

Descriptive Writing and the Five Senses

One of the key tasks that a passage of descriptive writing has to perform is to appeal to all five of the senses.

The "picture" that your novel paints in a reader's mind should be so much *more* than a visual one - it should also be about how things sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Only then will your writing truly come to life.

Far too many beginning novel writers limit themselves to the purely visual in their writing. But great description engages all of the senses.

Take a look at this list of things you might use to describe a character...

- His spiky brown hair
- The scar on his chin that only showed up in a certain light
- His chewed fingernails
- His ripped jeans

There is nothing wrong with these things, except that they engage only the sense of sight. Descriptive writing that is one-dimensional like that can be tedious.

Here are some other things you could say about the character...

- He wears too much aftershave (smell)
- His lips taste sweet like ripe fruit (taste)
- He has a high-pitched laugh (sound)
- His hair feels wiry (touch)

Exactly the same thing applies to describing a novel's setting. These descriptions of a beach all appeal to the sense of sight...

- The white sand.
- The tiny pink shells.
- The way the sea is the same blue as the sky, making it hard to tell where one ends and the other begins.
- The rocks still wet from high tide.

But these apply to all of the other senses...

- The smell of caught fish from the fishing boat (smell).
- The faint taste of salt on the breeze (taste).
- The screeching herring gulls (sound).
- The slippery rocks (touch).

Evoking all of the senses in a passage of descriptive writing is a simple way of making the description multi-dimensional. And you know what? It really doesn't take a lot of extra work.

I now want to talk about how to write descriptively using all of the senses by looking at each one in a little more detail.

1. The Sense of Sight In Writing

Sight is the most important sense to engage in good creative writing.

Novels are made out of words on paper, not celluloid. To enable the readers to "see" you must paint pictures for them, and for that you obviously need to draw on their sense of sight.

And so, just because I advised you to engage *all* of the readers' senses in your writing, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't predominantly write visual descriptions.

More than that, you should make these visual descriptions powerful. How? First, by not using too many unnecessary details. Second, by making the details you do use the best ones you can find.

2. The Sense of Smell

Smell is the most nostalgic of the senses. Which of us isn't transported back to school when we smell over cooked cabbage, or to childhood summers when we smell freshly-mown grass?

The sense of smell, then, is a useful way of getting characters to remember an event from the past in the form of a flashback (assuming that this event is important to the understanding of the present story).

Evoking the sense of smell is also a useful way of saying a lot with very few words. Try to imagine the following...

- The smell of a woodland in summer after rain.
- Sour milk in the refrigerator.
- The first smell of the sea through a car window.

I didn't write those sentences descriptively like I would have done in a novel (I **told** you, didn't **show** you). But even so, the mere mention of those things likely conjured up entire settings for you.

And you will be able to work the same magic in your own novels.

3. The Sense of Sound

Few settings are silent. And if they are truly silent, describing the *absence* of sound will be interesting in itself.

Characters speaking and coughing and banging things with hammers is one way of adding a soundtrack to a scene. Another way is to incorporate the sense of sound into the description of settings and characters.

If you are describing a seaside setting, for example, you could mention screeching gulls and waves breaking on pebbles to add an extra dimension to the description.

If you are describing a character walking through a hotel lobby, you could mention his heels clicking on the marble or the jangle of loose change in his pocket.

Sounds can sometimes be tricky to describe accurately, but one solution is to use onomatopoeias...

- Jangle
- Clatter
- Crash

(For more on this, see the article on [Figures of Speech](#).)

Another effective way to describe sound in your fiction is to compare the sound to something else - "the cries of the fox sounded like a child in terrible pain."

4. The Sense of Taste

You will mostly evoke the sense of taste under two circumstances - when characters are eating and drinking, and when they are kissing and canoodling. (When they are actively using their mouths and tongues, in other words.)

But always look for ways to incorporate it in more unexpected situations in your novel...

- When a character arrives at the coast, the usual thing would be to have them smell the sea. Instead, you could have them taste the salty breeze.
- When a young boy captures a frog at the bottom of the garden, have him lick it.
- When a character is returning to his childhood home, have him taste his mother's roast chicken and gravy when he is still 100 miles away.

Even if you don't actually describe a taste, just mentioning the thing we taste with - the tongue - can be powerful in descriptive fiction...

- It is the first icy day of winter and it starts to snow. A character looks up and tries to catch the flakes on her tongue.
- Further down the street, her younger brother, tortured by curiosity, licks a metal pole.

5. The Sense of Touch

Like all five of the senses, the sense of touch can be painful or pleasurable.

Make it pleasurable, like the feel of cool cotton sheets, and the readers will experience the pleasure along with the character.

Make it painful, like being head butted in the nose, and the readers will wince. Like you just did.

Sometimes, a touch is neither painful nor pleasurable but simply helps to describe the person or the place...

- A greasy stove
- A character's cracked lips
- A cold, sweaty handshake

Sometimes, the touch itself is what is important, not what the thing being touched feels like. A character reaching out to touch another character can be extremely powerful under the right circumstances, as can the laying of a hand on a headstone.

And finally...

6. The Sixth Sense

Don't forget this one - assuming you believe in that kind of thing and it is appropriate to the story you are telling.

Unscientific senses can be just as powerful, if not more so, than the conventional ones. And they also happen to be a great way of foreshadowing dramatic events to come.

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