



Writers' Lab

MARCH 2021

Imagery

Books are incredible pieces of technology. Whether they are novels, short story collections or poetry anthologies books are Virtual Reality in its purest form, helping readers to observe and be part of brand new experiences in never-visited places. The best novels must be those we forget we're reading . We've climbed inside the story and don't even notice the physical act of flipping the pages - we don't feel the dry paper between our finger and thumb, we don't hear the whisper of one page rustling against another, we don't notice the blurry movement of our eyes flicking from South-East to North-West.

Books are at their best when we're no longer seeing the words on the page, simply experiencing them. You've been there, right? The writer is talented enough to make the thought process of reciting words in our own minds appear to be the same as physical sounds and smells and tastes and textures. So perhaps books have always been better than even our most current technological capabilities with Virtual Reality? And if that's true, it's probably because writers use imagery rather than pixels.



What is Imagery?

A Dictionary's Definition: Imagery is language used by poets, novelists and other writers to create images in the mind of the reader. Imagery includes figurative and metaphorical language to improve the reader's experience through their senses.

A Writer's Definition: Telepathy.

Personally, I prefer to think of writing as a form of telepathy (rather than strictly VR technology). The imagined sights and sounds I have in my mind as the writer somehow need to travel through time and space to arrive in the mind of the reader.

I need my reader to imagine them as vividly as I imagine them (and as viscerally as my characters experience them). There will unfortunately be a certain level of fade and distortion as my thoughts are transferred. I have to be sure my images are clear, sharp, relatable, believable to begin with in my own mind, to help my reader receive them with the least amount of fuzziness or distortion. This doesn't mean I have to write down every single, itty-bitty, shopping-list detail of what I'm trying to describe and what I want the reader to experience. Shopping lists are rarely exciting. I only need to mind-transfer the most telling details, the most compelling images.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD IMAGE?

First of all, be careful not to mistake **imagery** for **symbolism**. Imagery is you the writer trying to give your reader the most imaginative - but also the most *imaginable* - description of what you want them to see, touch, hear, taste, smell and experience in your story. Symbolism, however, is taking a concrete image and using it to represent a more abstract concept (on a simple level, like the way the image of a heart is often used to symbolise love and a pair spectacles may get used to symbolise intelligence or nerdiness). Although imagery and symbolism can often compliment each other they are not necessarily interchangeable.



Good imagery is usually solid

Try to use concrete language for your descriptions. Concrete words are sometimes described as 'anything you can punch', or physical objects. As opposed to emotions and ideas which are abstract and have different associations for different readers. Abstract words can make for weak descriptions.

For example, I could write: "Bobby looked sad." It's not bad writing per se, and it makes sense, but let's agree that it's kind of dull. The main problem is that it's not specific enough and your reader may have a different image of what looking 'sad' is compared to you. Personally, I want to be more in control of what my reader imagines. And we're meant to be imaginative writers, not dull ones! Therefore: 'Bobby sagged like a punctured football.' 'Bobby had a face like a popped party balloon.' 'Bobby looked like a battered piñata.'

Good imagery should be relatable

Think of your reader and what your reader knows or has experienced in real life. It may be hard to have a reader imagine something they know nothing about, so be wary of being too knowledge-specific. For example, I recently discovered my 87 year-old mother didn't have a clue what a piñata is, meaning the above image of how Bobby looked would unfortunately leave her blank (she's led a sheltered life...). Obviously we'll never know who every single reader of our stories or poems may be, nor what their personal knowledge or experience encompasses, but it's useful to be conscious of the risk that a reader could miss the point of our beautiful descriptions. This is especially true when writing for children.

Good imagery is character specific

This is the other side of the coin to making your images relatable to your reader and especially true if you're writing from first person or close third person point of view. Would your character use that language, understand that reference, know what a piñata is? Your character has a limited vocab and experience, and it may be different from yours, so how would *they* describe the scene?

Good imagery uses all 5+ senses

Visual imagery is the most obvious because we're human and most of us rely on sight more more than any other sense. This means that appealing to a reader's visual



sense is simple but risks being boring. Paint your descriptions using interesting colours, shapes, textures, distances and juxtapositions.

Tactile imagery appeals to the reader's sense of touch using shapes, textures – similar to visual imagery but using fingertips instead of eyes. Also consider using weights, temperature and pain.

Auditory imagery appeals to the reader's sense of sound. Silence is over-used by too many writers, mainly because it doesn't exist – even if it's just the blood in your ears, there is always something to hear.

Gustatory imagery appeals to the reader's sense of taste. Gustatory and olfactory imagery can work together or cross over each other.

Olfactory imagery appeals to the reader's sense of smell. Our nose is reputed to have an incredible 'memory', and once sniffed, most pongs are rarely forgotten.

