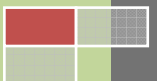


# PICTURE DESCRIPTION

GUIDELINES, TECHNIQUES & EXAM TIPS

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## PICTURE DESCRIPTION

IN THE BACKGROUND...  
IT LOOKS LIKE...  
IN THIS PICTURE..

A picture description is an ideal way of practising your English vocabulary in all sorts of fields. Pictures provide serious language practice and can be invaluable in the classroom for stimulating discussion and bringing enormous variety to lessons. They also provide the teacher with a flexible and convenient tool to test many different things in exams.



## GUIDELINES, TECHNIQUES & EXAM TIPS

LET ME SEE...  
AS I SEE IT...  
IT SHOWS...  
AT THE TOP...

Here you have some techniques and exam tips I have put together to help you describe a picture or photograph. Study them carefully and decide on how to structure your picture description. Don't worry if you find it a bit difficult at first, we'll practise a lot to make things easier in time. I've also included some exercises that we'll correct in a future revision class.



After all, as the saying has it:

***"A picture paints a  
thousand words"***

## QUESTIONS

### ➤ What happens when I have to describe a picture?

It's simple. The examiner gives you a picture and asks you to say what you see. He or she may also ask you to give an opinion or comment on the content of the picture.

### ➤ What does this test?

That depends on what the examiner is looking for. It can test fluency, vocabulary, stress, pronunciation and rhythms of speech, ability to communicate, grammatical accuracy and interactive communication. And probably it can test them all at the same time.

### ➤ How should I approach this type of test?

Here are some useful techniques and guidelines for describing pictures. You will not need to use all of them every time but it will be useful to be familiar with them.

## GUIDELINES

| DO                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | DON'T                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Look carefully at the photos. Think how to describe what you can see. Take your time to do it.</li> <li>➤ Be as precise as you can when you describe the photo itself. Use some 'position' language if it helps.</li> <li>➤ Use present continuous verbs to describe what is happening.</li> <li>➤ If there is a person or people in the photo, you will need to describe their appearance.</li> <li>➤ Answer questions as fully as possible. Keep talking, give details, explain your point, ask questions, paraphrase, don't get stuck on words.... Any device that demonstrates that you can carry a topic through will help your performance.</li> <li>➤ Try to direct the conversation towards something you are interested in and can talk about easily.</li> <li>➤ Speak naturally and be animated! Keep eye contact with the examiner, be friendly and show a positive attitude.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Don't worry if you don't understand immediately what is going on in the picture.</li> <li>➤ Don't worry if you don't know the precise words for what you can see; use alternatives.</li> <li>➤ Don't use the present simple to describe what is happening.</li> <li>➤ Don't use general language to describe people. You should use vocabulary of the level required.</li> <li>➤ Don't give too many one - or two - word answers. Avoid answers which are single words or lists. Silence is your enemy! If you are not a talkative person by nature, you must make an extra effort for the test.</li> <li>➤ Don't feel you have to stick rigidly to the subject. Don't give complicated explanations if you are not sure.</li> <li>➤ Don't be shy! This is your chance to show how well you can speak. Smile and relax!</li> </ul> |

## TECHNIQUES

### 1. Describe where things are in the picture

- Make sure you are familiar with the language used to describe where something is in a picture. Check that you know how to use the phrases in the boxes below:

|                                         |                     |                                          |                      |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| IN THE TOP<br>LEFT (-HAND)<br>CORNER    | AT THE TOP          | IN THE TOP<br>RIGHT (-HAND)<br>CORNER    | OF<br>THE<br>PICTURE |
| ON THE LEFT (-HAND)<br>SIDE             | IN<br>THE<br>MIDDLE | ON THE RIGHT (-HAND)<br>SIDE             |                      |
| IN THE BOTTOM<br>LEFT (-HAND)<br>CORNER | AT THE BOTTOM       | IN THE BOTTOM<br>RIGHT (-HAND)<br>CORNER |                      |
| IN THE<br>BACKGROUND<br>FOREGROUND      |                     |                                          |                      |

- Fill in the gaps with the correct 'position' language:



1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Don't be too certain

- Sometimes you cannot be sure what is happening in a photo or picture. Use appropriate language to show that you are **guessing**. Use uncertain and speculative language when you aren't 100% sure.

|                                                   |                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>I think / guess/suppose</b> it is...           | <b>Maybe / Perhaps</b> they are...         |
| <b>I'm not sure</b> but, they could be...         | <b>They seem to be</b> taking part in...   |
| <b>It's not very clear</b> but, probably...       | <b>It can/could/might</b> be a scene of... |
| <b>I can't quite make it out</b> but, perhaps.... |                                            |

