

Sensation as a Fiction-Writing Mode by Mike Klaassen

Sensation is the fiction-writing mode for evoking a character's perception of the senses. Authors are often encouraged to incorporate the five (or maybe even six) senses into their stories. Despite all the emphasis on utilizing the senses, sensation is not widely recognized as a distinct fiction-writing mode.

Unfortunately, failure to treat sensation as a fiction-writing mode:

- Downplays the contribution sensation makes to stories
- Diminishes the likelihood that sensation will be fully analyzed and understood by students of fiction
- Reduces the likelihood that sensation 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 the differences in how they are conveyed, each warrants its own analysis and treatment.

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

Fiction writers aren't limited to sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. In *Description & Setting*, Ron Rozelle describes a sixth sense—where a character *suspects* something, or *senses* that something is wrong, as in an intuition or a premonition.ⁱ

ELEMENTS OF FICTION. Sensation contributes to each of the five fundamental elements of fiction: character, plot, setting, theme, and style.ⁱⁱ The most obvious role of sensation is in **setting**. According to Jessica Page Morrell in *Between the Lines*, "Writers create intricate settings because readers rely on visual and sensory references . . . You breathe life into fiction by translating the senses onto the page, producing stories rooted in the physical world . . . that creates a tapestry, a galaxy of interwoven sensory ingredients."ⁱⁱⁱ Also, as characters move about within the story, "using sensory clues in the new locale, especially sights and smells, will help readers adjust as they move . . . into new territory."^{iv}

Regarding **plot**, sensation provides the vivid detail that helps bring action to life, creating verisimilitude. Morrell describes it as a "sensory surround," which when "coupled with drama tugs the reader into [the] story and forces him to keep reading." The old adage "Show, don't tell" means that you ". . . place [the reader] in the midst of the experience with unfolding action." "Showing requires that the

writing be solid, not abstract, and this means that at least one of the senses must be involved to show a specific reality.”^v

Sensation can also be a powerful tool for **character** development, especially regarding a character’s reaction to particular sensations. In fact, sensation may directly stimulate an emotional response. For example, the sight of a puppy may generate a feeling of happiness, while the sight of a maggot or the touch of a spider may stimulate fear or revulsion. Sensation can encourage recollection, which may be useful as a trigger in transitioning to backstory for character development or for stimulating emotion indirectly.

Likewise, a character’s reaction to sensations may provide a common thread for the development of one or more of a story’s **themes**. And, of course, how and when sensation is utilized throughout a story and the skill with which sensation is presented are important aspects of an author’s unique writing **style**.

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, 95-97. ISBN: 9781582973272.

ⁱⁱ Klaassen, Mike. *Fiction-Writing Modes*. 2015, 4. ISBN: 9781682221006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morrell, Jessica Page. *Between the Lines*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2006, 172-173. ISBN: 9781582973937.

^{iv} Morrell, 287.

^v Morrell, 172-173.