

Presentation for Genealogy Society

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Aim for the Right Words

The novelist Andre Dubus III said:

“I think what I love most [about writing] is that feeling that you really nailed something. I rarely feel it with a whole piece, but sometimes with a line you feel that it really captured what it is that you had inside you and you got it out for a stranger to read, someone who may never love you or meet you, but he or she is going to get that experience from that line.”

Make Weak Writing Strong

- “The day was a happy one” vs “The call of the great blue heron and a cool breeze on my cheek told me I was home.”
- “I was scared at Grandmother Gertrude’s house” vs “I sat on Grandmother Gertrude’s horsehair couch. My feet didn’t touch the floor but I’d already dropped crumbs on the shoes and left a smudge as I tried to wipe them away before Grandmother noticed.”
- “My teacher is gross” vs “When she is angry my teacher looks like a horse with the reins pulled back.”
- “My mother was angry” vs “When she was angry, my mother seemed to be a delicate vase cracking.”
- “The old man looked fragile” vs “With its spidery veins, the old man’s face was a stained glass window.”

Show, Show, Show

This means using more than the sense of sight, the one most used in our culture— there's also hearing, tasting, smelling and touching we must remember to include so we build a full world.

Sight

Excerpt from “The Apple Trees at Olema” by Robert Hass:

They are walking in the woods along the coast and in a grassy meadow, wasting, they come upon two old neglected apple trees. Moss thickened every bough and the wood of the limbs looked rotten but the trees were wild with blossom and a green fire of small new leaves flickered even on the deadest branches.

Blue-eyes, poppies, a scattering of lupine flecked the meadow, and an intricate, leopard-spotted leaf-green flower whose name they didn't know.

Hearing

From the opening of Janice Eidus' novel *The Last Jewish Virgin*:

“The vampire look was big that year, and I took extra care as I dressed in black for my first day at the Bennett Institute of Art and Design: panty-hose that whispered as I pulled them on...”

And from Theodore Roethke's poem “The Storm”:

While the wind whines overhead,
Coming down from the mountain,
Whistling between the arbors, the winding terraces;
A thin whine of wires, a rattling and flapping of leaves,
And the small street-lamp swinging and slamming against
the lamp pole.

Taste

Two from Charlie Brooker in *The Guardian*

“Last year's "Do us a Flavour" campaign, in which the company launched six temporary new varieties, was eventually won by the hideous ‘Builder's Breakfast’, which tasted like a fried egg in an envelope.”

“But the moment the product itself hit my tongue I was plunged mouthwards into an entire universe of yuk. In terms of flavour, it tasted precisely like I'd swallowed a matchbox full of caster sugar five minutes earlier, then somehow regurgitated it into my own mouth. And the texture was crumbly, dusty – slightly old even, as though this was a chocolate bar that had been found in the pocket of a civil war soldier and preserved specifically for my disenchantment.” (on Hershey Bars versus Cadbury)

Smell

From Theodore Roethke's poem "Root Cellar"

And what a congress of stinks!
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.
Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

From Margaret Atwood's novel "The Year of the Flood"

"As the first heat hits, mist rises from among the swath of trees between her and the derelict city. The air smells faintly of burning, a smell of caramel and tar and rancid barbecues, and the ashy but greasy smell of a garbage-dump fire after it's been raining."

Touch

From Ray Bradbury's novel "Dandelion Wine"

Somehow the people who made tennis shoes knew what boys needed and wanted. They put marshmallows and coiled springs in the soles and they wove the rest out of grasses bleached and fired in the wilderness. Somewhere deep in the soft loam of the shoes the thin hard sinews of the buck deer were hidden. The people that made the shoes must have watched a lot winds blow the trees and a lot of rivers going down to the lakes. Whatever it was, it was in the shoes, and it was summer.

Practice

In your journal, challenge yourself to working on one sense a day for five days; repeat as often as you can:

- Monday, sight;
- Tuesday, sound;
- Wednesday, touch,
- Thursday, smell,
- Friday, taste.

(Or any order you'd like; just practice writing all the senses regularly.)

Tips

- When you practice with exercises to concentrate on using your senses on the page, you'll start noticing opportunities to employ the senses in your ongoing writing.
- You'll see sentences like, "The day was beautiful," as places where you were in a hurry and used summary words rather than detail.
- You'll be able to go back and fix these sentences, filling in detail: "The call of the great blue heron and the cool breeze on my face told me I was home."

Another Tip

You may find that sometimes you both announce something using intangible words and then go on to use details:

“I was depressed. The songbirds sounded like white noise in the Laundromat; their feathers were grey as the walls in those places. I knew I had to check in with my psychiatrist.”

Would the writing’s momentum lose or gain without the first sentence, “I was depressed”?

Usually deleting “announcing” words that summarize keeps the reader experiencing the moment rather than remembering that someone is writing what they are reading.

Scene Dressing

Think of a movie and all that goes on in the environment of a scene—there are particular buildings, streets, furnishings, lakes products, cars; there are train sounds, helicopter sounds, sounds of water rushing. What someone cooks is a burger or spaghetti or chow mein, not just food. The characters have particular clothes and use products we recognize. These details create the world we enter when we watch the film.