- We use expressions with **'look'** when we are making guesses and deductions based on (usually visual) evidence:

| Study these constructions using <b>'look'</b> :                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Where necessary correct these sentences :                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1. <i>This looks like the work of a child</i><br/> <b>look like + NOUN</b><br/>           (when it means <i>be similar to</i>)</p>                                                                                                                                           | <p>1. <i>She looks like hungry</i></p> <p>2. <i>It looks as if it is going to rain</i></p> <p>3. <i>The boys look like breaking into the car</i></p> |
| <p>2. <i>The boy looks tired and fed up</i><br/> <b>look + ADJECTIVE</b><br/>           ( when it means <i>seem</i> )</p>                                                                                                                                                       | <p>4. <i>He looks like his father</i></p> <p>5. <i>They look they are in a crowded market</i></p> <p>6. <i>They don't look as if happy</i></p>       |
| <p>3. <i>The girl looks as though she is in her late 20s</i><br/> <b>look as though/as if + VERB PHRASE</b><br/>           (similar to 1, but attention must be paid to the <i>grammatical construction</i>)</p> <p>* <i>As if</i> and <i>As though</i> are interchangeable</p> | <p>7. <i>It doesn't look anyone is living here</i></p> <p>8. <i>He looks capable and reliable</i></p>                                                |

## 3. Paraphrase if you don't know the word

- Don't worry if there are things in the picture that you don't know the English for. Make sure you know how to talk 'round' words you don't know. These expressions are always useful:

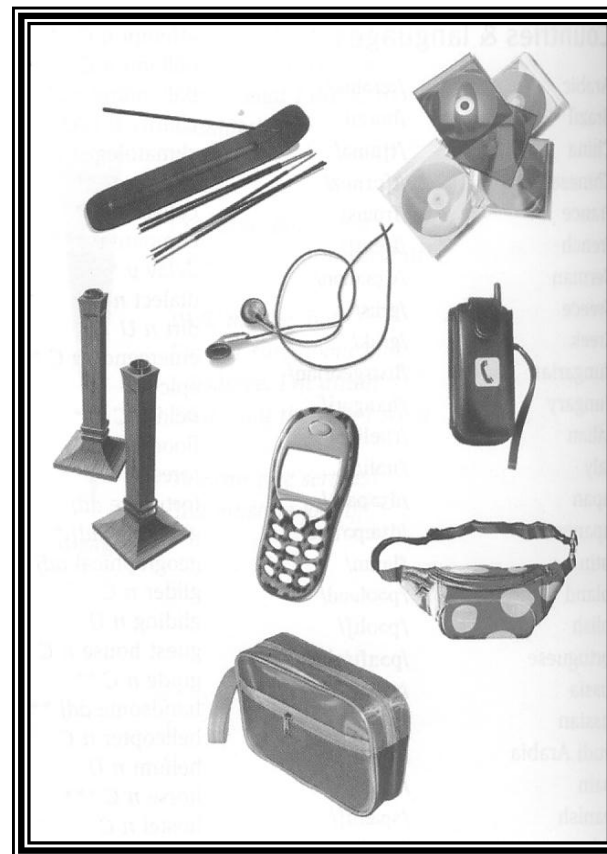
**It's used to** open... / **It's used for** opening... / **You use it to** open...

**It's what you do when you..**(if you don't know the verb)

**I don't know what you call it, but...**(describe or define it)

**I don't know what it is called /the word for it, but...**

**It's a kind / sort of...**   **It's like a.....**   **It's stuff /a thing for**



**1.Take** it in turns to choose one of the objects. Describe the object to your partner but do not say what it is. Your partner must guess which object you are describing

**2. Remember** to use the expressions mentioned above to talk 'round' words you don't know

## 4. Give your opinion & Use hesitation words



- Remember you may also be asked to give your opinion on the content of the picture or topics related to it. To start with, here are some expressions you can use:

|                                      |                                |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>In my opinion</b>                 | <b>As far as I'm concerned</b> |
| <b>As I see it</b>                   | <b>I would say that</b>        |
| <b>If you ask me</b>                 | <b>Personally</b>              |
| <b>I suppose/believe/think/guess</b> | <b>From my point of view</b>   |

- In order to play for time, to give yourself time to think, you can use hesitation words or sounds ('delaying sounds'). Make sure you don't use them from your own language. They can sound strange in English!

**Well,... Er..., Let me see..., Mmm..., Then..., I mean..., You know (what I mean)**

## 5. Ask for clarification & Correct yourself

- Don't be afraid to interrupt and ask if you don't understand what you are being told. It's important to familiarise yourself with the right phrases to ask for clarification or repetition and be able to go on:

**Shall I start?**  
**What do you mean?**  
**I don't (really) understand...**  
**Do you think you could say/explain that again?**  
**Would you mind repeating it, please?**  
**May/can I ask you a question?**  
**I'm not (quite) sure what I have to do...**  
**Can I interrupt or say something?**

- Asking the examiner to repeat can actually be the perfect opportunity to show off some complex language - e.g.:

**'I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch the last part...'**  
**'I didn't quite get what you said...'**  
**'If I can just check what you are saying, you'd like me to...'**

- And, be confident to correct yourself if necessary!