Kinesthetic imagery deals with the movement or action of objects or people. Did Mary run, race, charge or barrel along? Did the stone drop, fall, sink, or plummet to the ground?

Organic imagery is often referred to as the most difficult form of imagery to write because it deals with creating a specific feeling or emotion within the reader. Phrases that make the reader feel sad, fearful, nostalgic, elated, even guilty are all extremely effective organic imagery. Have you ever read a line of poetry or a scene in a book which made you cry? That's a fine use of organic imagery. Go back and re-read it! What imagery did the writer use to elicit such an emotional response?

Task One – Emotional Imagery

This task forces you to use concrete language to describe abstract emotions. It's one of my absolute favourite exercises to use in workshops, creating some genuinely thoughtful and imaginative ideas. Be as personal in your answers as you like, don't



worry right now about seemingly knowledge-specific answers (no one's going to read it except you) simply try to be as honest as possible.

Choose 3 of the following emotions then answer the questions below for each one. Don't worry about giving personal or seemingly obscure answers, simply try to be honest and original.

JOY

PANIC

BOREDOM

TERROR

HATE

SHAME

- 1) What **colour** is this emotion?
- 2) If you could **touch** or hold this emotion, what shape or texture or weight does it have?
- 3) If you could poke, prod, squeeze or shake this emotion, what **noise** does it make? (Not the noise of the person experiencing it but the actual emotion itself.)
- 4) What does this emotion **taste** of? (This answer does not have to be a food or drink but it should be more than simply 'sweet' or 'bitter' – name an actual substance.)
- 5) How does this emotion **smell**?

Hopefully you've come up with one or two new and surprising ways to describe an emotion that will fit into one of your poems or stories one day – making a perfect image for your reader to imagine.

KILL YOUR CLICHÉS

You are a writer. As a writer, it's your job to avoid clichés. Admittedly we don't always notice them because they are so embedded in our language, conversation and culture in the real world (so maybe we can forgive your characters spouting one or two in their dialogue).

When it comes to imagery, clichés are the rock-bottom, bargain basement, bare minimum. Try harder! The problem with clichés is that all too often they smack of lack of care or thought or imagination. Sometimes they 'stick out like a sore thumb' and unintentionally pull the reader out of a story 'by their short and curlies'. Worse,



they're boring. Finding new ways to say old things is tough, but when we succeed it can add fun, wit, style and emotional depth to our writing.

DESCRIBING WORDS

In the English language we use adjectives and adverbs for most of our descriptions. However, these modifiers can often diminish the effect of your verbs and nouns. For example, 'He ran extremely fast' doesn't accomplish anything more than, 'He sprinted.' In fact it diminishes the effect because it takes too long to read and if your character is racing, chasing or escaping we assume they'd be wanting to be doing it as fast as they possibly can!

Why use, 'She said loudly' when, 'She bellowed/shouted/screamed/shrieked/hollered' can feel so much more descriptive? Why say, 'They closed the door quickly behind themselves', when 'They slammed/banged/bashed/smashed the door closed' has so much more immediacy and is much more exciting to read. Using nouns to describe a character's actions has more power.

So, yes, obviously, a wide-ranging vocabulary is important. But reading as much as possible is the easiest and most enjoyable way to learn new, cool words.

Some writers claim to hate adjectives and adverbs.

Mark Twain ('Huckleberry Finn') advocated that after finishing a piece of writing the author should go back, cross out all of the adjectives and adverbs, and then redraft adding only the ones that feel absolutely necessary.

Elmore Leonard ('Hombre'; 'Get Shorty') says a writer should never use an adverb to modify the word 'said' when writing dialogue – if the author chooses the right words then the reader already knows how they're being said. These ideas can terrify many new writers but experimenting with them can be an excellent exercise in both imagination and restraint.

HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU DESCRIBE?

Look at this lamp on my desk. It has a circular black metal base approximately 10cm in diameter with a shaft made from polished wood, kind of reminiscent of an axe handle, and it stands 40 cm tall. The bulb inside is 40 watt and I bought it from the



Spar supermarket on Penzinger Straße last October 5th. It was a Tuesday and it was raining. But I was wearing my favourite coat which is green. The woman at the checkout was also wearing green but neither of us mentioned it and the bulb came in a packet of 2 which cost me €8.99. The shade of my lamp give off a rusty pink glow and is made from my brother's skin.

Let's be honest, there's only one (maybe two) important points in the above description. Everyone knows what a desk lamp looks like, and who cares about the bulb or how much it cost? We want to know more about the shade. And perhaps the wooden shaft a little later on...

Description is the opposite of accounting: you only need to mention the important bits. Less can be more because you don't want the story's pace to stagnate, or the shopping list of detail to clog up the reader's imagination with dollops of verbosity. Use your imagery as if it were a big pointy finger, pointing the reader's imagination at exactly what you want them to notice (which may indeed be a 'red herring' in a mystery story).

