

Writers use descriptive language in many ways – for example, in setting the scene in a novel or poem, travel writing, or biography. You need to be able to identify the author's purpose from the language used and the details included. You also need to be able to compare and evaluate different styles of description.

Top tips

When comparing authors, don't just write all you have to say about the first, then all you have to say about the second: try to keep comparing them all the way through what you write. The word 'Whereas' is useful here.

Getting you thinking

Read the two passages that follow, then select and write down any phrases that vividly bring to life the place described and the experience of the writer. Look especially for imagery – similes (using 'like' or 'as') and metaphors.

1 Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie*

A

I was set down from the carrier's cart at the age of three; and there with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began.

The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all around me, each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark, and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys.

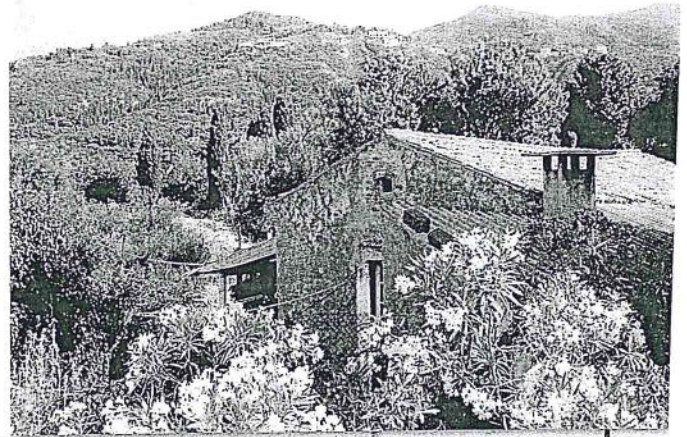
I was lost and didn't know where to move. A tropic heat oozed up from the ground, rank with sharp odours of roots and nettles. Snow-clouds of elder-blossom banked in the sky, showering upon me the fumes and flakes of their sweet and giddy suffocation. High overhead ran frenzied larks, screaming, as though the sky were tearing apart.



2 Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*

B

This dolls-house garden was a magic land, a forest of flowers through which roamed creatures I had never seen before. Among the thick, silky petals of each rose-bloom lived tiny, crab-like spiders that scuttled sideways when disturbed. Their small, **translucent** bodies were coloured to match the flowers they inhabited: pink, ivory, wine-red, or buttery-yellow. On the rose-stems, encrusted with green flies, lady-birds moved like newly painted toys; lady-birds pale red with large black spots; lady-birds apple-red with brown spots; lady-birds orange with grey-and-black freckles. **Rotund** and amiable, they prowled and fed among the **anaemic** flocks of greenfly. Carpenter bees, like furry, electric-blue bears, zigzagged among the flowers, growling fatly and busily. Humming-bird hawk-moths, sleek and neat, whipped up and down the paths with a fussy efficiency, pausing occasionally on speed-misty wings to lower a long, slender **proboscis** into a bloom.



Glossary

translucent: semi-transparent

Rotund: round

anaemic: pale and lacking in vitality

proboscis: long mouth or sucking device

How does it work?

Both authors describe how the garden first seemed to them as children. They both use quite lavish language with a lot of adjectives and imagery, but there are important differences.

Laurie Lee	Gerald Durrell
Lee conveys a strong impression of a young child's experience. We see his height relative to the grass: 'It towered above me'. Lee suggests that the garden is exotic but threatening: 'each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight'. The double metaphor here suggests a dangerous jungle. The adjectives in 'knife-edged, dark, and a wicked green' also convey a sense of threat.	Durrell's garden is delightfully exotic but unthreatening: it's a 'dolls-house garden', 'a magic land'. Instead of talking about his own emotions, Durrell concentrates on the garden's inhabitants whose appearance and behaviour he describes in loving detail.
Lee favours metaphors, suggesting that for the three-year-old the garden actually is a jungle.	Durrell makes more use of similes: 'like furry, electric-blue bears'. These distance the author slightly from the thing described.