

HOW TO WRITE DESCRIPTION

By Mike Klaassen

The ability to portray people, places, things, and concepts is an essential skill for writers, but mastering the fiction-writing mode of description means addressing numerous issues.

- Word choice
- Quantity vs. brevity
- Selection of details
- Concrete vs. abstract nouns
- Verbs: active voice vs. passive voice
- Modifiers
- Comparative description
- Transmorphic description
- Clichés vs. fresh language
- Obtrusiveness vs. transparency
- Disguised description
- Narrative vs. point-of-view description

WORD CHOICE

Rather than having to settle for a word that will merely do, authors who write in English are fortunate to have a vast reservoir from which to draw just the right word. But which word is better than another? In *Spunk & Bite*, Arthur Plotnik notes that “. . . perhaps the most intriguing quality of certain [words] is aptness—an exact, right-seeming match between word and thing.”ⁱ According to Michael Kurland, in *The Writer* March 2008, “Selecting the right word that conveys just the right shade of meaning and can’t easily slip over into some other meaning entirely—that is a writer’s job.”ⁱⁱ

QUANTITY VS. BREVITY

How much description is enough? How much is too much? Les Edgerton, in *Hooked*, provides some insight: “In fiction’s days of yore, it was perfectly acceptable (and even encouraged) to craft great blocks of passive description, also referred to as windowpane description . . . But today’s description is short and sweet . . .”ⁱⁱⁱ David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, notes that less is more. Economy of description may produce clearer effects than description with detail piled upon detail.^{iv}

“Details may be many or few, but best not to shovel them in wholesale,” observes Susan Bell, in *The Artful Edit*. And “Many writing mishaps could be avoided if a writer thought harder about the notion of necessity—in other words, about language that is, or isn’t, necessary.”^v In *Writer’s Digest Handbook for Novel Writing*, David Madden summed it up: “Be brief, as always.”^{vi}

SELECTION OF DETAILS

Not every detail can be included in the story, so a decision must be made as to which details of description to include and which to exclude. “Readers love details, as long as they are interesting, authentic, and colorful,” according to Janet Evanovich in *How I Write*. But “You don’t need to tell us every detail. Pick a few and the reader will supply the rest from his imagination.”^{vii}

David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, states “The rule I follow is that, if I can assume readers are familiar with a place, I don’t need to describe it at length. Only if I’m adding something new do I get excited about describing it.”^{viii} According to Peter Selgin, in *By Cunning and Craft*, “. . . some things don’t need describing. Never state what’s implied. And don’t imply what’s stated, either.”^{ix} Stephen Roxburgh, (publisher of Front Street Books) in *Children’s Writer* (November 1999), states that “The test for including a detail is relevance.”^x

“Details give your work texture, depth, and credibility,” observes Susan Bell, in *The Artful Edit*. She also notes that “When you edit, remove random details. Significant details are the ones that describe more than what is visual. Choose the detail that has an echo behind it.” Also according to Bell, “Your obligation. . . is to carefully select details that both mean the most and are the most authentic.”^{xi}

NOUNS: CONCRETE VS. ABSTRACT

How and when should concrete nouns be used instead of abstract nouns, or vice versa? “A concrete noun refers to a material object (the table, a dog), whereas an abstract noun refers to something intangible (love, art),” according to Gary Lutz and Diane Stevenson, in the *Writer’s Digest Grammar Desk Reference*.^{xii}

David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, observes that “When you read the word “apple,” you automatically see an image of that object in your imagination. Concrete words are triggers that instantly prompt you to imagine the physical experience that the words represent. By comparison, notice how hard it is to deal with abstract words. Honor. What happened in your imagination when you read that word? You saw a blank.”^{xiii} Where possible, use concrete nouns instead of abstract nouns.

VERBS: ACTIVE VOICE VS. PASSIVE VOICE

One of the first admonitions writers learn is to use active voice rather than passive voice. As explained by Gary Lutz and Diane Stevenson, the use of passive voice isn’t incorrect, “but it creates a strange and unnecessary sense of disembodied action.” Examples provided by Lutz and Stevenson include:

- (Active voice) John hit the ball.
- (Passive voice) The ball was hit by John. ^{xiv}

Another writer’s adage is “Show, don’t tell.” Active voice is a characteristic of showing, while passive voice is a characteristic of telling.

