

HOW TO WRITE A CHARACTER'S PERCEPTION OF THE SENSES by Mike Klaassen

One of the advantages written fiction has over other forms of storytelling is the ability to evoke a character's perception of senses. According to Ron Rozelle, "The sensation of what something *feels* like is used to describe everything from sensual pleasure to pain and torture. It's a wide range, and your readers have actually experienced only some of those feelings. So your job is to either make them recall exactly what it feels like when something occurs in your story or, if they haven't experienced it, what it *would* feel like if they did."ⁱ

How do fiction-writers do that? A quick review of dictionary definitions of sensation reveals a mixed bag of terms and phrases such as consciousness, stimulation of the body, mental functioning, bodily feeling, reaction, and perception. Not surprisingly then, the mechanics of effectively conveying sensation are also multifaceted. The variables include:

- Verbs of sensation
- Action verbs
- Modifiers
- Onomatopoeia
- Other word choices
- Comparison
- Symbolism
- Clichés
- Intensity
- Character emotion
- Reader emotion
- Physical reaction
- Hierarchy of senses
- Choice of sensation
- Narrative distance

VERBS OF SENSATION. The basic verbs of sensation are *see*, *hear*, *feel*, *smell*, and *taste*. For any particular passage involving a character's perception of the senses, fiction-writers face the choice of whether or not to actually utilize the applicable verb of sensation.

Example using verbs of sensation (in italics):

- Cisco paused at the back door of the livery stable. He *smelled* a mixture of prairie hay and manure. He could *see* horse stalls to his right and rows of saddle racks to the left. He *heard* a horse whinny and stomp its hooves.

As explained by Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Getting Published*, "Though it's desirable to make use of your character's senses in your writing, it's rarely necessary to use the actual verbs of perception such as *saw*, *heard*, and *smelled*. Ironically, these words distance the reader from your viewpoint

character because they remind the reader that he is not actually living the story through the character.” In lieu of using the verbs of sensation, Marshall recommends that authors simply describe the sensation.ⁱⁱ

Example without verbs of sensation:

- Cisco paused at the back door of the livery stable. The air reeked of prairie hay and manure. On his right stood horse stalls. To his left, rows of saddle racks. A horse whinnied and stomped its hooves.

ACTION VERBS. Distinct from the verbs of sensation are the action verbs needed to either:

- Maneuver the character into *position* to experience the sensation, or
- Describe an action the character must perform prior to being able to *receive* the sensation.

For example:

- Before a character can *see*, he may have to *look*
- Before a character can *hear*, he may have to *listen*
- Before a character can *feel*, he may have to *touch*
- Before a character can *smell*, he may have to *sniff*
- Before a character can *taste*, he may have to *eat*

Example where action verbs (in italics) set the character up to experience the sensation:

- Something in the air caught Cisco’s attention. He *sniffed*. Smoke. Mesquite wood. He *clutched* his Colt 45, its grip soothing to his jittery nerves. He *edged* closer to the door of the livery stable and *peeked* inside.

If the basic verbs of sensation are *see*, *hear*, *feel*, *smell*, and *taste*, then the plain-vanilla action verbs of sensation are *look*, *listen*, *touch*, *sniff*, and *eat*. For each of the action verbs of sensation there are synonyms. The number of synonyms available depends upon the sense being employed. For example, Stephen Glazier’s *Word Menu* lists dozens of verbs of motion and dozens of verbs of sight, but none for hearing, touch, taste, or smell.ⁱⁱⁱ Synonyms for *look* include *observe*, *study*, *gaze*, *glance*, *peek*, and many more. For *touch* there are *caress*, *finger*, *handle*, and so on. For *taste*, there are various synonyms for *eat*, including *nibble*, *chew*, *lick*, *bite*, *chomp*. The usable synonyms for *listen* and *sniff* are pretty limited: hearken? inhale?

Whether or not action verbs are needed or desirable to help the character experience the sensation depends on the situation. And sometimes action verbs are useful for other reasons, such as for dramatic effect, rhythm, or pacing.

MODIFIERS. As a fiction-writing mode, sensation is particularly vulnerable to the overuse of modifiers. Adjectives and adverbs tend to dilute the effectiveness of description; they *tell* rather than *show*. This is especially the case with adverbs ending in *-ly*.