Also, your reader doesn't necessarily resent having to do a little work for themselves. When they feel as though they've exercised their imagination and put in a bit of their own effort, they feel more invested. Let your reader feel smart and an integral part of the reading process.

Betty Crocker

I heard a good story about Betty Crocker, which may be apocryphal, but I think it fits here. (And Betty is not a real cook, or even a real person, just a brand invented to sell packet mixes for cakes and trifles etc. – but it's a good story). Apparently, when the company first started up they sold super easy packet mixes: literally pour in the packet of powder, mix with water, shove it in the oven. But they didn't sell – in part because they were no fun to bake with. Too easy. It felt like cheating. So the Crocker company chose to leave out the egg, the butter and the salt. Suddenly they sold like hot cakes (Ha, Ha!). The lesson being that the reader wants to feel clever, they don't want everything on a plate.



Your descriptions can be long itemised lists but they're boring and too simple to read. Anyone opening a novel knows they have to bring a bit of their own imagination to the experience, most readers are willing to put in a bit of extra effort because reading is not a passive thing to do – it should feel active. Don't be worried about letting your reader fill in a few of the gaps for themselves.

To put it another way, as writers we like to be in control. And we are. We are gods of our wordy world. But we have to cede some intellectual and imaginary control to our reader. We have to decide what they need to know for the imagery to make sense and the emotion to feel real. The rest can be for the reader to make up in their own stretchy imaginations.

Task Two – No Describing Words Allowed!

I mentioned Mark Twain's and Elmore Leonard's thoughts on writing above. Personally, I find their point of view (and their styles of writing) fascinating. Now, if we were to take their advice the logical extreme then it should be possible to write an interesting and unique description of someone, or something, without using any adjectives or adverbs whatsoever.

Choose either a person or a place or an event (such as a concert, football match, protest march etc.) and your choice can be of someone/thing real you've experienced or totally imaginary. Write at least 100 words describing that person, place or event without using any adjectives or adverbs.

This is a tough Task. But it's not impossible and genuinely rewarding. As a help and a guide here is an extract from the novel *Money* by Martin Amis. It's a fantastic description of Los Angeles and he only uses one, single adjective in the whole passage. Can you spot it?



'In L.A., you can't do anything unless you drive. Now I can't do anything unless I drink. And the drink-drive combination, it really isn't possible out there. If you so much as loosen your seatbelt or drop your ash or pick your nose, then it's an Alcatraz autopsy with the questions asked later. Any indiscipline, you feel, any variation, and there's a bullhorn, a set of scope sights, and a coptered pig drawing a bead on your rug.

So what can a boy do? You come out of the hotel, the Vraimont. Over boiling Watts the downtown skyline carries a smear of God's green snot. You walk left, you walk right, you are a bank rat at a river. This restaurant serves no drink, this one serves no meat, this one serves no heterosexuals. You can get your chimp shampooed, you can get your dick tattooed twenty-four hour, but can you get lunch? And should you see a sign on the far side of the street flashing BEEF – BOOZE – NO STRINGS, then you can forget it. The only way to get across the road is to be born there. All the ped-xing signs say DON'T WALK, all of them, all of the time. That is the message, the content of Los Angeles: don't walk. Stay inside. Don't walk. Drive. Don't walk. Run!

- Martin Amis, 'Money' (1984)

THE CURSE OF BAD IMAGES

Imagery and description are powerful weapons in a writer's arsenal. Your reader should enjoy the way you set the stage in the theatre of their imagination. If you under-do it, you'll leave them floating in a weird bubble in space. And may stop reading. If you over-do it, they'll become bored by the slow pace and smothered by the purple prose. And may stop reading. As with most things 'everything in moderation' is probably the key to good imagery and memorable description.

To prove it, we'll finish this month's Writers' Lab with some of my favourite, wonderfully inappropriate Bad Images, gleaned from both ex-students and the internet. Let them be a warning...



“The little boat gently drifted across the pond exactly the way a bowling ball wouldn't.”

“Long separated by cruel fate, the star-crossed lovers raced across the grassy field toward each other like two freight trains, one having left Dundee at 6:36 p.m. travelling at 55 mph, the other from Manchester at 4:19 p.m. at a speed of 35 mph.”

“The young fighter had a hungry look, the kind you get from not eating for a while.”

“It came down the stairs looking very much like something no one had ever seen before.”

“It hurt the way your tongue hurts after you accidentally staple it to the wall.”

“The ballerina rose gracefully en pointe and extended one slender leg behind her, like a dog at a lamppost.”

“Her beautiful hair glistened in the rain like nose hair after a sneeze.”

“It was an American tradition, like fathers chasing kids around with power tools.”

Until next month, Happy Writing!

PS. Martin's adjective was 'green'.

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