

Detail

Consider:

CHARLEY (to WILLY): Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked. Now listen, Willy, I know you don't like me, and nobody can say I'm in love with you, but I'll give you a job because – just for the hell of it, put it that way. Now what do you say?

— Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Discuss:

1. Who was J. P. Morgan? What is a Turkish bath? What picture comes to mind when someone is said to look like a butcher? How do these details contribute to the point Charley is trying to make?
2. How would the passage be different if Charley said J. P. Morgan would look like a *baker* in a Turkish bath?

Apply:

Think of someone famous and powerful. Use detail to create an unflattering but accurate description of the physical appearance of this famous person. Model your description on Miller's description of J. P. Morgan. Share your description with a partner.

Detail

Consider:

To those who saw him often he seemed almost like two men: one the merry monarch of the hunt and banquet and procession, the friend of children, the patron of every kind of sport; the other the cold, acute observer of the audience chamber or the Council, watching vigilantly, weighing arguments, refusing except under the stress of great events to speak his own mind.

— Winston Churchill, “King Henry VIII,” *Churchill’s History of the English-Speaking Peoples*

Discuss:

1. Churchill draws attention to the contrasting sides of Henry VIII through detail. How is the impact of this sentence strengthened by the *order* of the details’ presentation?

2. What is Churchill’s attitude toward Henry? What specific details reveal this attitude?

Apply:

Think of someone you know who has two strong sides to his/her personality. Using Churchill’s sentence as a model, write a sentence which captures – through detail – these two sides. Share your sentence with a partner.

Detail

Consider:

The truck lurched down the goat path, over the bridge and swung south toward El Puerto. I watched carefully all that we left behind. We passed Rosie's house and at the clothesline right at the edge of the cliff there was a young girl hanging out brightly colored garments. She was soon lost in the furrow of dust the truck raised.

— Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*

Discuss:

1. Circle the words that provide specific detail and contribute to the power of the passage.

2. Contrast the third sentence with:

We passed Rosie's house and saw a girl hanging out the clothes.

Explain the difference in impact.

Apply:

Rewrite the passage eliminating the specific detail. Read your rewrite aloud to the class. How does the elimination of detail change the meaning of the passage? Discuss this with a partner.

Detail

Consider:

He went on till he came to the first milestone, which stood in the bank, half-way up a steep hill. He rested his basket on the top of the stone, placed his elbows on it, and gave way to a convulsive twitch, which was worse than sob, because it was so hard and so dry.

— Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Discuss:

1. How do the details in this passage prepare you for the *convulsive twitch* at the end of the passage?

2. This passage does not describe the character's face at all. What effect does this lack of detail have on the reader?

Apply:

Plan a pantomime of the scene described in this passage and perform it for the class. After several people have performed their pantomimes, discuss the facial expressions they used in their pantomimes. Discuss the similarities and differences and how they relate to the use of detail in the passage.

Detail

Consider:

The dog stood up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge. Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived. The dog raced down the back-bone of the cow to the attack and Janie screamed and slipped far back on the tail of the cow, just out of reach of the dog's angry jaws.

— Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Discuss:

1. Which details reveal that the dog has rabies? What effect do these details have on the reader?

2. Contrast the details used to describe Tea Cake (the male protagonist) and Janie (the female protagonist). What do these details reveal about the author's attitude toward these two characters?

Apply:

Think of two contrasting characters. Write a sentence for each showing their reaction to a fight. Do not explain the different reactions; instead, show the different reactions through use of detail. Share your sentences with the class.

Detail

Consider:

MRS. VENABLE: . . . and the sand all alive, all alive, as the hatched sea-turtles made their dash for the sea, while the birds hovered and swooped to attack and hovered and – swooped to attack! They were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles, turning them over to expose their soft undersides, tearing the undersides open and rending and eating their flesh.

— Tennessee Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer*

Discuss:

1. Williams uses the repetition of detail in three places in this passage. Underline the three places and discuss whether the repetition enhances or detracts from the overall effect of the passage.

2. What is Mrs. Venable's attitude toward the scene she describes? Which specific details reveal this attitude?

Apply:

With a partner write a detailed description of a sporting event. Emphasize some violent or extreme action by repeating at least two vivid details. Try to create a feeling of revulsion through your choice of details. Share your description with the class.

Detail

Consider:

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without "a thin di-I-ime to my name." I looked forward to the delicious time when "my man" would leave me, when I would "hate to see that evening sun go down . . ." 'cause then I would know "my man has left this town." Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.

— Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Discuss:

1. Why are parts of the passage in quotes? What do the quoted details add to the passage?
2. Which details in the passage contribute to the conclusion that pain is sweet? Fill in the chart below to show how Morrison sets up this oxymoron.

"Sweet" Details	"Pain" Details

Apply:

Think of a paradoxical feeling such as sweet pain, healthful illness, or frightening comfort; then make a chart listing two details for each side of the paradox. Use the chart above as a model. Share your chart with a partner.

Detail

Consider:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
— W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts”

Discuss:

1. *Suffering* is a general term. What is a general term that sums up the detail in line 4?

2. Compare line 4 with the following:

While someone else is not suffering;

Why is Auden’s line more effective?

Apply:

Substitute the word *laziness* for *suffering* in line one of the poem. Now rewrite line four to complete the following:

While someone else is _____ or _____ or

_____.

Your new line should give details about the *opposite* condition of laziness. Use Auden’s line as a model. Share the “new” stanzas with a partner.

Detail

Consider:

Under the hard, tough cloak of the struggle for existence in which money and enormous white refrigerators and shining, massive, brutally-fast cars and fine, expensive clothing had ostensibly overwhelmed the qualities of men that were good and gentle and just, there still beat a heart of kindness and patience and forgiveness.

— John Okada, *No-No Boy*

Discuss:

1. What does Okada's choice of detail reveal about his attitude toward money?
2. How would the elimination of *and enormous white refrigerators and shining, massive, brutally-fast cars and fine, expensive clothing* modify the meaning and effectiveness of the sentence? Fill in the chart below with details that support your understanding of Okada's attitude toward money.

Money Details	People Details

Apply:

Choose a general noun then list three concrete noun phrases that reflect your opinion of the general noun. For example, Okada uses *money* as a general noun. He then expresses his opinion of money with detailed noun phrases: *enormous white refrigerators*; *shining, massive, brutally-fast cars*; and *fine, expensive clothing*. Share your list with the class.

Detail

Consider:

I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony.

— George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

Discuss:

1. What is the author's attitude toward the coolie's death? What details in the passage reveal this attitude?
2. Examine the last sentence of this paragraph. How would it have affected the overall impact had Orwell written, **his** eyes wide open, **his** teeth bared and grinning. . . ?

Apply:

Think of an event that you have personally witnessed which horrified you. Your job is to describe that event and evoke the horror. Do not state or explain that you were horrified. Instead, use detail to describe the event and reveal your attitude. Share your description with the class.

Detail

Consider:

Until I returned to Cuba, I never realized how many blues exist. The aquamarines near the shoreline, the azures of deeper waters, the eggshell blues beneath my grandmother's eyes, the fragile indigos tracking her hands. There's a blue, too, in the curves of the palms, and the edges of the words we speak, a blue tinge to the sand and the seashells and the plump gulls on the beach. The mole by Abuela's mouth is also blue, a vanishing blue.

— Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban*

Discuss:

1. The narrator details the blues of the landscape and the blues of her grandmother (Abuela). What connection is revealed by this juxtaposition of images?

2. Why is the last *blue* in the passage a *vanishing blue*?

Apply:

Choose a color and describe a scene using at least three varieties of that color. Try to mix details of landscape and people. Share your description with the class.

Detail

Consider:

How fine it is to enter some old town, walled and turreted, just at approach of nightfall, or to come to some straggling village, with the lights streaming through the surrounding gloom; and then, after inquiring for the best entertainment that the place affords, to “take one’s ease at one’s inn”!

— William Hazlitt, “On Going a Journey”

Discuss:

1. What details support the generalization, *how fine it is*?
2. What feelings are evoked by the details of the town (*old, walled, turreted*)? How does this selection of detail communicate Hazlitt’s attitude toward the town?

Apply:

Imagine going to a motel after a long day on the road. The motel is the only place to sleep in town, and the next town is 200 miles away. The motel is old and dirty; your room is shabby and dark. Plan a brief monologue which expresses your attitude toward this room. Include specific references to the details that both produce and reveal your attitude. Perform your monologue for the class.