Example using lots of adjectives and adverbs (in italics)

- Cisco paused at the *weathered* back door of the *rickety, old* livery stable. The *humid* air reeked with the *pungent* smell of *fresh* prairie hay and the *rank* stench of horse manure. On his right stood *dilapidated* horse stalls. To his left, rows of *dusty* saddle racks. A horse whinnied *shrilly* and stomped its hooves *nervously*.

Example using fewer adjectives and adverbs

- Cisco paused at the back door of the livery stable. The air reeked of prairie hay and manure. On his right stood horse stalls. To his left, rows of saddle racks. A horse whinnied and stomped its hooves.

Sometimes a modifier adds just the right touch, sometimes it deadens the sensation. It's case by case, depending on a host of variables, including context, pacing, and tone.

ONOMATOPOEIA. Regarding the sensation of hearing, Rozelle suggests onomatopoeia as a means of letting the reader hear things. Does a fan merely spin, or does it whirl? Does a skeleton merely shake, or does it rattle or clatter?^{iv} Onomatopoeia may function as either nouns or verbs. The duck *quacked*. The duck's *quack* echoed across the valley.

OTHER WORD CHOICES. Fortunately (even beyond verbs of sensation, action verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and onomatopoeia) there is a rich universe of words available to portray sensation. The choice of one word over another can make a difference in effectively conveying sensation. For example, does a lover touch—or caress? Should a particular smell be described as an aroma? A scent? An odor? A stench? Does the word generate a positive connotation or negative? How does a change of words alter the emotional response? Which emotions are stimulated by each word choice? Sometimes the differences are subtle; sometimes they're substantial.

COMPARISON. According to Rozelle, "Saying what something smelled like or tasted like or felt like is always telling."^v Similes and metaphors are important means of description in many forms of writing. Sensation lends itself to *comparison*, but sometimes a sensation may be best described through *contrast*. As in Rozelle's example of a tasteless stew, sometimes the most effective description is to describe what something *doesn't* taste like.^{vi}

SYMBOLISM. Sometimes sensation can take on a greater meaning. According to Rozelle, ". . . using something seemingly small to enlarge or call attention to the bigger picture, will serve you well time after time." Subtle use of symbols can be an effective means of reinforcing themes. But, warns Rozelle, "The use of symbolism can be tricky business for a writer and can quickly go over the top. Modern-day readers aren't as a rule very tolerant of blatant symbolism . . ."^{vii}

CLICHÉS. The sensation mode of fiction-writing, to borrow a cliché, is a target-rich environment for clichés. As stated by Rozelle, when depicting sensation, “Avoid giving your reader the overused clichés that she’s read time after time after time. Like a startled character being caught “like a deer in the headlights,” or one gazing intently “staring daggers.” Those have been done to death. But they are resurrected by far too many authors.”^{viii}

INTENSITY. Sensation has a range of intensity, from overwhelming, on one extreme, down to the absence of sensation. Think of movies where action scenes rumble with so much sound that it can shake your popcorn out of its box. But then the aftermath may be marked by softness, silence, or darkness. As explained by Rozelle, there will be times when you will want to be loud.^{ix} On the other hand, “Sometimes the absence of something is the most effective description of all.”^x

CHARACTER EMOTION. Sensation can create emotion within a character, and that emotion may be used to channel the story in different directions. A character’s *attitude* toward a sensation may reveal character. Emotion may be used to *transition* into backstory. Emotion may hint at a *theme* or help establish *tone*. Emotions (such as fear, curiosity, frustration, anger, lust) may advance *plot* by propelling the character into action.

READER EMOTION. As explained by Rozelle, “When using the sense of touch, you won’t always be describing what a character feels. Sometimes you’ll be nudging your readers toward what you want *them* to feel when they read your fiction, so they can associate a feeling that they might never have experienced with one that they probably have.”^{xi}

Many times the reader’s emotional response will mirror the character’s emotions, but sometimes not. For example, a viewpoint character may enjoy torturing a victim, but the reader might be appalled. A character may enjoy a tender love scene, but the reader may be horrified because one of the characters is a serial killer.

PHYSICAL REACTION. Often the best way to communicate a sensation is to portray the character’s reaction to it. According to Rozelle, especially “When its time to inflict a bit of pain and suffering in your fiction, put more emphasis on your character’s *reaction* to it than on the actual description of it.” Which sensations would make your character’s mouth water or his skin crawl? Which sensations would make him gag? Jump? Duck? Cough? Hold his nose?

