

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
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Session 5: Detail

Writers are first observers. Observe everything.

Detail is what convinces a reader that they are entering someplace real, someplace that they must take seriously and accept as real. To do that, you need to include real details.

A few well chosen details will evoke an entire scene better than an exhaustive description of the larger features.

Pay attention, pay attention all the time to what is around you! Pay attention to the colors and how they change in different light. Pay attention to where things are. We live so much of our lives on autopilot that we often don't see the world around us. Writers **MUST** see, must observe constantly.

Five senses:

When we think of description we think of the visual first. We are visual creatures. **BUT**—imagine a world that is only visual with no other senses involved. We have a lot of information but it lacks solidity.

Hearing is our second most important sense—after vision we rely upon it more than the others. Pay attention to the small sounds, the ones under the immediate information sounds. How do your shoes sound when you walk through a puddle? As you walk through snow?

Smell is our most primitive sense and it is lodged in an older part of the brain. While humans do not have a very good or useful sense of smell, this sense is more emotionally evocative than any of the other senses. This may be due to the fact that in the brain smell is in close proximity to the emotional center.

Smell is important. Pay attention to the way things smell and what that means to you. You may find it brings back memories. Pay attention! Sometimes you don't know that you are using your senses—what about the smell just before it snows?

Taste is very closely allied to smell. Pay attention to the details of flavor, in food and in other things (taste the air, snow...) Be aware of the subtle differences, pay attention!

Touch—we are always touching things. We live in texture and we get useful information.

Freeze. Where are your hands right now? What are you touching? How does it feel? Pay attention to what your hands are feeling **right now**. (Now try this with your feet...)

Description

When you write any kind of description, make sure that you include at least one and preferably two senses beyond vision. Even though most people aren't consciously aware of their surroundings (especially the details that are not visual) they are constantly getting information from these same details about the environment. You need to supply this to the

reader who will then build in this multi-dimensional structure that feels much more real because it reflects the way s/he knows the real world.

Exercises:

From now on, every class begins with each student contributing a detail she or he has noticed since the last class. For the next few weeks it should be entirely drawn from the senses.

Assignment:

Bring back a smell. Pay attention over the next few days to all the smells around you—the air outside and inside (and in different rooms,) the smell of cooking as you walk past a restaurant or a residential building and the smell of cooking when you walk into where you will eat dinner. Be aware of the smell of the garbage left on the street, plants, oil, chemical smells. How about the smell of cleaning, of the pool, of shampoo, of newly washed clothes.

Pay close attention to a smell. Does it have any emotional resonance? (Not a memory, just a resonance. Do you feel happy or comforted by the smell of newly washed laundry? Cooking? Do you feel happy or sad or indifferent to the smell of snow or rain? Entering the pool area?)