Detail

Consider:

She was wearing her usual at-home vesture. . . . It consisted mostly of a hoary midnight-blue Japanese kimono. She almost invariably wore it through the apartment during the day. With its many occultish-looking folds, it also served as the repository for the paraphernalia of a very heavy cigarette smoker and an amateur handyman; two oversized pockets had been added at the hips, and they usually contained two or three packs of cigarettes, several match folders, a screwdriver, a claw-end hammer, a Boy Scout knife that had once belonged to one of her sons, and an enamel faucet handle or two, plus an assortment of screws, nails, hinges, and ball-bearing casters – all of which tended to make Mrs. Glass chink faintly as she moved about in her large apartment.

— J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*

Discuss:

1. What does the detail in this passage reveal about Mrs. Glass's character? In other words, how does the detail give you a picture of her looks and insight into her character?

2. How would the meaning of the fourth sentence (*With its many . . .*) be different without the detail that follows the semicolon?

Apply:

Sketch a picture of Mrs. Glass. Include in your sketch the details from the passage that you think are most expressive of the author's attitude toward Mrs. Glass.

Detail

Consider:

In fact right behind her Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddy Malins across the landing. The latter, a young man of about forty, was of Gabriel's size and build, with very round shoulders. His face was fleshy and pallid, touched with colour only at the thick hanging lobes of his ears and at the wide wings of his nose. He had coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips. His heavy-lidded eyes and the disorder of his scanty hair made him look sleepy.

— James Joyce, "The Dead"

Discuss:

1. Joyce uses many specific details to describe Freddy's physical appearance. Fill in the chart below and indicate (✓) whether each detail is objective (making an observation) or evaluative (making a judgment).

Detail	Objective	Evaluative

2. What is Joyce's attitude toward Freddy? Which specific details reveal this attitude?

Apply:

Write a paragraph describing a character's personality by describing his/her physical traits. Do not make any direct statements about his/her personality or character. Instead, use detail about appearance to capture character. Read your paragraph to a partner and discuss which physical traits are stereotypes and which traits are valid indications of character.

Detail

Consider:

We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing-rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms, with sunken baths – intruding into one chamber where a disheveled man in pajamas was doing liver exercises on the floor.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Discuss:

1. List three general adjectives that you could use to describe this house. Explain the connection between the detail in Fitzgerald's sentence and the adjectives you have chosen.

2. How does the *disheveled man in pajamas . . . doing liver exercises on the floor* help create the mood and atmosphere of the house?

Apply:

Rewrite the sentence eliminating the specific detail. Read your sentence to a partner and discuss the change in impact and meaning.

Detail

Consider:

My grandfather took me to the back of his house, to a room that my mother said was private, that she had yanked me away from when I once had tried to look. It had a bead curtain at the door and we passed through it and the beads rustled like tall grass. The room was dim, lit by candles, and it smelled of incense, and my grandfather stood me before a little shrine with flowers and a smoking incense bowl and two brass candlesticks and between them a photo of a man in a Chinese mandarin hat.

— Robert Olen Butler, “Mr. Green,” *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

Discuss:

1. The first sentence states that the room is private. The author then uses specific detail to illustrate the privacy. How does this detail define and focus the privacy of the room?
2. Most of the passage is filled with detail describing the room. Which detail do you think adds most to the impact of the passage? Why?

Apply:

Write a sentence in which you use an action to characterize the state of loneliness. Use the first sentence of this passage as a model. Share your sentence with a partner.

Detail

Consider:

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,
Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog,
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,
I see in them and myself the same old law.

— Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass*

Discuss:

1. What is the conclusion of the last line? Which details in the passage support this conclusion?
2. The animals in these stanzas are specific and detailed. In contrast, the ambience (*the cool night, the wintry sky*) is more general. What attitude is revealed by this difference?

Apply:

Rewrite the passage, describing the night and the sky in great detail and the animals in general terms. Read your version to the class and lead a discussion about how this change shifts the meaning of the passage.

Detail

Consider:

The day has been hot and sultry. The sun has set behind great banks of clouds which are piling up on the northwestern horizon. Now that the light is beginning to fade, the great masses of cumulus, which are slowly gathering and rising higher toward the zenith, are lit up by pale flashes of sheet-lightning.

— W. J. Holland, “Sugaring for Moths,” *The Moth Book*

Discuss:

1. What are the details that contribute to the reader’s mental picture of the clouds? List these details and discuss the significance of the order of their presentation.

2. What is *sheet-lightning*? Why is it more effective to say *sheet-lightning* than *lightning*?

Apply:

Write three sentences that vividly describe a country scene. In your description use at least two details drawn from the world of science. Use your dictionary if you need to. Remember that it is better to name a specific tree than to use the general word *tree*. Share one of your sentences with the class.