Traditionally, in real life and in fiction, stimulus precedes response: first there is action then there is a reaction. But according to Marshall, “To show a character’s reaction to something shocking, break the action/result rule and show the reaction before describing what is being reacted to. This may seem backward,

but what happens is “. . . a tiny moment of suspense is created between the horrified reaction and the description of what’s being seen.”^{xii}

Example of action followed by reaction (stimulus then response):

- A gun fired, and Cisco flinched.

Example of response *preceding* stimulus:

- Cisco flinched. A gunshot.

HIERARCHY OF SENSES. Not all the senses were created equally; some are more powerful than others, depending on the situation. For example, as stated by Rozelle, “I heard or read somewhere that the sense of smell is the most nostalgic of the five senses.” “The fact that your reader’s olfactory memory is laden with treasures is reason enough for you to take full advantage of it. If this truly is the most nostalgic of the physical senses, then you should draw on it like a bank account, tapping it often to engage your readers more fully.”^{xiii}

Also according to Rozelle, taste is perhaps the most reliable of all the senses. “The others can sometimes be deceptive, but what something *tastes* like is usually quite simply the pure essence of the thing.”^{xiv} Think of cinnamon, pepper, sugar, salt.

According to Todd A. Stone in *Novelist’s Boot Camp*, some senses are more intimate than others. He outlines a hierarchy of senses, ranging from least intimate to most: sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. Stone encourages writers to build a connection between the reader and the story by using the more-intimate senses to make descriptions emotionally powerful.

CHOICE OF SENSATION. If you were a carpenter, you would not build a cabinet using just one tool. You might use a saw, but you would probably also use hammers, chisels, planes, and routers; each in its most appropriate time and place. According to Rozelle, “Too many writers make the mistake of packing almost all of their description into showing what everything in the story looks like, bypassing more effective senses.”^{xv} Limiting portrayal of sensation to *sight* may also mean that the writer is overusing the *least* intimate of the sensations and failing to take advantage of opportunities to utilize more intimacy.

To get a feel for the telescoping effect of intimacy in sensation, try this exercise:

- Imagine seeing a coffee pot
- Imagine hearing coffee dripping into the pot
- Imagine touching the hot pot
- Imagine smelling the fresh coffee
- Imagine tasting the fresh brew

Real life engages more than one sensation at a time; why shouldn’t fiction?

NARRATIVE DISTANCE. Donald Maass, in *Writing the Breakout Novel*, notes that since the invention of the novel it has been transformed by a progressive narrowing of point of view: from the once-essential author's voice to omniscient narration, to objective narration, to first- and third-person narration, and most recently to close third-person narration.^{xvi}

According to Maass, today's reader wants an authentic experience.^{xvii} Skillful inclusion of a character's sensory perception can go a long way toward adding verisimilitude to fiction, involving the reader, and making it seem more realistic.

According to Ron Rozelle in *Description and Setting*, ". . .the success of your story or novel will depend on many things, but the most crucial is your ability to bring your reader into it. And that reader will be most completely *in* when you deliver the actual sensations of the many things that comprise your story."^{xviii}

Renni Browne and Dave King, in *Self-Editing for the Fiction Writer*, observe that "One of the signs that you are writing from an intimate point of view is that the line between your descriptions and your interior monologue begins to blur. Readers move effortlessly from seeing the world through your character's eyes to seeing the world through your character's *mind* and back again."^{xix} Although Browne and King were referring to internal monologue (introspection), the same could be said of sensation.

Opportunities abound for evoking senses in fiction. The skillful use of sensation as a fiction-writing mode is a powerful tool for engaging readers.

LEARN MORE

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.

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ⁱ Roselle, Ron. *Description & Setting*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2005, 86. ISBN: 9781582973272.

ⁱⁱ Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2003, 16. ISBN: 9781582971964.

ⁱⁱⁱ Glazier, Stephen. *Word Menu*. New York: Random House, 1997, 539. ISBN: 9780679449638.

^{iv} Roselle, 93.

^v Roselle, 77.

^{vi} Roselle, 91.

^{vii} Roselle, 84.

^{viii} Roselle, 81.

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- ix Roselle, 84.
x Roselle, 94.
xi Roselle, 88.
xii Marshall, 56-57.
xiii Roselle, 83.
xiv Roselle, 90.
xv Roselle, 83.
xvi Maass, Donald. *Writing The Breakout Novel*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2001, 163. ISBN: 9780898799958.
xvii Maass, 163.
xviii Roselle, 76.
xix Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004, 128. ISBN: 9780060545697.