

Writers Workshop #3

It's Not Real If You Can't Smell It: Tips on Sensory Writing

What often brings a story to life are the details, but it's the sensory details in particular--the smells, tastes, textures, and sounds, as well as the sights--that can make a story seem not just believable but *real*. For example, if you write about a girl from Barrow, Alaska walking through Times Square in New York City late one night in July, 2007, and you show her feeling awed by all the noise and bright lights, I'll think that maybe you've been there once, a long time ago, or maybe you've seen photos of Times Square. But if you write also about the delicious smell of hot pretzels sold by a street vendor, the noxious fumes of the traffic, and the random, rank whiffs of urine, I will stop wondering if you know what you're writing about; I will feel as though I'm walking those noisy, over-lit, odor-rich streets with that overwhelmed girl.

I recently read a novel I liked that included scenes in a dairy barn, but I wondered if the author had actually spent much time in such a barn. Many years ago, shortly after college, I exchanged work for room and board at a 60-cow dairy farm near Bennington, Vermont. While the author did include barn smells in her narrative, she omitted some of the other sensory details that linger in my memory: the syncopated *shish-shish* of the milking machines, the pungent, steamy smell of the warm disinfectant we used to wash the cows' udders, the firm, swollen feel of a full udder, and the saggy, loose jiggle of a bag that's just been emptied of three gallons of milk. The author didn't mention how the hair of a cow feels smooth if you stroke it one way, bristly the other, how the black-and-white Holsteins stand firmly when you lean against their warm, solid hulks, or how a lovely brown Jersey, despite her huge, liquid brown eyes and long, dark eyelashes, will kick you hard if you startle her.

Here are some tips and writing exercises to help you learn how to incorporate sensory details in your stories. Go through these in order, or pick the ones that interest you. You'll get more out of the writing exercises if you read aloud to one or more people after you write. You can support each other's writing by commenting on where it seems most real or alive, or where you wanted to know more. Be encouraging of each other!

(Note: For any of the writing exercises, you can write about yourself or another real person, or you can use a fictional character. Use all the senses in each exercise. Also, you can write for any length of time. I recommend 5 to 30 minutes, depending on how confident you feel. Start with shorter times if you are not so confident.)

1. If you're currently working on a story, make sure that each scene in your story includes at least two or three different sensory details. The senses of sight and hearing are the most used in most stories, so focus on including the lesser-used ones—taste, smell, and touch.
2. Choose a favorite book and notice where the author includes sensory details. Do they make the story seem more realistic? If so, why do you think they do? Does the author use all five senses in his/her story? If not, do you think he/she should have?
3. Write for five minutes using all of your senses to describe where you are right now. What can you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch?
4. Do the same exercise, but first walk quietly around the room or outside, noticing what you sense. Then sit down and write for five minutes, using all your senses.
5. Do the same exercise, but first put on a blindfold and let another person lead you carefully around the room. Switch roles, and then sit and write for five or ten minutes, using all your senses and your memory of what you sensed while blindfolded.
6. Describe something you did, including sensory details. It can be quite ordinary, such as eating breakfast that morning, playing soccer, shopping for food or clothes, or dancing at a party.
7. Write for 5–20 minutes about a character, describing what he or she does, using sensory details. Again, it can be something ordinary.

8. Write about an insect or animal creeping, walking, or slithering up your arm.
9. Write a scene in which your character is either blind or deaf and in a place he/she has never been in before.
10. Write about being on another planet. What are the smells, textures, sights, sounds, and tastes in this strange, new place?
11. Write a scene in which you or your character experience every sense in a new way: for example, describe being in your bedroom when nothing you smell, taste, touch, see, or hear is familiar. If you can, include why everything is different: are you returning to your bedroom after years of living elsewhere? Are you blind now, after being able to see for years? Do you have new powers after living with aliens for a month?
12. Write a scene in which you or your character has lost your sense of smell or taste or touch.
13. Write about something you or your character loves, using all the senses.
14. Write a scene in which you or your character is sad or happy or scared or angry, using all the senses.

Have fun with this. Read your scenes aloud and get feedback. Encourage others. You may find that new story ideas or characters come out of doing these exercises. Circle those or put them in an "Ideas" folder, so you won't forget to write more about them another time.

Enjoy!