MODIFIERS

How and when should modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) be used to enhance description? The gross overuse of modifiers, sometimes in the form of “purple prose,” can stop a story in its tracks. But even more subtle misuse of adjectives and adverbs can slow the momentum of a story. “Most modifiers are filler, cotton batting or sawdust, their modifications perfunctory or already implied,” observes Peter Selgin. And “As for adverbs, they seldom add anything to an adjective that isn’t already there”^{xv}

According to David Morrell, “Adjectives tend to get in the way, overwhelming a description rather than sharpening it. Adverbs tend to have no other function than to strengthen weak verbs.”^{xvi} Renni Browne and Dave King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, note that “When you use two words, a weak verb and an adverb, to do the work of one strong verb, you dilute your writing and rob it of its potential power.”^{xvii} David Morrell also says, “. . . economy doesn’t only mean reducing a description to its essentials. It also means going for so clean a line that adjectives and adverbs become a sign of bad writing.”^{xviii}

Not all fiction-writing coaches agree on the avoidance of modifiers. After all, adverbs and adjectives are fundamental parts of speech, so avoiding them entirely may be difficult. According to Peter Selgin there is . . . “nothing wrong with adverbs and adjectives—as long as they pull more than their own weight by being fresh, unpredictable. Above all they must add something that isn’t obvious or trite to the words they modify.”^{xix}

COMPARATIVE DESCRIPTION

A common technique for building an emotional connection with the reader is the use of comparative description: similes and metaphors. Todd A. Stone, in *Novelist’s Boot Camp*, observes that “Similes and metaphors are like hand grenades—they are two of the oldest and most used descriptive techniques. They’re powerful, but you must use them carefully to avoid clichés, mixed metaphors, and figures of speech that just don’t work. Otherwise, they’ll blow up in the wrong place—your novel.”^{xx}

TRANSMORPHIC DESCRIPTION

Another descriptive technique for building an emotional connection with the reader is to endow the subject with traits not usually associated to it.

- Animals or inanimate objects portrayed as people (think cartoons, fantasy, and comics)
- Inanimate objects or abstract concepts seemingly endowed with human self-awareness (think fighting trees in *Lord of the Rings*)
- Abstract ideas, people, or animals represented as a physical thing (think soldiers standing as a stone wall)

These techniques are sometimes described by somewhat overlapping terms such as *anthropomorphism*, *personification*, or *objectification*. To borrow a term from science fiction, I call these techniques *transmorphic* description.^{xxi}

CLICHÉS VS. FRESH LANGUAGE

In general, fresh language is preferred to clichés. “Clichés are born when someone, somewhere, comes up with a truly original bit of language, probably to describe something,” according to Les Edgerton.^{xxii} As stated by Ann Hood in *Creating Character Emotion*, “Clichés . . . are a kind of emotional shorthand . . .” And “When we read a writer who relies on such emotional shorthand, we don’t trust what that writer is trying to say.”^{xxiii}

“Triteness can move an acceptable phrase into the realm of the untouchable,” notes Michael Kurland. And “Remember: Avoid hackneyed expressions, well, like the plague.”^{xxiv} In *Hooked*, Les Edgerton states “You’re a writer—use original language. Be the kind of writer who comes up with such inventive phrases that others will eventually transform into clichés.”^{xxv}

OBTRUSIVENESS

How noticeable or prominent should description be? “You don’t want the reader to notice your descriptions . . .,” advises Janet Evanovich in *How I Write*.^{xxvi} As stated by David Madden, in the *Writer’s Digest Handbook of Novel Writing*, “Words, phrases and other material that call attention to themselves—or don’t add to the story—destroy immediacy by putting distance between the reader and your fictional world.”^{xxvii} According to Kurland. “It often falls to the writer to make a description absolutely transparent so it doesn’t intrude between the reader and the action. And if the writer achieves that, the reader never notices the words.”

