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# Observation and Description

## TERMINOLOGY

The following is some important terminology related to private investigation of which you should take note when you encounter it in this study unit.

**aquiline** Hooked; curved like an eagle's beak; a nose similar to a Roman nose

**composite** Made up of various parts, as a *composite drawing*

**description** A picture in words

**florid** Highly colored, ruddy

**kinesics** Gestures, body movements, and facial expressions accompanying speech

**metaphor** An implied comparison (using one word for another) between two things

**nonverbal** Not spoken with words

**observation** The act of seeing and noting, or something seen and noted

**occipital** Having to do with the back part of the head

**paralanguage** Near or almost language

**physique** Bodily structure or shape of a person

**rapport** Connection or harmony; good interaction

**sense** The power of the mind to know what happens outside itself

**senses** Sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell are the five principal senses

**simile** An expressed comparison of two different things or ideas

**systematic** According to a system, method, or plan

## Observation and Description as Investigative Tools

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Careful observations and detailed descriptions are investigative tools. Your own observations help you build descriptions of persons, objects, places, and events. These descriptions can be used later to identify whom or what you saw. Others may observe someone or something, which they can describe to you. Their descriptions can help you find or identify persons, objects, and places.

*Descriptions* help people relate to others what they've seen or observed (Figure 1). Descriptions may be either written or oral. A person may use signs, gestures, sketches, the written word, or any other means to convey information about what he or she has seen.

**FIGURE 1**—A description given to you by a witness may help you to identify a person or object.



Most people aren't trained to remember and evaluate what they see. Therefore, the observations and descriptions of witnesses may not be as detailed or as objective as those of trained observers. Trained observers see and notice things that average people don't. In addition, trained observers know their observations can be affected by lack of sleep, by illness, or by other outside influences. They know they must make allowances for outside influences when they interpret what

they see. Knowing the techniques of good observation and description improves the ability of private investigators to interview witnesses.

## Factors Affecting Observation and Description

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As a private investigator, you must be aware of some of the things that can affect what people see. A person trained in observation skills should, of course, see and remember more of what he or she sees. Trained or not, however, many factors influence what a person sees, how well the person sees it, and how that person interprets what he or she sees. If you're aware of these influences, then you'll be better able to evaluate the descriptions given to you by others. In addition, you'll be able to assess your own observation skills. Let's look at some of these factors.

### Environment

On a clear day or in a well-lit building, people can see much better than they can on a cloudy or rainy day or in a poorly lit room. The presence of unrelated, distracting circumstances can also influence what people see by focusing their attention in a particular direction. For example, a spectator watching an exciting play on a football field may fail to note the actions of the person sitting in the next seat.

The length of time between the occurrence and the time that it's recalled may affect the accuracy of a description. That is, if much time has passed, the observer may forget or confuse details of an event and his or her description may be inaccurate.

Where an observer is when he or she sees an event influences what that observer sees. It's unlikely that more than one or two people will view an event from exactly the same vantage point. Difference in location may account for a difference in observation. Whether the sunshine is coming from the front or from behind the observer can greatly affect the details of what can be seen. A person looking west on a sunny day just before dusk would have difficulty seeing colors or other

details whereas a person looking east at the same time in the same area might see all details clearly. Distance also plays a part in observation. Someone observing an event from a great distance may be able to give a good overall description of what takes place; however, he or she may not be able to see and give as many details as someone who sees the same event at close range. On the other hand, the closer person may be unsure of the overall picture. When you get conflicting descriptions from people who have seen the same event, it may be due to some of these environmental factors.

## Past Experience

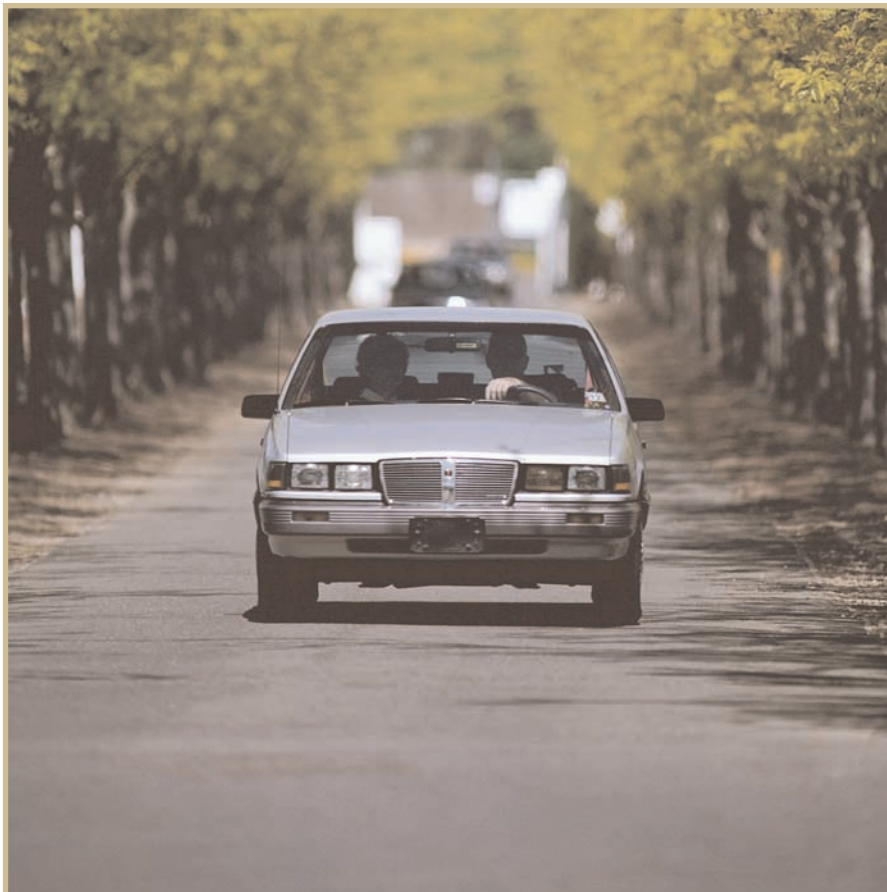
People tend to evaluate and interpret what they observe according to similar past experiences. For example, they tend to compare the size of a person or an object with the size of a person or object with which they're familiar. A very short or very tall person may fail to judge another's height correctly. Someone 6 feet tall may seem "very tall" to an observer who is only 4 feet 10 inches tall. The same 6-foot person would appear to be "normal height" to a person 5 feet 10 inches tall.