You don't just put footwear on, you pull on “pointed knife-sharp boots,” as Janice Eidus' protagonist does, or in the case of Ray Bradbury's protagonist, “Royal Crown Cream-Sponge Para Lightfoot Tennis Shoes, ‘LIKE MENTHOL ON YOUR FEET.’”

Journal Exercise: Detail

List names of products you've used today.

List names of streets you've driven this week.

List names of people you spoke with recently.

List names of TV shows and magazines you've watched and read recently.

List new words you've come across this week; give a detail from the environment you were in when you learned the word—across a mahogany desk from your boss in an air-conditioned room overlooking a cityscape? At dinner with your eight-year-old talking over mashed potatoes?

Journal Exercise: Sense Imagery

Think of images from childhood. Write a few down; choose one to write about in a paragraph of at least five sentences, each using one of the five senses:

My galoshes were clear plastic and came just above my ankle. When I stretched the fastener band around the button on one side of my foot to undo it, I imagined the elastic pursing its lips for a kiss. I yanked off the squeaky raingear, smelling the damp wool of my younger sister's wet mittens drying on the radiator, and then the scent of stuffed cabbage simmering in the kitchen. Had my mother remembered to put raisins in this time? I hoped the meal would be sweet, just like imagining Steven Fisk choosing me to be his girlfriend.

Journal Exercise: Hearing

- Describe a noise using words that make you hear the sounds.
- I wrote: The disposal company my husband calls Loud and Early slams and smashes its way into our sleep. We hear garbage cans scrap the top of the thick rusty truck, then clatter across the asphalt and cement of street and curb. When we hear the garbage truck grind the dregs of our existence to a pulp, we slide our feet to the floor. A police helicopter hurls its hello from overhead, shaking the walls and shattering any memory of our dreams.
- Note: Using words in a row that start with the same letter (alliteration like "cans colliding" and "helicopter hurls" is alliteration and words that sound like what they are describing like "clattering" and "slams" use onomatopoeia.

Journal Exercise: Sight

- Look at an object in the room or place you inhabit right now. Describe what this object--say a desk--looks like without relying on adjectives. Not the rectangular wooden desk, but a desk made of 10 pine boards about 6 feet in length joined side-by-side to the width of a canoe's belly.
- “The empty cupboard” might become, “The bare wooden shelves of the cupboard collected dust where cans of tomato sauce and cereal boxes should have been.”

Journal Exercise: Taste

Put something edible in your mouth and describe the taste of it:

- What might you choose? Beet greens, vitamin C, chewing gum?
- What does it taste like at first?
- Bite into it. What does it taste like a little more dispersed in your mouth?
- Now chew it. Describe the taste.
- Swallow or spit it out and describe the taste left in your mouth.
- Compare the taste to other tastes if you'd like.

Journal Exercise: Touch

Our fingers go out to greet the world by holding objects, stroking pets and loved ones, and shaking hands with strangers. We touch the fabrics of anything we sit on, open, close, carry, or use.

Think of something you are familiar with touching--an article of clothing, a pot scrubber, your cat, a garden rake, the driver's wheel of your car.

Describe in detail what you feel, remembering to use texture and temperature: I plunge my hands into the soapy dishwater in the white Rubbermaid tub in my sink. It is warm as the morning coffee I sip and swallow. It slides over my skin like my cat's moist tongue when she is licking me.

Journal Exercise: Smell

The smell of janitors' floor cleaning substances might remind us of our dorm cafeteria in college. The smell of tobacco or coffee on someone's breath or the smell of fresh mown grass or coconut oil on sunbathers takes us back years to other times and places we've experienced. Our sense of smell should never be overlooked in writing.

Write down smells—burning oil from a car going by, the smell of water from a hose, charcoal in the grill, sunlight on a cat's fur, electronic components or shower curtain liners. What does the smell remind you of? Write about your memory by beginning like this, "I sit here and smell _____. This smell brings me back to _____. That's when I_____.... Keep writing for a few more minutes remembering to include more smells from that time.

Metaphor

A child who says, “Look, Daddy, there’s fingernail in the sky!” might be teased for not knowing it is the moon, but metaphor making gives writing a boost and allows us to relay a refreshed experience of environment and interactions, of thought and feelings.

Metaphor allows us to show personality: Oxtail soup described as tasting like already been chewed Wrigley’s Spearmint gum, by young adult author Christi Killien, allows us to taste the soup as her 12-year-old character would and reference her world.

Ray Bradbury has a father who is looking up from the woods at the sky say, “Finest lace there is” and his son sees that the trees are woven into the sky and the sky into the trees.

Create New Pictures

When you find a cliché, look behind it to see what you can reveal about character and story:

“He was hungry as a horse” vs “As he waited for his food, he was hopeful the portions here wouldn’t remind him of polka dots on his Aunt Emily’s dresses. He needed something substantial, portions that looked like cumulonimbus clouds in a Montana sky.”