**What I mean... What I'm trying to say...**  
**I don't think I explained that very well...**

## 6. What to include

**LOCATION** (describe where things are in the picture)

Remember to use the position language you have learnt so far in order to do it in a proper way.

**What** can you see in the picture?

**Where** are things placed in the picture?

**PLACE** (mention something about the place)

**Where** is it?

**What's** the place / scenery like?

**ACTION** (describe what is happening)

**What** are the people **doing**?

**PEOPLE** (speculate about the characters)

Talk about people's appearance, clothes, relationship. If there is not a main character, focus on the group

**What** are the people like?

**What** are they **wearing**?

**How** are they **related**?

**IDEAS & OTHER DETAILS** (speculate about the scene)

Give extra information about the scene to add further details to your description.

**What** has happened?

**What** do you think will happen **next**?

**What** is the weather like?

**What else** can be interesting in the picture?

**IMPRESSION** (give some impressions and opinions)

**How** do they **look**?

**What** is his/her emotional state?

**What** are they thinking/talking **about**?

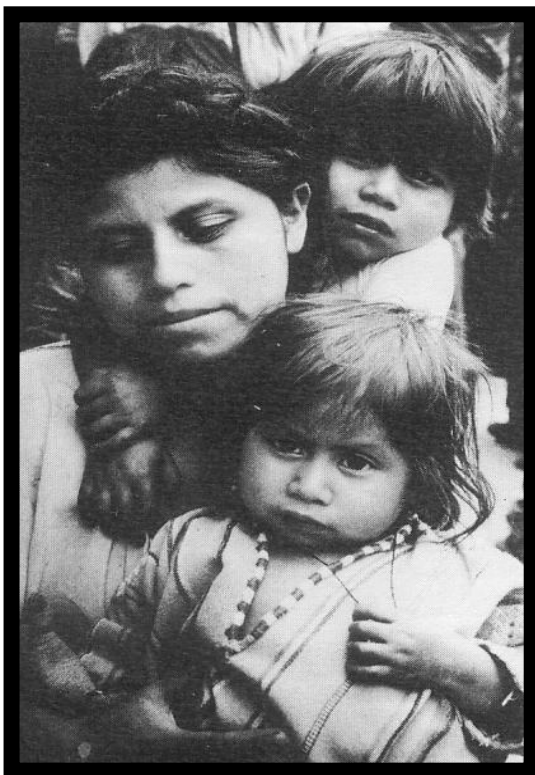
## PRACTICE 1

Takes after  
Might  
Could be  
Shows

To tell  
The background  
Make it out  
Perhaps

She has got  
Would say  
It looks as though  
Looks like

Looks  
Can't be  
Maybe



This photo **(1)** ..... a young mother and her two kids.  
I **(2)** ..... they must be from somewhere in South America.  
**(3)** .....they're in a crowded market, although it is difficult **(4)**....., because you can't see much of **(5)**.....

The mother has her hair up in a bun and a roundish face. She **(6)** ..... fed up, but this **(7)** ..... because she's tired. **(8)** ..... she's had a busy day shopping.

The child with its arm around her neck **(9)** ..... a little boy.

It seems he's aware of the camera.

The little girl **(10)** ..... more than three. She's a little plump, but you can see that she really **(11)** ..... her mother. **(12)** ..... her mother's mouth and the most beautiful almond-shaped eyes. She's holding something in her hand ...

I can't really **(13)** ..... It **(14)** ..... be a charm or **(15)** .....it's a crucifix.

## PRACTICE 2

### Location

- Match the phrases on the left with the appropriate places in this photograph

at the bottom  
at the top  
on the right-hand side  
on the left-hand side  
in the top left-hand corner  
in the bottom right-hand corner  
in the foreground  
in the background  
on the left  
on the right  
in the middle



### Picture discussion

- Look carefully at the photograph and answer the questions. Remember to use the expressions you learn to make suggestions and give your opinion.

#### A Description

1. What can you see in the photograph?
2. How are the eight people in this photograph related?
3. What else could you describe to the examiner?

#### B General questions

1. How many people are there in your family?
2. Would you like to be a twin, a triplet a sextuplet? Why? Why not?
3. Why do you think parents often dress twins in the same clothes?
4. From a child's point of view, what are the pros and cons of being part of a big family?
5. From the parents' point of view, what are the advantages and disadvantages of having only one child?

M. Cristina C. B.

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