**Descriptive Writing and the Five Senses**

***From novel-writing-help.com***

One of the key things that a passage of descriptive writing should do is appeal to *all five* of the senses. Appeal to the sense of sight only (how things look) and your writing will lack dimension.

Like I said in Part I of this article, movie makers have cameras and microphones, but novelists have only words to describe how things look and sound.

That's the bad news.

*The good news?* We can also use those words to describe how things feel, smell and taste, too. So to bring your writing to life and truly *immerse* your readers in the story, be sure to engage *all* of their senses.

**More On the Five Senses**

Take a look at this list of things you might use to describe a character...

* His almost-black hair
* The scar on his chin that only shows up in a certain light
* His chewed fingernails
* His ripped jeans

There's nothing wrong with using one or more of these details to describe the character – except that they engage only the sense of sight. Descriptive writing that is one-dimensional like that can be tedious.

Here are some other things you could say about the character...

* He wears too much aftershave (smell)
* His lips taste sweet like ripe fruit (taste)
* He has a high-pitched laugh (sound)
* His hair feels wiry (touch)

Exactly the same thing applies to describing a novel's [setting](http://www.novel-writing-help.com/story-setting.html). These descriptions of a beach all appeal to the sense of sight...

* The tiny pink shells in the white sand.
* The way the sea is the same blue as the sky, making it hard to tell where one ends and the other begins.
* The rocks still wet from high tide.

But these apply to all of the other senses...

* The smell of caught fish from the fishing boat (smell).
* The faint taste of salt on the breeze (taste).
* The screeching herring gulls (sound).
* The slippery rocks (feel/touch).

**Bottom line?** When describing something in your novel (a character or a setting), don't restrict yourself to the purely visual. Also think about how a person or a place smells, tastes, sounds and feels.

And that's about as complicated as it gets!

Just for fun, though, let's run through each of the senses in more detail (including the sixth sense!)...

**1. The Sense of Sight**

Okay, you don't want to restrict yourself to *just* how things look, but sight is still the most important sense to engage in good descriptive writing.

In the absence of a movie camera, describing how things look with words is the only way you'll enable your readers to "see."

**Your best bet here?** Don't attempt to paint the full picture, describing every tree and building and passing dog in sight. Instead...

1. Focus on just a handful of details (and allow readers to paint the rest of the picture for themselves).
2. Make those details the best ones you can find.

We'll be looking at both those things in more detail in the [final part of this article](http://www.novel-writing-help.com/details-in-writing.html). For now, understand that good descriptive writing is all about *quality*, not *quantity*.

You can make a reader "see" with very little (their brain will do the rest). And precisely the same thing applies to making them hear, taste, touch and smell.

Speaking of which...

**2. The Sense of Smell**

Smell is the most nostalgic of the senses. Which of us isn't transported back to school when we smell over-cooked cabbage, or to childhood summers when we smell freshly-mown grass?

Incidentally, smell is a useful way of getting characters to remember an event from the past, in the form of a [flashback](http://www.novel-writing-help.com/flashbacks-in-writing.html) (assuming that this event is important to the understanding of the present story). But that's getting off topic...

For descriptive writing, evoking the sense of smell is a great way of saying a lot with very few words. Try to imagine the following...

* The smell of a woodland in summer after rain.
* Sour milk in the refrigerator.
* The first smell of the sea through a car window.

I didn't write those sentences descriptively, like I would have done in a novel (I **told** you, didn't **show** you). Even so, the mere mention of those things likely conjured up entire settings for you.

So again, just finding one really evocative smell to describe will go a long way.

**3. The Sense of Sound**

Few settings are silent. And if they are truly silent, describing the *absence* of sound will be interesting in itself.

Characters speaking and coughing and banging things with hammers is one way of adding a soundtrack to a scene. Another way is to incorporate the sense of sound into the description of settings and characters.

So if you're describing a seaside setting, for example, mention screeching gulls and waves breaking on pebbles to add an extra dimension to the description.

If you're describing a character walking through a hotel lobby, mention his metal heels clicking on the marble, or the jangle of loose change in his pocket.

Sounds can sometimes be tricky to describe accurately, so here is a good place to use a figure of speech. One solution is an onomatopoeia...

* Jangle
* Clatter
* Crash

Similes work well, too – "the cry of the fox sounded like a child in terrible pain."

**4. The Sense of Taste**

You'll mostly evoke the sense of taste under two circumstances – when characters are eating and drinking, and when they are kissing and canoodling. (When they are actively using their mouths and tongues, in other words.)

But always look for ways to incorporate it in more unexpected situations in your novel. For example...

* When a character arrives at the coast, the usual thing would be to have them *smell* the sea. Instead, have them *taste* the salt on the breeze.
* When a young boy captures a frog at the bottom of the garden, have him lick it... then recoil.
* When a woman returns to her childhood home, have her taste her mother's roast chicken when she's still 100 miles away.

Even if you don't actually describe a taste, just mentioning the thing we taste with – the tongue – can be powerful in descriptive fiction. For example...

* It's the first icy day of winter and it starts to snow. A character looks up and tries to catch the flakes on her tongue.
* Further down the street, her younger brother licks a metal pole.

**5. The Sense of Touch**

Like all five of the senses, touch can be painful or pleasurable.

Make it pleasurable, like the feel of cool cotton sheets on a summer night, and the readers will experience the pleasure along with the character.

Make it painful, like being head-butted on the nose, and the readers will wince. Like you just did.

Sometimes, a touch is neither painful nor pleasurable, but simply helps to describe the person or the place...

* A greasy stove.
* Cracked lips.
* A cold handshake.

Sometimes the touch itself is what is important, not what the thing being touched feels like. A character reaching out to touch another character can be extremely powerful under the right circumstances, as can the laying of a hand on a headstone.

And finally...

**6. The Sixth Sense**

Don't forget this one – assuming you believe in that kind of thing, and that it's appropriate to the story you are telling.

Unscientific senses can be just as powerful, if not more so, than the conventional ones. And they also happen to be a great way of foreshadowing dramatic events to come.

**Wrapping Up**

Everything above boils down to one word: details.

Descriptive, sensual writing is about getting readers to truly *experience* a setting or a character through their senses.

So when you set out to describe a person or a place in your story, you should first make a mental list of all the details you could mention to bring it to life (with the items on the list appealing to a variety of sense).

It's then all about selecting the best details you can come up with, and leaving the mediocre ones out.