Journal Exercise: Like

- David Greenberg, Portland, Oregon poet in the schools, named this exercise for helping facilitate metaphorical thinking. To play allow one thing to be like something not usually compared to it:
- The straps on my Birkenstock sandals are like to highway overpasses.
- When I soak in the bathtub I feel like the pit inside an avocado
- Boys playing soccer are like trees in the wind

Journal Exercise: Abantu

- In *Technicians of the Sacred* by Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Hass, past poet laureate of the US, read about an oral form from the African Abantu tribe. He told his class that in the rhythm of work, one person might say “the sound of an elephant’s tusk cracking” and another might answer “the voice of an angry man.” Try it:
 - Corn flakes in my bowl
 - Little dolphins swimming
 - Laundry fresh from the dryer
 - The smell of freshly baked bread
 - Children sitting in a story circle
 - A string of beads
- If you wish, you can list first lines in the morning and answer them in the evening or propose first lines to writing partners and answer first lines they propose.

Lesson from a Movie

The dialog from “City of Angels” contains a lesson for writers

Seth is an immortal who has not senses and Maggie is the mortal he is in love with. They are in the kitchen and she is slicing a pear.

Seth: What's that like? What's it taste like? Describe it like Hemingway.

Maggie: Well, it tastes like a pear. You don't know what a pear tastes like?

Seth: I don't know what a pear tastes like to you.

Maggie: Sweet, juicy, soft on your tongue, grainy like a sugary sand that dissolves in your mouth. How's that?

Seth: It's perfect.

In Summary

- Remind yourself to use each of the five senses. A pair of boots is not just a pair of boots; the boots might be beige and soft as a wren's nest, made of thick leather and as high as corn stalks or black and sharp as a knife.
- Trust in the images you choose to convey feeling. Avoid generalizations and announcements before images that carry the information. The day is not just beautiful. You hear the gold finch singing from atop purple Canadian thistle.
- Tired metaphors are placeholders for more evocative language. Raining cats and dogs becomes "hail came from the sky hard and fast as Aunt Trudy's insults."

Imagery, Dialogue & Reflection

Rhetoric for imagining your ancestor's life to write about it:

- You can engage the reader when you don't know the exact situation of an ancestor but have done enough research to be able to imagine how things were for them by starting out with phrases like this (and putting in the descriptions you believe are in keeping with their situations and times):
 - I imagine that....
 - It could have been that...
 - Perhaps they....

More on Imagery That Reaches Us Through Our Senses:

Here's an excerpt, "Salmonberry, 1906" from *The Forest Lover* by Susan Vreeland. In this passage, Emily Carr is visiting a small village on the west coast of Vancouver Island:

- Smells of fish and grease and the rich spice of wood smoke engulfed her. Women in striped cotton dresses sitting on tiers of platforms around the fire murmured and gave her curious looks. Some stopped what they'd been doing. An old woman in a red head scarf watched her with narrowed eyes, probably wondering what a white woman wearing a strange plaid English tam perched on her head was doing in their isolated village.

Dialogue, A Kind of Sound Imagery:

Here's an excerpt from Nancy Huran's novel *Under the Wide and Starry Sky*. In it Fanny, who is destined to have a many year's affair with Robert Louis Stevenson, is talking with a fellow ship passenger as they have docked in Belgium:

"Eleven o'clock," said Mr. Hendricks, the baby-faced surgeon from New York who stood nearby, eyeing his pocket watch. "I suspect we won't be getting off t his boat tonight." They watched a cluster of customs officials exchange heated Flemish with the captain of their channel steamer.

"Do you understand what's happening?" Fanny asked.

"The Belgians are refusing to inspect anyone's trunks until tomorrow."

"That's impossible! There aren't enough beds on this little boat for all of us."

The surgeon shrugged. "What can one do?" I am philosophical about these things."

And I am not," she muttered. "The children are exhausted."

"Shall I try to secure sleeping cabins for you?" Mr. Hendricks asked, his pretty features wreathed in concern.

Reflection Brings the Thinking Into the Present:

Here is an excerpt from Kim Stafford's memoir *100 Tricks Any Boy Can Do: How My Brother Disappeared*. In it, he is talking about reading his famous deceased poet father William Stafford's journals:

- It wasn't until I read his journal, for example, that I learned the act of teaching could be as frightening to my father as it sometimes was for me. I thought he was the master, never at a loss; it was I who fretted anxiously before a class, and might spend much of the following night awake, going over what I had not done right. But there it is in his journal, after he had been teaching college for over ten years: "Back to school today. When I stood--1st hour--and first looked at the students, I thought I'd throw up. But all students were nice today." I would have been helped by knowing my fears were not an aberration, an idiosyncratic failure. And I suspect this knowledge might have helped my brother, too.

Carrying on the Writing Spirit!

- My best to you all in writing about ancestors and drawing as engaging and complete a portrait of them and their times as you can. Your readers will praise and appreciate you.
- For more information on writing, please contact me at sbender@writingitreal.com and check my website at www.writingitreal.com.