taking selfies, sharing photos on Facebook, and typing descriptions about them.

Below I explain the steps that make up the activity, beginning with preparation.

CREATING AN ACTIVITY SHEET

Prepare an activity sheet with a 4 x 4 grid. In each grid space, write a prompt. Guided by the prompts, students will use their smartphones to take at least four pictures. Figure 1 gives a set of prompts based on the ones I have used with my students.

Some of the prompts in Figure 1 include an instruction on how many people should be in the picture. This is done to ensure that a certain degree of group work is involved and to enable students to write richer descriptions later.

Note that the prompts can be manipulated to meet particular lesson objectives. If you plan to have your students write on a certain topic—for example, describing a day as a superhero—you can include prompts related to the topic. In this way, students can make use of thematically related vocabulary in their description.

SETTING UP A GOOGLE SLIDES FILE

Set up a Google Slides file with blank slides for students to upload their photos and descriptions. (To do this, you need a Gmail account.) Go to <https://docs.google.com/>

presentation/u/0/ and choose “Blank” under “Start a new presentation.” After you have opened a new file, click the blue button marked “Share” in the top right-hand corner. Click the tab under “Link sharing on” and select “Anyone with the link can edit.” Copy the link and send it to your students. Your students can then access the same file by clicking on the link.

For my lesson, I included a demonstration slide to tell students my expectations. For example, I pasted a picture for the prompt “A moment of relaxation (at least 2 people)” and wrote a description: “In this picture, my friend and I are enjoying Americanos at a cozy café one wintry morning. This is a relaxing moment because we can talk about our school life and read books we like while enjoying a cup of freshly brewed coffee.”

Using Google Slides, students will have a class album by the end of the activity. Moreover, students can use the editing function to type brief comments on each other’s descriptions.

Variation: Instead of using Google Slides, students can print out their photos and write their descriptions on a piece of paper. Teachers can then compile a physical copy

How you feel at the end of the term	A moment of confusion	A symbol of friendship (at least 2 people)	You before an exam
A moment of relaxation (at least 2 people)	A typical school day	You in a parallel universe	The ending of a movie you like
A classical pose of a superhero	A horrifying moment (at least 2 people)	A memorable place and what you do there	An activity that makes you happy
The school through your eyes	You playing a sport	Something unusual in a restaurant	You speaking English (at least 2 people)

Figure 1. Possible prompts for student photos



"An activity that makes you happy"

of the class's photo diaries. Following this low-tech approach achieves the same purpose as using Google Slides in terms of demonstration of learning outcomes.

INTRODUCING THE WRITING TASK

Tell students that the learning outcome of this writing unit is to write a 400-word photo-diary entry about a memorable experience they have had, using at least four photos. Ideally, these photos will be taken by the students, although photos can also be downloaded from the Internet. Students can also find pictures in magazines or draw the pictures themselves.

Tell students what you expect in the description:

- 1.** Write two or three sentences with information about the people (who), the environment (where), the time (when), the activities (what), and the feelings associated with the situation. Note that because students are writing about their own experiences, at least one person in the description should be the student.
- 2.** Use descriptive language to describe mood, feelings, atmosphere, objects, and people.

Show students the demo slide you created (or on a separate PowerPoint slide or poster paper if you choose not to use Google Slides) and tell them that this is a picture about a moment

of relaxation. Read out the description and ask the students whether it fulfills the instructions. If students find this challenging, help them by asking them questions such as these:

- Did I mention who is in the photo?
- Did I mention where I am?
- Did I mention what I am doing?

After students understand what constitutes an effective picture description, remind them that they are going to include this kind of information in the writing task.

PREWRITING ACTIVITY

Distribute the activity sheet—with the grid—to students and tell them the purpose of this activity is to help them write effective

descriptions, based on photos. Give clear instructions about what they need to do in the activity:

1. Tell students that there are 16 prompts in the grid and that they have to choose four of them. After they choose the prompts, they should use their phones to take pictures that show what the prompt is asking for.
2. Remind students to pay attention to the special requirements in some of the prompts. For example, some prompts require that at least two people be in the photo.
3. Let students know how much time is allotted for the activity and when they should come back to the classroom. The duration of this prewriting activity is flexible. It can be shortened or





“A moment of relaxation (at least 2 people)”

lengthened depending on the number of pictures you want students to take, how many students have phones, whether you want them to take the photos in class or outside class, and so on. I had a class that lasted two hours; I allowed students to move around for 40 minutes, and that left adequate time for the next step. If you ask students to take only one or two photos, that obviously will require less time.

Variation: Depending on your lesson time, you may want to introduce this activity to students and have them complete it as homework. This way, lesson time will not be taken up waiting

for all of the students to come back and solving technical glitches. (However, doing the activity in class is beneficial because students can work together to practice collaborative writing, supporting one another as they write their descriptions.)

4. After students have taken the four photos, tell them to upload their photos to the Google Slides file and type a description of two or three sentences next to each. Remind students of the information you expect the descriptions to include. If you decide not to use Google Slides, ask students to write the descriptions on a piece of paper.

SHARING AND ANALYZING DESCRIPTIONS

The warm-up activity would be meaningless and irrelevant if inadequate time is allocated to this step. After all, the purpose of this activity is to raise students' awareness about providing details to a description.

When all students have uploaded or prepared their photos, show the Google Slides file with the photos and descriptions, or display the papers with the descriptions of the cutout photos or drawings. Invite students to share their descriptions with the whole class. Tell students that they have to highlight the key information in their description, namely the people, the environment, the time, the activity, and the feelings associated with them.

To maximize the effectiveness of this prewriting task, the key information can be turned into a table or checklist for assessing students' description of an event. The table can be used to develop students' self-regulation during the prewriting, writing, and reviewing stages of writing. For example, in the prewriting stage, students can write their outlines based on the "who, where, when, what" framework. When students start writing, they can refer to the framework to remind themselves to include all the necessary information in their descriptions. Later, when students have a chance to evaluate their own work and the writing produced by their peers, they can use the table to evaluate how well the description incorporates each part of the framework.

ADDITIONAL PREPARATORY STEP (FOR TECH-SAVVY TEACHERS)

In order to make the photos as original and creative as possible, you may want to introduce photo-editing apps. Students can add special effects to their photos before uploading them to Google Slides. For students, the photo-editing apps may make the activity more fun; for teachers, it helps to know that these apps and their special effects can motivate students to use more diverse vocabulary to enrich their descriptions. Below are some apps that I have introduced to my students:

- **Bonfire Photo Editor Pro** (play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.gogoinv.bonfire.android&hl=en): With its user-friendly interface, this app can help you improve your photos.
- **My Heart Camera** (itunes.apple.com/us/app/my-heart-camera-photo-collage/id657224393?mt=8): You can use this app to decorate your photos with heart stamps.
- **Photo Grid** (itunes.apple.com/us/app/photo-grid-photo-collage-maker/id543577420?mt=8): This app allows you to enhance your photos by adding stickers and text and applying filters.

ADAPTING THE TECHNIQUE

Teachers in all contexts can adapt this activity to different themes or topics. For example, teachers of English for Specific Purposes courses could adapt the activity by using prompts targeted at an upcoming topic or one that has just been studied.

Teachers with students at lower proficiency levels can use the activity with the expectation that students might produce shorter descriptions; those students might need hands-on guidance, especially when they write about the first picture. The more pictures they describe, the more comfortable they should feel, and the less guidance they are likely to need.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This activity introduces a writing task by tapping into students' personal experience and prior knowledge, providing options and allowing for flexibility in the description. By participating in this activity, students should develop their capacity to write about particular events by using descriptive language.

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