

EMOTION AS A FICTION-WRITING MODE

by Mike Klaassen

Emotion is the fiction-writing mode whereby a character's feelings are portrayed. Unfortunately, emotion is not widely recognized as a distinct fiction-writing mode. Failure to treat it as such:

- Downplays the contribution emotion makes to a story
- Diminishes the likelihood that emotion will be fully analyzed and understood by students of fiction
- Reduces the likelihood that emotion will be utilized skillfully and to its full potential

Some writing coaches lump *thinking*, *emotion*, and *sensation* into one category. Certainly, each of these is linked to the mind of the character, but thinking, emotion, and sensation are also quite different, in real life and in fiction. Given their importance and their differences, each warrants its own analysis and treatment.

Sometimes emotion is included in broader categories, such as *narration*, *description*, or *summary*. Of course, emotion may be considered a subset of each of these writing modes under their broadest definitions, but lumping emotion into such wide topics does little to clarify its use; in fact, it adds to the confusion.

CONVEYING EMOTION

In published fiction, the portrayal of character emotion may appear to be seamless, almost effortless. In reality the finished product is the result of hard work by an author using six basic techniques for portraying emotion:

- Stating emotion
- Explaining emotion
- Dialogue
- Introspection
- Bodily reaction
- Action

STATING EMOTION

The easiest means of adding emotion to a story is for the narrator to simply state the character's emotion. For example:

As Cisco approached the livery stable, he felt a growing sense of frustration.

But as Ann Hood states, "One way we fall into ambiguity is by labeling an emotion rather than honestly exploring it."ⁱ

EXPLAINING EMOTION

One step beyond simply stating an emotion is to explain it or tell about it. For example:

As Cisco approached the livery stable, he felt a growing sense of frustration. If Bart got his way, innocent people could get hurt or killed.

DIALOGUE

Emotion may be conveyed through dialogue. For example:

As Cisco approached the livery stable, he grabbed Billy by the shoulder. "I'm worried that if Bart gets his way, innocent people could get hurt—or killed."

INTROSPECTION

Emotion may be conveyed through a character's thoughts. For example:

As Cisco approached the livery stable, he realized that if Bart got his way, innocent people could get hurt or killed.

And of course, thoughts should be consistent with the character's emotional state. For example, as explained by Nancy Kress, "Most characters' frustrated dialogue and thoughts should be slightly incoherent."ⁱⁱ

BODILY REACTION

As stated by Evan Marshall, in the *Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, "Nothing conveys emotion as strongly as its physical manifestations."ⁱⁱⁱ According to Nancy Kress, in *Writers Digest*, August 2004, "An effective technique to dramatize your character's [emotion] is to show how it affects his body. We frequently react to emotion physically before we've had a chance to process information rationally."^{iv}

Bodily reactions to emotion range from subtle to extreme: goose bumps, blushing, sweating, increased heart rate, laughing, crying, upset stomach, shaking, tingling nerves, vomit, loss of bladder or bowel control. For example:

As Cisco approached the livery stable, his heart pounded, and his insides tightened.

ACTION

Emotion may be portrayed through physical action. As described by Nancy Kress, ". . . most of your depiction of frustration should be through the character's active and dramatized response"^v

Action that expresses emotion may range from subtle to pronounced. An example of **subtle** action:

As Cisco approached the livery stable, he clenched his jaw. If Bart got his way, innocent people could get hurt or killed.

An example of **pronounced** action:

Cisco approached the livery stable and kicked the door open.

The fiction-writing mode for evoking a character's feelings is *emotion*.

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Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

ⁱ Hood, Ann. *Creating Character Emotions*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 10. ISBN: 9781884910333.

ⁱⁱ Kress, Nancy. *Dynamic Characters*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 156. ISBN: 9781582973197.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2003, 20. ISBN: 9781582971964.

^{iv} Kress, Nancy. *Writer's Digest*, August 2004, 44.

^v Kress, Nancy. *Write Great Fiction: Characters, Emotion & Viewpoint*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2005, 155. ISBN: 9781582973166.