All observers usually understand sounds, odors, tastes, and other perceptions that are common to all environments. However, items specific to a particular area may pose a problem for a person not familiar with that area. For example, a lifelong resident of a big city might not be able to accurately describe a farm scene. A native of a tropical island shouldn't be expected to describe a high-speed car accident in minute detail. In such cases, stimuli that can't be easily compared to a past experience are often mistakenly interpreted in terms of familiar things. In addition, a wrong interpretation of a past experience may influence the perception of a present experience.

## Interests

A person's interests also affect perception. For instance, many American teenagers can quickly recognize and identify the make and model of a car. On the other hand, they may fail to perceive details of the driver's appearance, license number, or make and condition of the tires (Figure 2).

Special-interest training may increase someone's power of observation; however, it also may limit the focus of attention and cause the loss of other details. Specialists often have acute perception within their own field, but fail to be observant in other fields. Artists may take special note of color, form, and proportion; however, they may fail to discern or properly interpret sounds or odors. Conversely, a mechanic may quickly note the sound of a motor or an indication of the state of repair of a car, but fail to clearly discern the appearance and actions of the driver.



**FIGURE 2**—For some people, it's easier to identify the make and model of a car, rather than describe the person driving it.

## Physiology

Pain, hunger, fatigue, or an unnatural body position can affect a person's power to accurately observe and interpret things. Discomfort may cause an observer to misinterpret things he or she would normally comprehend. A person's senses of taste and smell are often distorted by physical and external stimuli. These senses (taste and smell) are generally the least reliable bases for interpretation. The presence of a strong taste or odor may completely hide the presence of other tastes or odors.

## Emotions and Prejudices

Emotions like fear, anger, or worry and mindsets like prejudice or irrational thinking patterns may impair perception. For example, a victim of an armed robbery may have been in such fear of the criminal's weapon that he or she may be able to recall only the size of the weapon and may not be able to describe the offender. Because of the great fear, such a person may exaggerate the weapon's size. Or, an observer may dislike another person so much that he or she views only the actions of that person and is unable to describe anything else.

Sometimes an observer may have strong prejudice against a class or race of people. For example, a person who dislikes police may unwittingly permit this prejudice to affect his or her view of the actions of a night watchperson or a security guard. The term "unwittingly" is used because even though the person's senses record a true report of what occurred, he or she may misinterpret the report because of this prejudice.

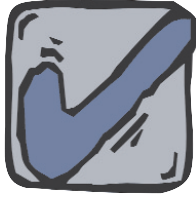
## The Five Senses

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Good observers use all five senses to give meaning to what's going on around them. The senses of sight and hearing are used most often; however, the senses of smell, taste, and touch are also important to observations and descriptions. The more senses an observer uses, the better the observations. Fiction writers and even the news media frequently cite amazing results by people claiming to be using *intuition*

(commonly referred to as “the sixth sense”) and spiritual sources. A professional private investigator shouldn’t ignore any possibility of help in getting desired results on a case; however, whether or not to follow up on leads from extra-sensory sources or someone’s intuition should always be the client’s decision.

The ability to observe improves with practice. Events or spoken words that mean little to an untrained observer may be very meaningful to a trained investigator. In the next section, you’re going to study about how investigators make observations and descriptions. Before going on to that section, however, take time to complete *Self-Check 1*.



# Self-Check 1

At the end of each section of *Observation and Description*, you'll be asked to pause and check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Self-Check" exercise. Answering these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Self-Check 1* now.

Indicate whether the following statements are True or False.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Descriptions may be either written or oral.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Most people aren't experienced in remembering or evaluating what they see.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A difference in location may account for a difference in observation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The past experiences of people don't affect how they observe an event.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. People with special interests or training may be *less* observant in other fields than in the one they specialize in.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The *most* reliable of the five senses are smell and taste.

Check your answers with those on page 49.

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