DISGUISED DESCRIPTION

Should any particular bit of description stand on its own, presented directly from the narrator (as narrated description)? Or should it be disguised by mixing it in with other fiction-writing modes (such as action, dialogue, introspection, recollection, sensation)? Les Edgerton, states that “Today, static (or passive) description is eschewed in favor of active description, description incorporated within the action of the scene itself, so the bit of description doesn’t stop the scene or even slow it down noticeably.”^{xxviii} “You want your description to exist as part of action and emotion . . .,” according to Sandra Scofield, in *The Scene Book*.^{xxix} David Morrell notes that “Description also fails when it is static. Too often, scenes are constructed so that a character arrives at a locale, the locale is described in one lump, and then the action continues. A much better tactic involves using details of the setting as part of the action.”^{xxx}

NARRATIVE VS. POINT-OF-VIEW DESCRIPTION

Should description flow from the narrator (as in narrative description) or should it appear to flow through the mind of a point-of-view character? Janet Evanovich hints at the answer when she observes that “. . . you want [the readers] to feel like they’re right next to your characters, experiencing the scene as the character does.”^{xxxi} 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. According to Maass, today's reader wants an authentic experience. Skillful inclusion of description from a character's point of view can go a long way toward adding verisimilitude to fiction, involving the reader, and making it seem more realistic.^{xxxii} David Madden, sums it up "Filter all description through point of view."^{xxxiii}

Description is the fiction-writing mode for portraying people, places, things, and concepts. How a writer uses description and the skill with which he presents description is an important aspect of his or her 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.

This article was adapted from two articles published by Helium.com on October 27, 2008. Copyright 2008 and 2022 Michael John Klaassen. All rights reserved. You are welcome to share this article with others.

ⁱ Plotnik, Arthur. *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style*. New York: Random House Reference, 2007, 210. ISBN: 9780375722271.

ⁱⁱ Kurland, Michael, *The Writer*, "Choose the Right Word," March 2008, 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edgerton. *Hooked: Write Fiction That Grabs Readers at Page One and Never Lets Them Go*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007, 92, 34. ISBN: 9781582975146.

^{iv} Morrell, David. *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing: A Novelist Looks at His Craft*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2002, 141. ISBN: 9781582971438.

^v Bell, Susan. *The Artful Edit: On the practice of editing yourself*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007, 122. ISBN: 9780393057522.

^{vi} Madden, David. *Writer's Digest Handbook for Novel Writing*. "Creating Immediate, Urgent Stories." Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1992, 161. ISBN: 9780898795073.

^{vii} Evanovich, Janet. *How I Write: Secrets of a bestselling author*. New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2006, 50. ISBN: 9780312354282.

^{viii} Morrell, 144.

^{ix} Selgin, Peter. *By Cunning & Craft: Sound advice and practical wisdom for fiction writers*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007, 136. ISBN: 9781582974910.

^x Stephen Roxburgh, (publisher of Front Street Books) in *Children's Writer* (November 1999), 2.

^{xi} Bell, 2.

^{xii} Lutz, Gary and Stevenson, Diane. *The Writer's Digest Grammar Desk Reference*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2005, 6. ISBN: 9781582973357.

^{xiii} Morrell, 141-142.

^{xiv} Lutz and Stevenson, 30.

^{xv} Selgin, 127

^{xvi} Morrell, 141.

^{xvii} Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to edit yourself into print*. 2nd edition. New York: Harper Resource, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004, 198. ISBN: 9780060545697.

^{xviii} Morrell, 141.

^{xix} Selgin, 216.

-
- xx Stone, Todd A. *Novelist's Bootcamp*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2006, 230. ISBN: 9781582973609.
- xxi Klaassen, Mike. *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*. 2015, 163. ISBN: 9781682221006.
- xxii Edgerton, 163.
- xxiii Hood, Ann. *Creating Character Emotions*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 13. ISBN: 9781884910333.
- xxiv Kurland, 19.
- xxv Edgerton, 163.
- xxvi Evanovich, 50-51.
- xxvii Madden, 163.
- xxviii Edgerton, 92.
- xxix Scofield, Sandra. *The Scene Book: A Primer for the Fiction Writer*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007, 111. ISBN: 9780143038269.
- xxx Morrell, 145.
- xxxi Evanovich, 51.
- xxxii Maass, Donald. *Writing The Breakout Novel*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2001, 163. ISBN: 9780898799958.
- xxxiii Madden, 161.