

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 13: Sensory Deceptions

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In reading through the myriad of writing books available, the same rules of literature apply:

- Avoid Cliché
- Show, Don't Tell
- Keep Adjective Counts Low
- Keep Adverb Counts Low
- 'And' and 'But' Shouldn't Begin Sentences
- Keep Be's In Proper Tense

Of course there are a few hundred other day-to-day rules, but how are you going to clearly write descriptions of events, people, locations, and feelings if you aren't breaking some of these?

Clichés are the easiest to dismiss. Instead of tired comments such as “like a chicken with his head cut off”, or “as a cat on a hot tin roof”, use phrases that perhaps your family members use. Find a turn of words that uses the least amount of syllables to describe the greatest of imagery. My grandmother, on my birth mother's side, used to tell me stories of her childhood, tossing in some Gaelic phrases. “Butter brown eyes” and “scent of spring water” – both elicit specific responses. As common as it was to hear this from her mouth, these certainly weren't common to any other tale.

The road to description is painted by personal experience. Let's look at the sentence : *It was a dark and stormy night.*

Without visual imagery, "It was night" is only a subject, verb, predicate, and dull. Pepper adjectives, such as Dark and Stormy, and the sentence provides a sensory reaction. But, the sentence as written is also quite clichéd. Let's add some personal experience.

This night left me cold and numb.

Now I've added some information about the subject that plays on a personal experience. Does it still imply a "dark and stormy"? If the story is about devious people, and a lonely location, it could just be. The story may be about loss, divorce, an aggravating shopping experience,-- regardless of the story intent, the sentence leads the reader to have a reaction based on senses. I also replaced the "be" word with something more active, more alive. Let's try another way of writing it.

October nights approach this town like a shower of blood- soaked rain.

How's that for visual? Now I've added an adjective to describe what sort of night, and the feeling is pushed out by a new idea. This sentence almost enters the realm of overstating. I left the single subject, and moved on to a topic that can lead the reader to thirty-one nights from which to choose. Given that the word "October" appears, as well as the phrase "shower of blood soaked rain", the reader is led to believe that this is a horror story taking place during Halloween.

Setting scene in only one sentence is easily done. It works well with dialogue. It reads very well within script. As an essayist, I'm usually told to "do that 1500 word type of piece", or "submit your work in no more than 2400 words." I'm limited. I use words that not only bring the reader to my kitchen table for a chat, but also put the reader in a specific mindset. I try to get her to feel my anger, confusion, pain, elation, and

even ennui. I'm more likely to amp up the adjectives than the adverbs. Too many adverbs make many sentences muddy. Too few can lose the rhythm.

It truly absolutely actually was a dark and stormy night.

Or, to quote one of our local newscasters only moments ago:

She practically actually sped while she was totally speeding away.

What? Some of us are better writers than speakers. Adverbs hide actions when used poorly and augment them when used well. Some writers wear out adverbs by placing them in nearly every sentence. However, if your style is to flow pensively through a stream of gilded lilies, providing a specific meter to the tale, stay true to your voice. I find that poetic authors use the art of writer's prompts to form their written worlds.

Picking the right modifiers gives you a voice. Strip away any descriptive word from any story, and you have discovered the art of the bland.

Adding specific words throughout the telling will help:

- Increase readability
- Motivate your audience
- Separate your wording from any other author's
- Bring pages to life
- Add cadence to passages

Whether you write non-fiction, fiction, or even prose, your goal is to stand out. Critics don't just talk about the way you bring your story to life, they compare your performance. They don't score you on providing a beginning, middle and end. They consider your choices. While critics

point out the beauty of the written words, they also deconstruct the narrative to learn about your audience. A good critic quotes the passages she enjoys. Read a review, and see how the critic describes the writer, or her voice.

One of my favorite criticisms came from a third grade teacher who came up to me at a spoken show. She said, "I'm glad I'm not you." The book she held was *DeepNDarkNBlue*, a chapbook of a twenty-something's anecdotal stroll through Anti-Depressant land. I handed her another chapbook, about the animals I cared for, and love letters from men I've gone through. The voice was still there, as I do tend to use similar phrasings, cadence, and dictionaries. But, I watched her in the corner of the lecture hall giggling, rapidly turning pages.

There's a book available entitled *Descriptionary*. When you are at a loss for a way to describe a moment in time, or even a feature on a character's face, you can turn to books like this one. When I write, I remember that it's a form of make-believe. The only differences are that the playground is replaced with a computer, and the soccer ball is now an adjective. Sometimes I'll write a sentence, just so it's there, and then go back to it later to rework it.

Let's say I write: *I stood watching eyes staring back at me.*

I haven't determined what I'm trying to evoke from this, but I know it's important to the story. If I let the writing spin me around a bit, I can see what the purpose that sentence raises. As the encounter progresses, I find that the character is deeply insecure. The words are much easier to mold into something that summons a response.

I stood, hunched, my eyes barely visible through my unclean hair. All I could see was their damnation. They didn't want me there, and their stares told me so.

The character improves. The paranoia and insecurity arise. Because I was painting her on a richer canvas, I added more lines to draw the reader into her world.

Rather than links this week, take on a few writer's prompts to find out if your voice carries in any topic. A writer's prompt is a method to shake your mind into finding new forms to your written approach. Taking a few moments out of your hectic writing schedule is rewarded by this sort of playful exercise. Next week, we'll go into the power of the first paragraph.

1. Describe in less than one paragraph the room around you.
2. Using adjectives in this article try to incorporate 15 of them to write a paragraph about your home.
3. Describe the word "Ice" without ever using the word "frozen"
4. Pick your favorite smell, color, and sound. Put all three into a paragraph or one page story.
5. Take a page from a local paper, and cross out all of the adverbs. Reread the page.

- 30 -